

RESEARCH ARTICLE



EXPOSITION OF CORRUPTION IN “GULLIVER’S TRAVELS” BY JONATHAN SWIFT: A TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT




Jonathan Swift enjoys a unique place in English prose as a master of satire, sarcasm and irony. In him reflects a great social critic of all times. *Gulliver’s Travels* is a Swift’s magnum opus that appeals the readers of all ages, classes and intellects for its style, themes and panoramic setting. It also attracts the attention of readers globally for its blunt description of unscrupulousness of various types found in the society ranging from political, moral and intellectual to academic. The research critically analyses various instances of corruption revealed in *Gulliver’s Travels* by Jonathan Swift. The qualitative content analysis method of textual analysis has been employed to describe and interpret various characteristics of the text in terms of its exposition of corruption. The research systematically investigates all the four parts of the novel and concludes that the description of political and moral aspects of corruption is dominant in the text, though traces of intellectual and educational unscrupulousness can also be found. Furthermore, instances of political corruption are recurrent in the voyages to *Lilliput*, *Brobdingnag* and *Houyhnhnms* whereas the voyage to *Laputa* is distinguished for the account of intellectual corruption. The study, which is unique in its analysis of the exposition of human vices and follies in the novel under the definition of corruption rather than satire, will not only deepen an understanding of the instances of corruption in the eighteenth-century English society but also add to the appeal of the novel to the students of English Literature.

Keywords: *Corruption, Political Corruption, Intellectual Corruption, Extortion, Exposition*

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INTRODUCTION

Corruption is a “wrongdoing on the part of an authority or powerful party through means that are illegitimate, immoral, or incompatible with ethical standards” (Amundsen, I. 1999). It is a global phenomenon that ruins the very warp and weft of the society where it is rampant. The universal existence of the menace of corruption vis-a-vis its disparaging effects on societies have also grabbed the attention of social scientists and academics along with the policy makers worldwide and the issue has become an epicenter of discourse both multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary (Berlinski, 1997; Egwemi, 2012; Sadiq & Abdullahi, 2013).

Hence, in order to further contribute to both the arenas of interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary knowledge, the focus of the paper is to analyze the phenomenon of corruption with reference to its exposition in English literature. For the purpose, Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* is probably the best choice for two reasons: first, it is a comprehensive literary document that exposes human corruption in all walks of life at various levels and despite an elapse of almost three centuries, the novel is still relevant chapter by chapter. Second, so far, no academic research categorically examines the novel in the perspective of its being a comprehensively corruption revealing document, though numerous studies investigate the novel as masterpiece of satire. It is pertinent to mention here that Canfield, J. Douglas (1973) in his article 'Corruption and Degeneration in *Gulliver's Travels*' discusses various examples of corruption revealed in the novel but the discussion is too narrow and general in nature as it neither academically defines the scope of a particular type of corruption nor does it synchronize a textual instance with the type.

Jonathan Swift is the most prominent prose writer of the Augustan / the Neoclassical Age or the Age of Reason, marked by the features of order, clarity, precision and stylistic decorum. Swift's greatness as a prose writer lies in his artistic employment of various satirical techniques to expose different dimensions of corruption of his time with a reformatory objective of deterrence of vice or “to

mend the World as far as they are able.” (Swift, Jonathan, 2016). Though almost all his writings including *The Battle of the Books* (published in 1704, exposes intellectual corruption in ancient and modern learning), *A Tale of a Tub* (published in 1704, reveals corruption in religion and learning) and *Modest Proposal* (published in 1729, discloses political corruption) are a journalistic reporting on one form of corruption or the other, yet his 'chef-d'oeuvre' *Gulliver's Travels* is a wide-ranging document that reflects on corruption at all levels.

Gulliver's Travels, though, on the face of it, is a travelogue of an English surgeon turned captain, Lemuel Gulliver who stumbles from one adventure to the other, yet, deep down, it is a mirror-reflection of the vices and corrupt practices of the eighteenth-century society. As per the structure of the novel, Gulliver, the adventurer advents his venture with *A Voyage to Lilliput* where he happens to be captured by six inches tall dwarfs with minds in proportion. From the world of gnomes, Swift in his second *Voyage to Brobdingnag* transcends us to the island of colossals where we topsy-turvy encounter gigantic creature twelve times the stature of Gulliver with corresponding fauna and flora of the island in proportion. Gulliver's next wonderlands are the islands of Laputa, Balnibarbi, Lagado, Glubbdubdrib, Luggnagg and Japan. There he meets weirdly styled scientists, astronomers, mathematicians and sorcerers. Finally, Gulliver is dropped off on the 'island of the Houyhnhnms' where rationally thinking horses rule over animal-like humans called 'Yahoos'. All the four voyages offer Swift a superb platform to depict corruption in action. The following section categorically analyses various types of corruption instanced in different voyages.

DISCUSSION

Corruption, generally, is interpreted in monetary terms, and bribery, extortion, kickbacks, grafts, misappropriation and embezzlement are a few commonly used terms associated with corruption, yet the trench of corruption is much deeper than what it usually is perceived to be. It has a wider connotation and it takes different forms and is branded into various types as per the angle of



taking place of the action such as governmental, political, financial, social, intellectual, moral, legal and religious. The section is structured into four sub-sections to categorically examine various instances of corruption exposed in the novel.

EXPOSITION OF POLITICAL CORRUPTION

Political corruption is the misuse of power by the political decision-makers, to perpetuate their power, status and wealth (Amundsen, I. 1999).

The type of corruption is best revealed in the *Voyage to Lilliput* where the reader is first stunned to find the rope-dancers' dexterity which they have acquired by years of long training and then the same reader is shocked to know that this is a recruitment exam for high positions at the royal court. Even ministers are needed to exhibit their skills to retain their positions. Additionally, in order to qualify for their coveted posts, the candidate must jump over or crawl under the adjustable stick hold by the emperor. This is a vivid description of political corruption which unveils that high designations are not awarded as per your wisdom or suitability for the job considering the principle of 'right man for the right job', but according to the accomplishment of a task which is not at all relevant to the position in question. Moreover, getting through the adjustable stick test depends on the sweet will of the emperor and not on the expertise of a candidate. The situation clearly alludes to the most popular form of political corruption, i.e., favoritism.

In the same voyage, we encounter the war monger type of corrupt political leadership that instead of ensuring peace and stability in a country wages wars against its so-called enemies on trivial issues that can be better dealt by a psychiatrist than a soldier. The High Heel (the Tramecksan) and the Low Heel (the Slamecksan) issue as well as the Big-Indian and the Little- Indian feud that force the Lilliputians and the Belfuscudians to have an eye ball to eye ball contact into the battlefield for six moons are the worst examples of political and governmental corruption where states are involved in triggering a war like situation to achieve their hegemonistic designs at the cost of the loss of both precious lives and resources. The situation gets further deteriorated when nations jump into the arms race

(as Belfuscudians got a huge well-equipped fleet to invade the Lilliputians) sacrificing their mass welfare role. Indirectly the scenario alludes to the war between the two European nations namely England and France as well as the morally corrupt English party politics of the High Church (Tory) and the Low Church (Whigs) that engrossed its members into an issue of either no or petty importance instead of raising political awareness of the problems of national and international significance. The instances are a vivid exposition of political corruption where political high ups are guilty of maneuvering a situation using the state resources to suit to their private gains.

Similarly, the conferral of the highest title of 'Nordac' on the spot on Gulliver in an acknowledgement of his becoming an instrument to the king of Lilliput to help quench his thirst for more power to assume the title of the "Sole Monarch of the Whole World" is also nothing but an elucidation of political cum emotional corruption of rulers where they win public support playing with the emotions of the masses by awarding state titles to a few instrumental figures. As a matter of fact, they plough the field to justify achieving their evil designs. In other words, it is a form of 'clientelism' or 'a contingency-based exchange' (Hicken, Allen. 2017) where a patron endows titles or benefits to its clients, in compensation with the political support of the individual or the group.

Another example of political corruption can be traced out in the "Voyage to Laputa" where the Laputian king designs a novel way to use the state power to sustain his rule. He controls his subjects by creating a constant threat of a hovering island that can not only devoid the Laputians of sunlight and rain but also pelt stones on them and in the case of a rebellion the flying island can also literally crush a specific spot of uprisers. The episode also refers to the Anglo-Irish struggle where England exploits the state authority to further its rule.

A similar practice of political despotism is observed in Luggnag where the king misuses the state authority of receiving the dust licking tribute from his visitors and courtiers. The king poisons the royal floor to get rid of troublesome courtiers or to



discourage petitioners. This is how the king misuses the state power to perpetuate his power.

EXPOSITION OF EXTORTION

Extortion is a type of corruption where a gratification is extracted using coercion (Mind Controversy. n.d.)

In the *Voyage to Lilliput*, Gulliver is provided with sustenance and refuge by the state on the condition of acting as an ally of the Lilliputians against its enemy state, Belfusco, hence, it is a quid-pro-quo agreement between the parties. Later the highest title to be partisan with the 'Emperor' of Lilliput is also conferred on Gulliver but following his refusal to further succumb to the whims and passions of the Laputian king against the Belfuscudians, he is awarded with death penalty. Though Gulliver has a narrow escape of execution of the penalty by sneaking to Belfuscu, yet it imprints such an everlasting impression on his mind that he bluntly refuses the offer to serve Belfusco resolving "never more to put any confidence in princes or ministers". (Swift, Jonathan, 2016). This is the description of hypocritical attitudes of state agents or figures of authority who bribe a client to accrue benefits but threat to use force when it stops serving their purpose. It, in a way, equates to extortion where they endeavor to extract a favor using coercion.

EXPOSITION OF MORAL CORRUPTION

Betrayal of moral ideals of a society falls into orbit of moral corruption (Lopez-Claros, A. 2014) While describing the state of the English institutions to the Master-Horse in the *Voyage to Houyhnhnms* Gulliver's ruthless reflection of the moral deterioration of the agents of political, judicial and theological institutions of England is a great instance of the exposition of moral corruption in the novel. The character-sketching of: politicians who barter the chastity of their wives and daughters to hook the socio-political status; legislators who are essentially variant in their words and actions; lawyers whose worth lies in their excellence at deception and hence inhibition of justice; ecclesiasts who ignite irrational, flimsy and trivial theological controversies -all these ultrasonic descriptions are an objective view of the immoral elements found in the British society.

EXPOSITION OF INTELLECTUAL CORRUPTION

Misguiding a society for private gains by the intellectuals under the influence of a dogma (Bantawa, B. 2018)

An excellent example of the disclosure of intellectual corruption is found when Gulliver, during his visit to the island of Glubbudrib (*Voyage to Laputa*) happens to interact with the phantoms of Alexander, Hannibal and Caesar along with others. To his wit's end the answer he received from the great figure didn't synchronize with the prejudiced and hyperbolized description found in historical documents, e.g., Alexander, the great was not poisoned as per the traditional historical view went but couldn't succumb to fever. The episode exposes the intellectual corruption of academic institution of History that most of the time misleads humanity by distorting facts and concocting tendentiously written stories to glorify villains and diminish real heroes to serve national, religious and personal purpose.

EXPOSITION OF CORRUPTION IN EDUCATION SYSTEM

Corruption in the education sector is "the systematic use of public office for private benefit, whose impact is significant on the availability and quality of educational goods and services, and, has impact on access, quality or equity in education" (Hallak and Poisson, 2002).

The social status-based education system in the public nurseries of the Lilliput where children are educated and trained according to the status of their parents is a description of corruption in the education system where students are not imparted knowledge and training as per their aptitude but status in the society.

CONCLUSION

Gulliver's Travels by Jonathan Swift is such a realistic description of corruption that though Gulliver claims of garnishing the truth to diminish its bitterness in his account of the English society to the Brobdingnagian king, yet he spontaneously Freaks out, "the bulk of your natives, to be the most pernicious race of little odious-vermin that Nature ever suffered to crawl upon the surface of the earth" (Swift, Jonathan, 2016).



Overall, though the novel comprehensively unveils almost all the major types of corruption in all sections of society, yet portrayal of political as well as moral dimensions of corruption is more evident. Moreover, *voyages to Lilliput, Brobdingnag and Houyhnhnms* represent Swift's mastery of exposition of political corruption whereas the *voyage to Laputa establishes him as an adept* illustrator to reveal intellectual unscrupulousness of society.

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