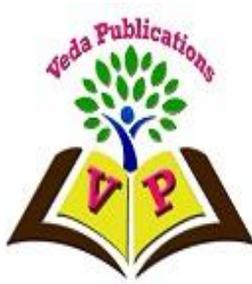




RESEARCH ARTICLE

**ANALYSING THE ANTISEMITIC CONSTRUCT OF FAGIN THROUGH THE PSYCHOLOGICAL FUNCTIONING OF STEREOTYPES**

Tanya Singh

*(M.Phil Scholar, Amity Institute of English Studies and Research, Amity University (UP), India.)*Email: tanyasingh2096@gmail.comDOI : <http://dx.doi.org/10.54513/JOELL.2022.9201>**ABSTRACT**

Fagin in Dickens' *Oliver Twist* unveils the English literary tradition and social reality of London Street Jews revealing antisemitism as a part of the Victorian culture. To create an archetypal supervillain who endangers the life of innocent juveniles, Dickens borrows from the antisemitic literary customs of his time to create a villainous character approved and hated; a Jew. Fagin's exaggerated characterisation is modelled on medieval antisemitism and is reflective of Dickens' antisemitic ideology and the then social reality of Jews living on London Streets. Dickens accepts and reflects on the antisemitism of his age to establish a Jew as the immutable villain of the London society. This paper critiques the antisemitic unconscious of Dickens reflected through the character of Fagin and further analyses his method of creation impregnated with elements of literary and traditional antisemitism for his villainous portrayal.

Keywords: *Oliver Twist, Antisemitism, Fagin, Charles Dickens*



Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist* got published in 1838, the initial phase of the Victorian period. This phase was influenced by and accepted antisemitism. Dickens' predecessors Cibber, Garrick, Foote, Fielding and Sheridan; all produced Jews as sinful and many writers after them continued to do so (Stone 228). Punch openly opposed Jewish emancipation, the members of which were all Dickens' friends who radically expressed antisemitic ideologies. It almost seems like Dickens borrowed elements of antisemitism of his age, which was more than difficult to escape, to create the character of Fagin, a Jew. Fagin's Jewishness is not just a reflection of literary antisemitic traditions but was also the reality of Jews living on the London streets.

Dickens is often accused of being an antisemite based on the creation of the infamous stereotypical villain; Fagin and his antisemitic ideologies reflected in *The Pickwick Papers*. Critics also defend Dickens' antisemitism, accepting that although Fagin's characterisation is extremely hostile and stereotypical, it does not appear to be a conscious attack on the Jews but reflects the influence of literary, social and cultural antisemitism on Dickens that resulted in the creation of Fagin. *Oliver Twist* was thus, a product of an era whose literary tradition was predominantly antisemitic and was written by an author who "accepted and reflected" on the antisemitism of his age (Stone).

In 1863, Dickens was taken aback after receiving a letter from his acquaintance Mrs Davis complaining about the exaggerated characterisation of Fagin. She wrote:

It has been said that Charles Dickens, the large-hearted, whose works plead so

eloquently and so nobly for the oppressed of his country, and who may justly claim credit, as the fruits of his labour, the many changes for the amelioration of the condition [of the] poor now at work, has encouraged a vile prejudice against the despised Hebrew (Meyer 239).

Admirably, on being encountered on his overt antisemitism in the novel, Dickens himself made a conscious effort to acknowledge his unwanted offence and rectify antisemitic undertones in the second publication of *Oliver Twist* (1867). The last chapter was the most thoroughly revised where Dickens replaced the use of the term "The Jew" with the name of "Fagin". This is the only chapter that sympathetically aligns the reader with Fagin revealing Fagin's inner state of mind. More recently research has demonstrated "the automatic and unconscious activation of certain stereotypes, even among people who embrace egalitarian and non-prejudiced beliefs" (Augoustinos and Walker 631). Even though not a conscious attack, Fagin projects Dickens' idea of a Jew and that of the age in which it was produced. Dickens was, which I will contest, though unconscious yet an antisemite who reflected and accepted the antisemitic consciousness and traditions of the age proof of which is the antisemitic characterisation of Fagin.

In the preface to *Oliver Twist*, Dickens claims that he aims to represent the society as it is, "to show them as they were" (Lane 94). During the 1830s, a Jew could not open his business in London and was regarded as a foreigner whose amalgamation in the English society was considered impossible. A majority of the Jewish population lived on London streets and



made their income either through fencing or money lending (Stone) and Fagin too are created similarly, a fence who resides in "A dirtier or a more wretched place ... very narrow and muddy, and the air was impregnated with filthy odours" (Dickens 62). Fagin is a typical Jew as having been represented in the English literary tradition, a money lender, living in rags and 'gloating over their riches'. Fagin's character fits perfectly in Allport's definition of a stereotype which is; "an exaggerated belief associated with a category. Its function is to justify (rationalise) our conduct in relation to that category (Augustinos and Walter 632)".

From a cognitive perspective, stereotypes can be easily viewed as social schemas: they are theory-driven, stable knowledge structures in memory, they have internal organisational properties, and are learned by individuals usually during their early years (Augustinos and Walker 631).

On analysing Fagin as per "cognitive perspectives of social schemas", we notice that Dickens chose to construct Fagin based on the medieval "theory-driven" models of a Jew which reflects the authors' former antisemitic "knowledge structures in memory". Fagin's hostile appeal as archetypal stereotyped Jewish villain showcases the presence and acceptance of antisemitic prejudices primarily fixed by traditions and customs (Lane 94) "learned by individuals during their early years".

Sander Gilman argues that:

when physical characteristics are encoded as 'Jewish', they represent the social function imposed on them by non-Jews. It is the

figurative body of the Jew, the one imbued with presumably recognisable traits, which carries social significance and onto which anti-Semitic fears and desires are projected (Shapiro 11).

Fagin is introduced with a prime focus on his physical attributes and ethnicity. Moreover, in the first 38 chapters of *Oliver Twist*, Fagin was 257 times introduced by his ethnicity; "The Jew" and not by his name. It almost seems like Fagin's negative character is not his own but is universal of a Jew. He loses his identity to that of his ethnicity, which in itself is a metaphor for the Jewish collective being identified as a whole without any scope of individual traits or differences.

Susan Meyer in *Antisemitism and Social Critique* in Dickens's *Oliver Twist* comments on the novel's juxtaposition of the Jew with Christians. Although the novel has more negative Christian characters (Mr Bumble; the Beadle, the Sowerberrys, Mrs Mann and Mr Gamfield) whose characters are hateful and in contrast with the principles of Christianity, Fagin is yet the most detested and unforgettable villainous character in the long tradition of English literature (Meyer 242).

Dickens caricatures Fagin using conventional antisemitic tropes as "... standing with a fork in his hand, a very shrivelled Jew, whose villainous-looking and repulsive face was obscured by a quantity of matter red hair" (Dickens 63). While introducing Fagin to the readers, Dickens deploys textual imagery with words like "fork in his hand", "shrivelled", "villainous", "repulsive" and "red hair" thereby suggesting Fagin's devil-like persona which is in itself is a medieval antisemitic stereotype of a Jew and its



relations with the Devil. Fagin is shown wearing “a greasy flannel gown, with his throat bare”; an unusual costume thus rendering him an alien. Dickens’ vivid characterisation exaggerates Fagin’s appearance, personality and demeanour as of a typical Jew symbolising him as the wicked, alien ‘other’.

Since the fourth century, Jews were associated with anything and everything evil inhibiting sinful attributes of stinginess and greed. Fagin’s materialistic and possessive nature towards his riches are stereotypically revealed when he watchfully takes out a concealed box of riches placing it “carefully on the table. His [Fagin] eyes glistened as he raised the lid and looked in ... gold watch, sparkling with jewels” (Dickens 65) and when he meets Oliver and shakes his hand “, especially the one in which he [Oliver] held his little bundle” (Dickens 63).

Fagin is characterised using universally identifiable traditional antisemitic mannerisms emphasising a fixed and unchangeable Jewish identity. The ambiguity around the Jewish minority is revealed when Oliver at first perceives Fagin as a kind-hearted Jew providing him [Oliver] and to homeless children food and shelter not knowing about Fagin’s ill intentions and his materialistic purpose with Oliver. Fagin is crafty and selfish who would leave no stone unturned for his capitalistic gains and to protect himself and his nasty business. He is “sly” bearing resemblance to the cunning and deceitful Shylock; a miser Jew.

Dickens introduces us to the Jew; Fagin and his gang of criminals who are evil, selfish and greedy symbolising a lack of Christian principles. Fagin is, like the Jews were, dehumanised, his demeanour

compared to that of an animal - “like some loathsome reptile, engendered in the slime and darkness through which he moved: crawling forth, by night, in search of some rich offal for a meal” (Dickens 137). Fagin’s degeneration makes him “a morbid deviation from an original type” (Mendelssohn 183) justifying his heathen self.

The chapter named “The Jew’s Last Night Alive” deals with Fagin’s dreadful fate. With every step towards his end, Fagin seems to have been transformed into a beast “with a countenance more like that of a snared beast than the face of a man” (Dickens 397). Fagin’s suggested transformation into a beast seems to symbolise the trope around a Jew’s non-redeemable offences undeserving of mercy, salvation and redemption.

Lisa Rodensky deliberates on the charge of Fagin’s acquittal commenting that Fagin’s trial “feel all the more like a matter of who Fagin is and not what he has done” (Meyer 248). Rodensky’s comment highlights the unfortunate consequences of being a Jew and the biases of English society. Anthony Trollope comments on the societal bias through Nina Balatka when the Old Trendellsohn discloses the saddened state of Jews to Nina saying, “It is, I believe, the creed of a Christian that he may deal dishonestly with a Jew, though the Jew who shall deal dishonestly with a Christian is to be hanged. It is strange what latitude men will give themselves under the cloak of their religion! (Trollope 40)” Meyer juxtaposes Fagin’s fate with those of other Christian characters like Mr Bumble whose fate is comical as compared to Fagin’s dreadful fate (248).



Fagin's anxiousness in the last chapter reveals how he was unsympathetically scrutinised by the bystanders awaiting his eviction:

The court was paved, from floor to roof, with human faces. Inquisitive and eager eyes peered from every inch of space ... all looks were fixed upon one man – the Jew. Before him and behind: above, below, on the right and the left: he seemed to stand surrounded by a firmament, all bright with gleaming eyes (Dickens 391).

Dickens' emphasis on "bright and gleaming eyes" reveals the lack of sympathy towards Fagin the Jew and his most awaited conviction. Dickens suggests Fagin's damnation even before his death with his:

... gasping mouth and burning skin. He grew so terrible, at last, in all the tortures of his evil conscious... His red hair hung down upon his bloodless face; his beard was torn, and twisted into knots; his eyes shone with a terrible light; his unwashed flesh, crackled with the fever that burnt him up (Dickens 395).

On further analysing *Oliver Twist*, and delving into the historical and social context of the novel, one comes across the fact that antisemitism was very much prevalent in both English literary and geographical culture. Dickens was a product of a pre-existent antisemitic culture that was familiar with the Jew as the accepted Other. Dickens' antisemitic characterisation is a result of his subconscious image of a Jew which further shows how the Jews were perceived by him and the Gentile Victorian population of London. So, when Dickens was in

search of a villain, he unconsciously picked on mythical antisemitism rooted in Victorian customs to produce a character well established in the memory of the society as an accepted villain. The negative image of the Jew was thus borrowed from the past and was developed by Dickens with no significant alterations made. Fagin's character is inclusive of traditional racialism highly influenced by medieval antisemitism.

Dickens considered the Jewish image as a symbol to represent the hated 'other'. In Fagin, we recognise the stage Jew with his red hair, which traces his lineage to the satanic figure of Judas. The arch-villain of London's underworld, Fagin is a spendthrift Shylock who exerts a merciless hold on his victims (Sicher 149- 150). It is almost like Dickens treats Fagin's Jewishness as a scapegoat to formulate a character well-accepted, familiar and hateful rendering him the most hated and unforgettable villain. The caricature of Fagin in Dickens' *Oliver Twist* substantiates the method of its creation which is antisemitic and by a creator who, even though unconscious, was an antisemite. The character of Fagin not only reflects conventional stereotyping but also reflects how Jews were recognised in the English culture thus, adding another immutable villain to the long list of English Jewish villains.

WORKS CITED

- Augoustinos, Martha, and Iain Walker. "The Construction of Stereotypes within Social Psychology: From Social Cognition to Ideology." *Theory & Psychology*, vol.8, no.5, Oct.1998, pp. 629-652, doi:[10.1177/0959354398085003](https://doi.org/10.1177/0959354398085003). Web.
- Berman, Ronald. "Jews in the Nineteenth-Century Novel." *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, vol. 32, no. 2, University of



- Illinois Press, 1998, pp. 57–67, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3333558>. Web.
- Dickens, Charles. *The Originals: Oliver Twist*. OM Books INTERNATIONAL, 2018. Print.
- Felsenstein, Frank. "JEWS AND DEVILS: ANTISEMITIC STEREOTYPES OF LATE MEDIEVAL AND RENAISSANCE ENGLAND." *Literature and Theology*, vol. 4, no. 1, Oxford University Press, 1990, pp. 15–28, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23927203>. Web.
- Lane, Lauriat. "Dickens 'Archetypal Jew.'" *PMLA*, vol. 73, no. 1, Modern Language Association, 1958, pp. 94–100, <https://doi.org/10.2307/460278>. Web.
- Meyer, Susan. "Antisemitism and Social Critique in Dickens's 'Oliver Twist.'" *Victorian Literature and Culture*, vol. 33, no. 1, 2005, pp. 239–252. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/25058705. Web.
- Shapiro, Rebecca. "The Other Anti-Semitism: Philo-Semitism in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century English Literature and Culture." *Purdue e-Pubs*, docs.lib.purdue.edu dissertations/AAI9819031/. Web.
- Sicher, Efraim. "Imagining 'the Jew': Dickens 'Romantic Heritage.'" *British Romanticism and the Jews*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2008, pp. 139–155, doi:10.1007/978-1-137-05574-3_9. Web.
- Stone, Harry. "Dickens and the Jews." *Victorian Studies*, vol. 2, no. 3, Indiana University Press, 1959, pp. 223–53, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3825878> Web.
- Trollope, Anthony. *Nina Balatka*. Serenity Publishers, LLC, 2009. Print.
- Valman, Nadia. "British Jewish Literature and Culture: An Introduction." *Jewish Culture and History*, vol. 12, no. 1-2, 31 May 2012, pp. 204–212., doi:10.1080/1462169x.2010.10512150. Web.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tanya Singh is a research scholar and an English Tutor who recently completed her M.Phil from Amity University, Uttar Pradesh. She completed her M.Phil dissertation on 'Antisemitism in Victorian Fiction: A Comparative Study of Dickens, Trollope, Eliot and Maurier'. She is an empathetic reader and a budding writer. Her areas of interest are varied but primarily includes studies on war, religion, culture and propaganda.