

A Study of Nancy in *Oliver Twist* from the Perspective of Post-colonialism

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Abstract: As a British critical realistic novel, *Oliver Twist* focused on the miserable living conditions of the underprivileged in the 19th century. Both Oliver's and Rose's fortunes reversed totally with the acceptance of unexpected assistance from others. However, Nancy was trapped in a morass of adversities, from which she could never escape. This text endeavored to analyze the underlying reasons from the perspective of post-colonialism.

Keywords: Dilemma; Post-colonialism; Nancy; Charles Dickens

1. Introduction

With a vivid description of the unfair society in which wealth spoke louder than goodness, Dickens exposed the misfortunes suffered by the oppressed in *Oliver Twist*. There was no essential difference between Nancy and Oliver as well as Rose, but Nancy had no way to be saved while the other two happened to receive unexpected assistance from either their relatives or complete strangers. Rereading this novel contributed to deconstructing the discourse violence hidden in colonization and to revealing the historical truth concerning how the colonized ones, especially women, were silenced (Zhao Yifan, 2006). Therefore, it is high time that Nancy should be noticed. This text aims at presenting what Nancy's plights exactly were, analyzing what kinds of effort she made to improve this situation, and pointing out the reasons why her self-redemption was destined to be a failure.

2. Triple Marginalization Suffered by Nancy

In this novel, London acted as an epitome to mirror the actuality of the British society, in which the aristocratic bourgeoisie did their best to enjoy lavish lifestyles, while ordinary people lived in great hardship. The polarization of wealth made it harder for the poor to make a living, and some of them embarked on the road of degeneration and crime. Different from quadruple-dyed villains like Fagin and Sikes, Nancy was an innocent and beneficent lady, adhering to the ethical standards, but she was still despised by all and pitied by none.

Although Oliver had a miserable childhood, he continued to accept assistance from all quarters. He was brought up in a branch workhouse, where seven-pence halfpenny was offered for each child per week. Such worth was a good round diet for a child, though the greater part of the weekly stipend ended up in Mrs. Mann's pocket. Afterwards, he was supported by Mr. Bumble and Mrs. Maylie successively, and from then on his fate totally changed. On the contrary, Nancy led a drifting and alienated life from birth. She grew up in the most wretched condition where neither one kind word nor one mild look had lighted the gloom of her infant years. She thieved for Fagin when she was a child not half as old as Oliver, being "in the same trade and in the same service for twelve years (Dickens, 2018: 110)." When she perceived that Oliver was likely to go astray like her, all her emotions exploded. She poured out her discontent and complaint to Fagin in a continuous and vehement scream, but what she had done had nothing to do with those numb hearts.

Fortune cast Nancy as a nameless woman, at whom even the meanest could point the finger of scorn. What's worse, Sikes, the man she loved most in the world, also beat and scolded her at will. She nursed and cared for him day and night, as if he had been a child. However, it aroused no tenderness in that unfeeling housebreaker. She clearly knew that he was a sheer villain, but she had never thought of abandoning him. Even at the last moment of her life, she was still trying to keep him from homicide. Sadly, the murderer had no hesitation in beating her to death with all the force he could summon. Upon hearing news about this murder on his absconding

way, he “remained standing in the street, apparently unmoved by what he had just heard and agitated by no stronger feeling than a doubt where to go (Dickens, 2000: 344).”

At the bottom of the social ladder, Nancy was not only oppressed by men, but also despised by women. When she hastened to meet Rose as a voluntary bearer of the intelligence, people in the hotel stopped her in the hall. Four housemaids even remarked tauntingly that “the creature was a disgrace to her sex, and strongly advocated her being thrown, ruthlessly, into the kennel (Dickens, 2000: 281).” When she heard a light step approaching her, she felt burdened with the sense of her own deep shame, and shrunk as if she could not bear the presence of her with Rose. The unexpected kindnesses from Rose surprised Nancy a lot, and she burst into tears. Having never been treated with any respect or consideration, she could only set her rotten heart on Sikes to relieve and let him fill the place that had been a blank through all her wretched life. However, her purest feeling of comfort and pride turned out to be a new means of violence and suffering.

3. Fighting Against Unfairness and Cruelty

Nancy’s dilemma is actually a question concerning “to do or not to do.” To help Oliver out of trouble is to obey her inner voice, and she can also atone for Fagin and Sikes’ crimes; on the contrary, innocent Oliver will be misguided.

The thief coterie were afraid that Oliver might tell their whereabouts to the police, but none of them dared to take soundings around the police office. Nancy’s arrival helped them out. In spite of strong refusal from the very beginning, she had to obey their demands, for she did not dominate. After being taken back to the den, Oliver jumped suddenly to his feet and ran out of the house. Being afraid that the dog might hurt Oliver, Nancy sprang before the door and closed it, shouting that “keep back the dog; he’ll tear the boy to pieces (Dickens, 2000: 108).” At the same time, she grasped Sikes and struggled violently with him, “the child shan’t be torn down by the dog, unless you kill me first (Dickens, 2000: 108),” screamed the girl. Nancy did everything she could to protect Oliver, regardless of her own safety.

As soon as she knew that Fagin and Sikes were coming up with wicked ideas to degrade Oliver’s reputation. Nancy tried hard to winkle the details out of them. When the two sophisticated thieves were discussing about their vicious plan, she reassured them by pretending to be drunk. With everything well arranged, Oliver was delivered over to Sikes. Having guessed what Oliver proposed to do, she warned him not to act on impulse. So kind was her that she continued to comfort Oliver. “I have saved you from being ill-used once, and I will again, and I do now (Dickens, 2000: 140).” In order to prevent Oliver from degrading from an innocent boy to an immoral and inhumane thief, she growled that it was better for him to lie dead in a ditch than associate with those lunatic guys. A strong sense of responsibility towards Oliver and deep affections for Sikes were utterly incompatible with each other. She was torn by such a dilemma.

Upon knowing Monks and Fagin’s evil plot, Nancy was tortured both mentally and physically. When she was asked to go to Fagin’s abode and fetch the required advance, she got another chance to know more. When Monks was close upon her, she glanced at him with an air of careless levity and withdrew her eyes quickly. But “as he turned his towards the Jew, she stole another look, so keen and searching, and full of purpose (Dickens, 2000: 276).” Fearing that the secret might be revealed, Fagin took Monks out of the room. The moment the sound of their footsteps ceased, “she glided from the room, ascended the stairs with incredible softness and silence, and was lost in the gloom above (Dickens, 2000: 277).” After eavesdropping, she was bewildered and unable to decide how to do. Eventually, she determined to fight against unfairness and cruelty. There was an unusual paleness in her cheek, but a fire of hope in her eyes. She risked her life to get in touch with Rose and Mr. Brownlow, keeping them informed of hazards Oliver may face. Thanks to her timely and accurate information, Oliver was rescued. Nevertheless, she was brutally murdered by Sikes.

4. Predestined Tragedy

Nancy protected Oliver from suffering, but she could not save herself. Living in a patriarchal society, she had little chance to be free and independent. Women’s fixed social role determined that they had little chance to receive education or to engage in creative jobs which were considered as privileges of men. Besides, they were taught that education, work and so on were obstacles to the realization of femininity, which rendered the plight of women even more miserable (Zhao Xifang, 2009). She had also endeavored to find a way out of her dilemma, but her marginalized position as a subaltern made her have no chance to speak or that even if she spoke, her words would be ignored or interpreted wrongly to serve the dominant discourse (Zhao Xifang, 2009). With the awareness of the quandary she was in, the pathetic lady realized that it was impossible for her to escape from such a rigidly stratified society.

Nancy’s sacrifice was taken for granted in the western society. But everything changed when her life was reshaped from the

perspective of post-colonialism. As a matter of fact, this plot was completely in line with the construction of imperialist discourse in which the colonized ought to sacrifice themselves to satisfy and please the colonizers (Zhao Xifang, 2009). In the white-dominated world, Nancy must play a role conforming to stereotypical images of the “other.” This other was quite important in defining the identity of the subject. The colonized others “are marginalized by imperial discourse, identified by their difference from the center and, perhaps crucially, become the focus of anticipated mastery by the imperial ‘ego’ (Ashcroft et al., 2000).” Nancy was a typical image of the other. She bore a great sense of inferiority, especially when she compared herself to Rose. Her yearning for ultimate salvation was completed with Rose’s personal belongings. Having been beaten severely, she staggered and fell, but still tried her best to hold Rose’s handkerchief up, as high towards Heaven as her feeble strength would allow.

It was obvious that Dickens, intentionally or unconsciously, showed his thoughts of imperial centralism and superiority complex of his race. To a great extent, “the crimes he exposed in his novel *Oliver Twist* are not actually based on the social reality as he claimed to be, but out of his bias of racial discrimination he inherited from the notion of anti-Semitism (Qiao Guoqiang, 2004).” He described Fagin as “a very old shriveled Jew, whose villainous-looking and repulsive face was obscured by a quantity of matted red hair (Dickens, 2000: 54).” Besides, he called Fagin the Jew rather than his name, because “the mental and moral behavior of human beings, as well as individual personality, ideas and capacities, can be related to racial origin, and that knowledge of that origin provides a satisfactory account of the behavior (Ashcroft et al., 2000).” Though Nancy was shaped as a positive character, the author showed little difference in describing her and the other Jews. “Her disordered appearance, and a wholesale perfume of Geneva which pervaded the apartment (Dickens, 2000: 179),” afforded convincing evidence that she had let herself get into the bad habit of drinking. It was obvious that Dickens remained a great sense of racial superiority.

5. Conclusion

Oliver Twist was regarded as a classic speaking up for the rights of the orphans, and the protagonist Oliver was a perfect model inspiring children to demonstrate their own strength and to fight for equal rights. But it was the imperialist ideology that glorified Europe by derogating the other countries and rationalized Oliver’s success via Nancy’s death. Nancy’s tragedy was predestined from the beginning. In terms of race, the white hated her and looked down upon her because of the deep-rooted racial prejudice. Not only did the white exclude her out, but also the rich Jews. They did not come near her, because she was not in the rich’s rank. Squeezed by those two forces, little space was left for her to live. When gender involved, her condition just became worse. She is not the only one that is oppressed. There are thousands of others whose conditions are as terrible and wretched as hers. Everyone ought to be warmhearted helpers, instead of passive lookers-on, and that will make a vast difference.

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