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DEHUMANIZATION OF THE WORKING CLASS AND THE SILENT
SCREAM OF A VICTORIAN WOMAN AGAINST THE
INDUSTRIALISING ENGLAND: *THE FACTORY LAD* BY JOHN
WALKER

İşçi Sınıfının İnsandışlaştırılması ve Bir Viktorya Kadınının Endüstrileşen
İngiltere'ye Sessiz Çığı: John Walker'ın *The Factory Lad*'i

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Abstract

The invention of steam engine was one of the turning points in British industrial history. It is also considered as the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, with which the modes of manufacturing had changed forever. In this period, many factories are opened, large industrial cities are established; and due to the need of workforce, millions of people migrated to these cities. These people formed a new social class with many problems. They had to live and work under very difficult conditions. Moreover, as a result of rapid mechanization in production, they faced the danger of losing their jobs. In this study, the class distinctions which occurred during and after the Industrial Revolution, and the problems it caused in the society have been examined within the context of John Walker's *The Factory Lad*, a melodramatic factory play which is one of the first examples of realist theatre in the nineteenth century English Dramatic Literature. The dehumanization of the working class and their families by the industrialization are depicted by making references to the play.

Keywords: Dehumanization, Factory plays, workers' theatre, The Factory Lad, John Walker.

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Öz

Buhar makinesinin icadı Britanya endüstriyel tarihinde dönüm noktalarından biri olur. Aynı zamanda bu olay, üretim biçimlerinin tamamen değiştiği Endüstri Devrimi'nin de başlangıcı olarak kabul edilir. Bu dönemde birçok fabrika açılır, büyük endüstri şehirleri kurulur, ve işgücü ihtiyacına da bağlı olarak milyonlarca kişi bu kentlere göç eder. Bu göçmenler birçok sorunu olan yeni bir toplumsal sınıfa oluştururlar. Oldukça güç koşullarda yaşamak ve çalışmak zorunda kalırlar. Dahası, üretimin hızlı makinalaşması sonucunda işlerini de kaybetme tehlikesi ile karşı karşıya kalırlar. Bu çalışmada Endüstri Devrimi'nde ve sonrasında ortaya çıkan sınıf farklılıkları ve toplumda yarattığı problemler; aynı zamanda 19. yüzyıl İngiliz Tiyatrosunun ilk gerçekçi tiyatro örneklerinden biri de olan melodramatic fabrika oyunlarından John Walker'ın *The Factory Lad* eseri bağlamında incelenmiştir. İşçilerin ve ailelerinin endüstrileşme tarafından insandışlaştırılmaları oyunundan örnekler verilerek gösterilmiştir.

Anahtar Sözcükler: İnsandışlaştırma, Fabrika oyunları, işçi tiyatrosu, *The Factory Lad*, John Walker.

1. Introduction

It is a generally accepted truth that starting in the 1750s, the Industrial Revolution created a huge burst in the production methods, economy, and the workforce of Great Britain. Due to the Industrial Revolution, the labour process rapidly mechanized, the production increased and machinery relieved “*most workers of the most tedious, repetitive, and hence “mechanical aspects” of the labour process*” (Ure, 1844: p. 82). However, for some people, it is a dark period in the history of the Empire. During this period, British society experienced many catastrophes such as a massive migration from rural to urban areas, the emergence of a new social class, and power struggles among the classes.

Just after the invention of the steam engine and the Industrial Revolution—possibly more than any other European country—England experienced very radical social explosions alongside the economic ones. Of these reactions or explosions, labour movement showed itself very prominently. Supply and demand equilibrium changed, new technology dispensed with the necessity of manual labour, class distinction took a new shape, steam superseded the looms and there was no redress to the collective redundancies. Due to migration and new working habits, a new social class emerged and rapidly became the most prominent and trendsetting class of British society.

The fast and massive mechanization of the labour force resulted in the degradation and even dehumanization of the members of the working class. According

to Harry Braverman, “*subjecting workers to the mundane atmosphere required by mass production in factory environments degrades workers to a sub-human level*” (Braverman, 1998: p. 32). Thus, the distinction between a human worker and a machine was blurred for a profit-oriented factory owner of the Victorian period. Moreover, the non-working female members of the working class (i.e. wives, daughters, and mothers of the workers) experienced this dehumanization process through their kin. Even though they did not work at factories or mines and faced with the threat of losing their jobs to machines, they were still affected deeply from this trauma. John Walker’s *The Factory Lad* deals with the tragedy of a working-class family. In this respect, this study examines the dehumanization of the workers by the factory owners with a specific emphasis on Jane, the leading female character of the play, who becomes a victim in this conflict.

2. Discussion

According to Laura Frader “*Industrialization involved the application of new inventions and technologies to production. New machines harnessed sources of energy like water and steam power and made the manufacture of goods more efficient than ever*” (Frader, 2006: p. 12). As a result, machines started to replace humans and animals, which were previously the main source of power in production. The advancements in technology and mechanization had some major economic consequences. “*Capitalism developed by destroying the feudal mode of production and replacing it with one based on absolute private property and the market, which made possible for higher levels of productivity*” (Selden, Widdowson and Brooker, 2005: p. 88). This new way of production gave way to new expectancies such as more profit, new markets, and sources of raw material.

It cannot be denied that the Industrial Revolution helped England to become the wealthiest country in the world. It created new opportunities for the industry, mining, and even farming and livestock. Along with the industry, the advancement in medical sciences saved many lives and increased the living standards of the people. A huge railroad system had been established and used for both public and industrial transportation.

On the other hand, the developments in the industry, technology, and science gave way to some social problems. With the dream of having better living conditions, millions of people migrated from rural to urban areas, making the cities overpopulated. However, the majority of these immigrants become the cheap labour force at the factories, mines, and even farms who work under terrible conditions. “*Most Victorian men, women, and even children worked long and hard at jobs that require physical labour than present day occupations... The work day and the work week were extremely long*” (Mitchell, 2009: p. 39). Even though they worked very hard, the workers were generally underpaid and struggled with poverty.

According to David Matsumoto “*dehumanization is the process of reducing human beings to something less than human, which can be a mental exercise in re-categorization or a set of actions that has significant negative effects on a person or a group of people*” (Matsumoto, 2009: p. 152). During the Victorian period, the industrial and even agricultural workers reduced to mere machines by their employers. They worked for many long hours, had no legitimate rights, and in most cases underpaid and struggled with starvation. In this respect, it is possible to say that the members of the working class were highly dehumanized in this particular period.

People, the working class, had the aim of finding a way to make themselves understood. They tried to make it via journals, diaries, newspapers, and novels which were blowing up at the time. However, the most immediate and effective reaction to this turmoil was given by the dramatists of the period. Lots of playwrights took on the task to write about the opinions and problems of the working class. This immediate ability of theatre is put into words by Prentki and Selman as follows:

Theatre can say the unsayable. This capacity is perhaps its most central asset. Whether at the individual, group, or public level, theatre gives us ways to express: our dilemmas; our political views, whether conservative or radical; our insights, however tentative; our problems, shortcomings, fears, intentions, complaints, anger, commitments. Theatre allows us to enter difficult and dangerous territory, whether emotionally, socially, or politically, by virtue of its capacity for narrative, embodiment, symbol, and metaphor (Prentki and Selman, 2000: p. 101).

The emergence of melodramas and factory plays constituted the basis of the plays of the Victorian period. Melodrama has always had its roots in the “*bourgeois tradition of European sentimentalism... as well as in the tradition of popular entertainment*” (Poole, Ralph J. and Saal, Ilka, 2008: p.16). For this very reason, it has always been very popular among the different classes of society, including the aristocracy. Another reason for the popularity of melodramas was its simple structure and language. So, it did not require “*cultural literacy for its appreciation*” (Poole, Ralph J., and Saal, Ilka, 2008: p. 16). Thus, it is not surprising for melodrama to appeal to the literary taste of the working-class audience of the Victorian period.

Melodrama dealt with a variety of subject matters. Of these subject matters, class struggle was especially popular among the lower classes, because the genre was faithfully adapted by the “*historically voiceless*” (Grimsted, 1971: p. 80) working-class society. The popular theme of the sexual exploitation of the lower class woman by an Aristocratic villain which was popular in the 18th century shifted to the “*labour and social exploitation of workers by factory owners*” (Poole, Ralph J., and Saal, Ilka, 2008: p. 16) in the 19th century. Such familiar conflicts became immediately viral among the most populated working-class society. To them, the plays were

the reflection of their struggle and they watched it as veracity rather than a work of fiction.

John Walker's *The Factory Lad* is one of the earliest examples of this new genre. However, like other factory plays whose settings were not London, the play remained relatively provincial. Sally Vernon adds that she has "*found no evidence to suggest that these particular factory plays were very successful on the London stage*" (Vernon, 1977: p. 128). Due to this unpopularity in London theatrical circles, the play did not get the attention it deserved. According to Michael Booth "*The Factory Lad had only six performances when it was first produced at the Surrey Theatre, and one reason was the unfamiliarity of the material to London audiences, for whom the troubles in northern factories may have seemed very remote*" (Booth, 1969: p. 204). On the other hand, as this unpopularity does never mean that melodrama is useless, Booth takes attention to the significance of melodramas in *A Defence of Nineteenth-Century English Drama*:

Considering its social emphasis in an age increasingly conscious of class, the amount of latent or actual class conflict in melodrama is hardly surprising: the oppression of the virtuous peasant by the villainous aristocrat or landowner, the seducing squire's pursuit of the village heroine, the employer's harsh treatment of his employee, and the antipathy between owner and worker—all this is evidence of the social responsiveness of melodrama to its period, and engrossing material for the social historian interested in popular attitudes to class, attitudes whose variations depend in part upon the geographical location of particular theatres in working-class districts or in the middle-class West End (Booth, 1974: p. 10).

The Factory Lad begins with Mr. Westwood's decision to fire all the workers in his factory to take advantage of the steam machinery. Being discharged, the workers decide to destruct the factory and to crack all the machinery for revenge as "*their appeals for mercy fall on deaf ears*" (Patterson, 2005: p. 144). George Allen is a hardworking and honest worker who tries to hold on to life with his wife and children. After being fired, he joins the arsonists as he can find no other way. Will Rushton, whose wife and children are slaughtered in a foreign country by the natives, wants to take his revenge by blazing the factory. After setting the factory on fire, they are seized and arrested but in the final scene, Rushton shoots Westwood and he probably dies.

Nick Haslam argues that there are two different forms of dehumanization. These are "*Animalistic Dehumanization and Mechanistic Dehumanization*" (Haslam, 2006: p. 260). To him, the Mechanistic Dehumanization

occurs when human is linked to object, automata or machine. In this state, the HN [Human Nature] characteristics such as warmth, emotion, and individuality are denied. This dehumanization often occurs in the context of interpersonal interactions and organizational settings such as in a factory or working place. It is often accompanied by indifference, a lack of empathy, an abstract and deindividuated view of others (Haslam, 2006: p. 258).

There is no doubt that the members of the working class who suffer from losing their jobs due to mechanization are subjected to this kind of dehumanization.

The individuality and emotions of the workers are denied by their employers. To them, the workers are only a group of people who are supposed to manufacture goods for them, and they are important as long as they can do so. Their families, social lives, problems, feelings, and emotions are not important for the factory owners. Moreover, when they discharge a group of workers, they do not pay attention to their identities as individuals. The workers are reduced to names on a piece of paper. So, in the play, the discharge of George and other workers is an example of Mechanistic Dehumanization.

Jane Allen, the wife of George Allen, has a very significant role in the play, because the emotions, the beggary, the sorrows, and the 'rights' of the working class are portrayed via Jane. She is the voice of her society, in other words, she represents the working class. Even though she is not a worker herself, Jane suffers from all kinds of loss and sorrow workers live. Thus, it is not only the workers who are affected by the consequences of mechanization of manufacture, but also their families and social circles. In other words, like George and his fellow workers, Jane is also dehumanized by the new world order.

Jane is a conventional working-class mother who always tries to support her family, makes her husband happy, and like the other members of the working class; does not want anything but to be happy with a simple life. When she is getting ready to welcome her husband, that simplicity is seen in these words of hers:

It's past eight, and your father will be coming home, and he'll be very tired, I dare say, and hungry too, and at the end of the week a bit of supper and a draught of ale is a thing he looks for! And his family around him, who so happy as George Allen?
(Walker, 2000: p. 206)

After working happily for their kind-hearted employer for years, George Allen and his fellow workers lose their jobs to machines when the owner of the factory passes away and his profit-oriented son, Squire Westwood, takes over the business. What Westwood cares about is to increase the profit of his business. And he believes that the mechanization of the manufacture in the factory will be more profitable.

Besides, it is seen that he does not pay any attention to his employees and their families, so from his profit-oriented point of view, what matters is more production and more money. Thus, as the workers are not as productive as the machines, they must be replaced by the latter. Here, it can be said that the humanness of the workers is superseded by their productivity. Without any hesitation, Westwood fires Allen and his friends by degrading their humanity to tools, denying their rights as workers, making them less valuable than the machines; thus dehumanizing them.

On the day he is fired, George arrives home; he is very feverish, and her daughter Mary shows him the lace, but he throws it down and stamps on it. Despite George's pointless behavior, Jane stays calm and, in an undertone, asks him the reason for his reaction. The simple happiness of this working-class family is fading away, and the following conversation takes place between the couple:

ALLEN: ...George Allen must beg now! Ah, beg or as bad-work and starve. And that I'll never do!

JANE: Oh, speak! Work and starve? Impossible!

ALLEN: Naught be impossible these days! What has ruined others' turn first, now it be ours (Walker, 2000: p. 207).

George emphasizes that he is not alone in this disaster; lots of people face the same tragedy and sorrow. The damage of the new order is put into words by George:

That steam – that curse on mankind, that for the gain of a few, one or two, to ruin hundreds, is going to be at the factory! Instead of five-and-thirty good hands, there won't be ten wanted now, and them half boys and strangers (Walker, 2000: p. 208).

Like many other factory workers, George is frustrated and not capable of understanding this new world order. He starts to look for an enemy to fight against, and in his sorrow, he believes the whole industrial revolution is his enemy. He forgets about all human qualities he owns and reduces himself to a tool of manufacturing. In this respect, he also compares himself to a machine, steam engine in particular, and dehumanizes himself. Even though he believes that he fights against this new order, in fact, he unwittingly knuckles under it.

When Smith comes and whispers something to George, Jane feels distracted and understands that George is not going to do something good. Although she kneels and begs him to stay home with his family, George does not listen to her. When he gets to the pub, he decides to destruct the factory with his friends; but his comment on Rushton following this decision is really interesting. He thinks that Rushton has nothing to lose and jail would be great luck for him as he will not have to beg for money to pursue his life.

*He, poor unhappy wretch, cannot feel more or sink lower-the
gaol to him is but a resting place* (Walker, 2000: p. 212).

According to Haslam, the second type of dehumanization, the Animalistic Dehumanization “occurs when UH [Uniquely Human] characteristics to distinct between us and animals such as refinement, self-control, intelligence, and rationality is denied” (Haslam, 2006: p. 257). When George and his friends decide to set the factory on fire, they become the subjects of Animalistic Dehumanization. They lose not only their connection with reality but also the ability to recognize what is right and what is wrong. They are unable to control their anger and make rational decisions. Thus, they reduce themselves to animals who act according to their most immediate urges. When they feel themselves under a threat, they react with an instinct to fight. In this respect, the factory they used to work becomes the symbol of industrialization for them. To fight against industrialization, they decide to demolish the factory without thinking about the consequences of such an action. This irrational behavior is highly animalistic and lacks any kind of self-control that a human being should possess.

Since Jane is presented as the reflection of the working class, the sorrows of the workers are depicted in the second scene of the second part within the conversations of Jane and George. After blazing the factory, George comes back home, he gets ready to escape but he wants to see his family and gives all his money to Jane. Jane is very upset, she does not want to let him go, but she has nothing to do. She is aidless, poor, and unhappy. Moreover, she is crying and she is trying to keep his family together:

*ALLEN: Ha, that be sweet! [To his wife in an undertone.]
Hush! Here—here, take this— [Gives money.]— it be all I have, and
this, too. [Gives watch.] There be, too, a little up-stairs. Take care
of thyself, Jane, and of children.*

*JANE: Oh, George, say not that! You would not leave your
Jane, who has ever loved you, and ever will?* (Walker, 2000: p. 217)

Following this conversation, constables and Westwood arrive at Allen’s home to seize him. Westwood orders the constables to take him, they go into action at once and Jane sits up and begs to Westwood, she screams but no one hears her. Her screams remain silent because, it is too hard for a peasant, an oppressed worker’s wife to make herself understood. The ruling class is deaf to the screams of the working class due to their greediness to earn more and more. These ignored, silent and unheard entreaties resonate as follows:

JANE[kneels]: Oh, mercy! Spare him—spare my husband!

MARY: Oh, spare my father!

MILLY: Don't hurt father!

JANE: He is not guilty, indeed he's not! (Walker, 2000: p. 217)

The constables and Westwood try to seize the workers; however, they cannot be successful at their first attempt, and the workers manage to flee. But this achievement does not last for a long time and they get caught soon. In this scene, a short dialogue is very interesting and different from the context of the whole play. The play concentrates heavily on the problems of the working class and events are reflected from their points of view. But the conversation between Rushton and Westwood in this scene implies that Westwood is not the guilty one. "Walker brings his characters to life quite convincingly and allows even the villain Westwood reasonable justification for his unyielding attitude" (Patterson, 2005: 144). This interesting conversation is as follows:

RUSHTON: Hell-hounds, would you murder the poor wretches you have deprived of bread!

WESTWOOD: Villain, have you not deprived me of bread, and set fire to my dwelling, reckless who might perish in the flame? (Walker, 2000: p. 219)

Just after this altercation, soldiers and the workers create trouble and it ends with the disarming of Hatfield and Wilson, and capture of George. Following this, distracted screams of Jane are heard as her husband is wounded and captured. She kneels and clasps George and says:

Oh, mercy—mercy, my husband! Do not—do not murder him! Oh, George! (Walker, 2000: p. 219)

The act closes with the endless, unheard, silent screams of the working class against the upper class. Jane and Westwood are again and lastly on the scene to deliver the messages of Walker on the class issue. Just before the abrupt and lethal action of Ruston towards Westwood, Jane's oppressed situation is depicted as follows:

[Falls at Westwood's feet clasping his knees.] Mercy—mercy, to you I kneel! Pity my poor husband, and I will pray for thee, work for thee; my children, all—all, shall be your slaves for ever—ever, but spare him! (Walker, 2000: p. 222)

The conclusion of the play reveals that George fought a war against industrialization in which he did not have any chance to win. Moreover, war is not the only thing he loses. He lost his rationality, dignity, family, and possibly his life, too. The scene his wife Jane gets on her knees and begs for his life is symbolic. Because, no matter how hard the working class fights, it is always the upper-class landlords

and factory owners who win the fight. Thus, Jane symbolizes the whole working class who are dehumanized and spoiled.

3. Conclusion

Victorian period holds a significant place in English history. It was an age of drastic social, political, and economic changes. It is possible to say that, the Industrial Revolution was at the heart of especially social and economic changes that took place in this era. With the invention of the steam engine, the modes of production in mining, industry and even farming irreversibly changed. It created new opportunities for almost everyone in society and triggered the largest migration wave from rural to urban areas in British history. Within 50 years or so, millions of peasants migrated from the countryside to large industrialized cities to reach better living conditions. However, they ended up becoming the most crowded social class of the nation: the working class.

Even though industrialization and mass production created many new job opportunities for these people, with the rapid progress of mechanization many workers became unemployed. Because most of the work previously had done by them started to be done faster and cheaper by the newly invented machines. The lucky ones who did not lose their jobs were struggling with poverty, long working hours, and terrible working conditions. In the mid-nineteenth century, especially the large industrial cities were irrevocably overpopulated by these people who had nowhere else to go. For this reason, the lives and difficult living conditions of working-class people become one of the most important social issues of the Victorian period.

As regards to literature, it was also one of the most productive periods. Novelists, poets, playwrights, and even journalists produce many literary works most of which are dealing with the social problems of the working class. Thus, the general characteristics of the literature produced in this period are being realistic. One of the works written in this period is *The Factory Lad*, a melodramatic play written by John Walker. Even though the play is written a few years before the coronation of Queen Victoria, it would not be wrong to consider it as Victorian, because it successfully depicts the social and economic problems of workers, as well as their struggle in industrializing England which continues through the Victorian period.

The play tells the story of a group of factory workers who lose their jobs when the owner of the factory dies, and his young son, Squire Westwood takes over the business. Walker depicts Mr. Westwood as the representative of industrial England. Comparing their work to that of machines, Squire Westwood decides that machines operate faster and cheaper than the workers. Besides, they can run for longer hours without needing maintenance and manufacture more goods than human workers. Thus, he discharges some of the workers one of which is George Allen, the cen-

tral character of the play. In this respect, the play handles the problems of the working class by focusing on the family tragedy of George, his wife Jane, and their three children. In the play

It can be argued that the dehumanization of the workers is one of the major themes of the play. Their lives, responsibilities to their families, feelings, and emotions are underestimated by the system and their value is decided according to their productivity and profitability. Moreover, they are degraded and compared with machinery. When compared to machines, they are seen as less productive. As a result, they lost both their jobs and their value as human beings. Their rights as workers and as human beings are taken away. In this respect, they are subjected to Mechanistic Dehumanization.

In the play, Walker also alienates George, his family, and other fellow workers from other qualities that make them human, such as their dignity, rationality, and individuality. When the workers are fired, they decide to destroy the factory for revenge. Their reaction to Mr. Westwood's decision is impulsive rather than rational. They fail to recognize their enemy and choose revenge over justice without considering the consequences. What they do is not a humane action. Also, after they set the factory on fire, Mr. Westwood and his men hunt them like wild animals. They are all captured and at a moment of disturbance, George is wounded and supposedly dead. Thus, it can be said that they are also subjected to Animalistic Dehumanization.

Another example of dehumanization is seen through the end of the play. When George and his friends are captured, George's wife Jane gets on her knees and begs for her husband's life in vain. In the play, Jane symbolizes the silent majority of the working class. She is not a worker herself, however, she is highly affected by her husband's downfall. In her character, Walker depicts the wives and the families of the factory workers. Even though she was innocent and frustrated, she begs Mr. Westwood on her knees. It can be argued that in this scene she loses her dignity and as Mr. Westwood does not spare George's life she is dehumanized.

In conclusion, *The Factory Lad* is a realist melodramatic play that tells the story of a working-class Victorian family. It depicts the tragedy they lived with a simple, yet striking language. The members of the working class are subjected to dehumanization and oppression in different ways.

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