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***The Road to Wigan Pier and the Jungle:
The Conditions and the Troubles of the Working
Class and the Writers' Suggestion of Socialism***

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ABSTRACT

The accounts of George Orwell (1903-1950) in *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937) and Upton Sinclair (1878-1968) in *the Jungle* (1906) and their personal experiences and observations of the working-class life in Wigan Pier, the industrial north of England and the Packingtown in Chicago, reveal the horrible working and housing conditions, unemployment, and thus the struggle for survival. One of the main reasons of the fact that these writers suggest socialism as a solution is the conditions of the laborers in both places which the writers personally observed and reflected in their works. This study aims to explore these social problems which eventually lead the writers who are from different countries in different times suggest socialism in different ways from each other.

Key Words: Socialism, working class, struggle for existence, capitalism.

***The Road to Wigan Pier* and *the Jungle*: İşçi Sınıfının Koşulları, Sorunları ve Yazarların Sosyalizm Önerisi**

ÖZET

The Road to Wigan Pier (1937) romanında George Orwell (1903-1950) ve *the Jungle* (1906) romanında da Upton Sinclair (1878-1968), İngiltere'nin kuzeyindeki sanayi bölgesindeki Wigan Pier'de ve Chicago'da Packingtown denilen mezbahalar bölgesinde edindikleri kişisel deneyimlerini ve işçi sınıfı üzerine yaptıkları gözlemlerini aktarmaktadır. Bu eserler, emekçilerin içinde bulunduğu korkunç çalışma ve yaşam koşullarını, işsizlik ve bunların sonucunda ortaya çıkan hayatta kalma mücadelesini anlatmaktadır. Söz konusu yazarların bu duruma çözüm olarak sosyalizmi önermelerinin nedeni, eserlerinde gözlem yapıp yansıttıkları benzer koşullardır. Bu çalışmanın amacı, farklı ülkelerden olan iki yazara yine farklı zaman dilimlerinde, benzer koşullarda sosyalizm çözümüne iten sosyal nedenleri, birbirlerinden farklı şekilde nasıl aktardıklarını incelemektir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Sosyalizm, işçi sınıfı, hayatta kalma mücadelesi, kapitalizm.

INTRODUCTION

There are several points of similarities between George Orwell's *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937) and Upton Sinclair's *the Jungle* (1906) although each one is of different literary genre; while the first one is semi-documentary, the latter one is a novel. They both point out the troubles of the working class in detailed coverage of aspects of life as housing, living and working conditions, and suggest that it is the socialism that would solve such problems. This socio-economic theory seems new to Orwell unlike Sinclair. For the part two of *The Road to Wigan Pier*, R. Hoggart claims that "it is partly opinionation about socialism by a man who had then a patchy idea of the nature of socialism" (1965, 72). Upton Sinclair's tone for stressing the importance of social programs is harsher than George Orwell since Sinclair states that he observes a deeply-rooted corruption in the State, which leads hopelessness among the workers. Orwell, on the other hand, questions British attitudes towards this economic system and political theory. Like Sinclair, he tries to reveal the benefits of the system. One of the main reasons of the fact that these writers express they suggest socialism as a solution is the conditions of the laborers which the writers personally observed and reflected in their works. This article aims to explore these similar conditions which lead them suggest the similar solution, the socialism, in these two novels.

DISCUSSION

The account of Orwell and Sinclair's personal experiences and observations of working-class life in Wigan Pier and the Packingtoun respectively reveals the horrible working and housing conditions, unemployment, and thus the struggle for existence. The horrendous working conditions tend to prove some of the essentials of Marxist theory of which socialism, or the socialist mode of production, is a part. By implementing socialism, it is assumed that the theory claims to improve the society. In order to understand the writers' suggestion of socialism, it is better to examine the characters and the plot through this theory. When the novels are explored through this perspective, Roger Webster's (1990) ideas on this issue are helpful for a better understanding. He states that it is usually as a way of exploring the wider social and historical forces of which they are seen as products. The characters trying to survive under these conditions are the products of the capitalism and the bourgeoisie (65-66). The books reflect 'the historical and material conditions of society; these are the main criteria for assessing its realism' as Georg Lukacs proposes (Webster, 1990: 66).

In the first part of *The Road to Wigan Pier*, Orwell gives a detailed view of the conditions of the poor and unemployed. Since they work underground in the mines, it is very hot, dusty and also very dangerous. The region is called 'Black Country'. The miners are like apes there crawling on hand and knees in dangerous darkness. They may face an explosion in the depths of the mines for they use dynamites. In addition to this, time is another concept to discuss because the miners have to spend three or more hours on travelling to get to the place where the coal is dismantled. It is situated several miles away from the elevator and the tunnel has a minimum space for the coal-miners to move. Although they do not work more than seven or eight hours a day, they have to spend almost whole day at work. They have few hours left to go back home and to sleep and to get ready for the same struggle next day. In *the Jungle*, the situation is worse. The wage-earners in the stockyards are subject to ten to twelve hours of work and get paid hardly enough for one day's survival of a person only. The working conditions in the Packingtoun are more horrible than Wigan Pier. The factory owners (or the robber barons, a term generally used for the owners in the beginning of the 20th.century) value their profits over the health of the laborers and the public consumer. The lack of sanitation in the factories is evident for the dishonest practices of the meat-packing industry. The owners produce and sell stale and rotten meat and the substances used in the meat process are poisonous. The chemicals affect their health badly. Some of the workers are killed. In the winter, the factories turn into hell for the workers

because their fingers get frozen, and sometimes their fingers stick to the icy iron wheelbarrow full of meat, and they lose some of their fingers. Accidents happen because “the floor was half an inch deep with blood, a stream of bright red was pouring out upon the floor” (*The Jungle*: 39). Blood of the meats spilt over the ground iced up and the workers slide. One of the most terrible accidents happens in one of the galleries. Sinclair says ‘their peculiar trouble was that they fell into the vats;... sometimes they would be overlooked for days, till all but the bones of them had gone out to the world as Durham’s Pure Leaf Lard!’ (*The Jungle*: 99). Marija’s turning to prostitution can also be regarded as being a product of the social and economic forces. She involved in it in order to survive. Sinclair accuses of capitalism because it forces women to the prostitution. In addition to the abuse to which women were objected, they lose their jobs. They are forced to sell their bodies which are the only commodity they have in order to survive. The world of these oppressed people is resembled to a jungle, a Darwinian jungle where the merciless rules of ‘the survival of the fittest’ exist. Only the strongest and the luckiest ones can have the chance to live.

Another attack on ‘laissez-faire’ capitalism is observed on the housing conditions described both novels. ‘Laissez-faire’ can be explained as minimizing or eliminating government interference in economic affairs, allowing the free play of supply and demand.

Sinclair gives vivid descriptions of the miserable conditions and talks about the corruption in the real estate agency, to which any governmental officer control what they are doing. The agents who seek only for their own gain cheat the immigrants who do not know the language well and the laws in the country can easily be violated. Adam Smith argues that “the individual’s self-interested pursuit of optimum gain and happiness was both regulated by, and harnessed to, the general good, the economist’s law of demand and supply. His thesis was that by trading with individuals not only got what they wanted but gave others what they desired. However they intend to get only their own gain” (cited from Mulcahy, 2008, 29). Under the light of Smith’s argument, one could understand the motive behind the agents’ cheating. They are after the optimum gain under these economic conditions. However, Jurgis and all his relatives are the victims of this system; they collect their savings and buy a house - or they think that they own the house. They are again deceived. The façade is shiny and nice but in fact it is built with the cheapest materials. Inside of the house is very unhealthy and rotten. Eventually, they realize that the house will not be their property until they pay for all debt. The houses in this region are to be pulled down, thus the landlords do not even hammer a nail; they do not care about

them. In Orwell's book, we see several people living in 'caravans', too. Orwell calls them 'caravan dwellers'. The houses are in rows with very small windows letting no sunshine inside. "The whole rows of houses are undermined, and the windows often are ten to twenty degrees out of the horizontal" (*The Road to Wigan Pier*, 170). Windows are not installed correctly - they are not lying straight in the structure. If you put a ball on the window sill, it would roll off one way or the other. There is not any proper bathroom in the houses, either. The miners need to wash regularly because the black dust all covers them. Few of them have a bath at their homes but the rest have only a little basin or go to the public baths which is not enough. The people of the working-class try hard to be clean. Orwell tells us his personal criticism on the dirt, bugs and the crumbs everywhere in the pension of the Brooker family where he has stayed during his research.

Other frightening realities are observed in the workers' food and nourishment. Orwell gives striking and detailed descriptions of the families' purchase of food with very low wages some of which are spent on fuel for cooking. Despite the low wages, the poor families tend to buy expensive and 'tasty' food (*The Road to Wigan Pier*: 168). The psychological aspect of buying 'tasty' food is that this is the only thing that they can afford to forget the misery of their life. They believe that this helps them forget the monotonous life spent in the darkness of the mines. Sinclair's characters have much in common in this respect. The workers in the Packingtown drink alcohol a lot in order to forget the hardships they have been facing. The food they consume is poisonous and rotten. Even the milk Marija buys for her baby contains so much formaldehyde that could kill anyone who drinks. The sellers add the substance into the milk so that it will not turn sour without caring for others' health. What's worse, there is not any official institution to check productions of food and drinks.

In addition to these horrendous conditions, the unemployment is another burden on the shoulders of the working-class people. It is an ironical situation because actually most of them work but the wage they earn is not enough to survive- it cannot be accepted as a living wage. In *the Road to Wigan Pier*, it is observed that the Great Depression in the 1930s is one of the biggest causes for the unemployment. In *the Jungle*, the enormous rush of European immigrants to Chicago results in loss of work. On the other hand, the workers are exploited until they lose their last strength in their bodies, and when they lose their health and strength, they lose their jobs, too. The factory owners do not care about their health because there are millions of immigrants waiting in the queue for a position in front of the factory gates or the slaughter houses.

It can be asserted that the miserable situations which the workers face are also a part of the class conflict according to the Marxist theory of class struggle in the history of the mankind. Elizabeth Jay (1986) explains the socialist outlook and says “ ...all previous history moved in class antagonisms and class struggles, that there have always existed ruling and ruled, exploiting and exploited classes, and that the great majority of mankind has always been condemned to arduous labor and little enjoyment.” She asks why this is and gives an answer:

“Simply because in all earlier stages of development of mankind production was so little developed that the historical development could proceed only in this antagonistic form, that historical progress as a whole was assigned to the activity of a small privileged minority, while the great mass remained condemned to producing by their labor their own meager means of subsistence and also the increasingly rich means of the privileged” (107).

The writers suggest socialism as a solution for the working class who are exploited in different ways. Marxist Literary Criticism proposes that literature is a reflection of ideological struggle and can itself be central to the task of ideology critique. It can be asserted that through the end of *the Jungle* and *the Road to Wigan Pier* reflect this idea.

Upton Sinclair gives an explanation for Socialism and discusses it through Jurgis’ relationship with the trade unions. Jurgis discovers that there might be a good and democratic relationship between the employer and the wage earners unlike what he has experienced so far. He also realizes that the unions try to teach the workers a class conscience and an alternative hegemony of the working class people. He writes basic elements of Socialism. The wage-earners only have their labor to sell. The capitalists own the means of production; that is, the factories. Socialism, then argues for public ownership and the control of the means of production. As Sinclair reveals, the capitalists ruthlessly exploit the workers for more profit-the surplus value- to use it in other enterprise to have more profit. In this chain, the capitalists lower the wages to earn more money. Here, Sinclair suggests Socialism in which there is no chance for graft, corruption and exploitation of the proletariat. Through Socialism, he believes, the means of production will be in the hands of the workers. He ends the book with a statement, repeating three times: ‘Chicago will be ours!’ This is a final statement of his desire for socialism and also a paraphrase of Marx’s Manifesto’s stirring conclusion: “The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win. Workingmen of all countries unite!” (Downs, 1961: 258).

Going back to Orwell's approach to the socialism as reflected above, one could say that Orwell has got a completely different attitude in expressing his ideas about socialism. Unlike Sinclair, he focuses upon the arguments against socialism in the second part of the book. Peter Marks (1999) clearly reveals Orwell's attitude:

“In Wigan Pier, Orwell argues tendentiously that ‘in order to defend Socialism, it is necessary to start by attacking it for the moment I am advocatus diaboli’. There follows the infamous, intemperate and overtly provocative caricature of socialists and communists as fruit juice drinkers, sex maniacs, pacifists and feminists” (6).

Orwell criticizes socialists and communists for they speak against their own class while they seem to make propaganda for the rights of the laborers -the proletariat in Marx's term- and for solidarity among them. He thinks they behave like middle-class people who do not care for the lowest ones. Therefore he is not quite hopeful for the working class. The socialist movement, according to Orwell, is not led by them anymore. Therefore, his suggestion of Socialism is different from what actually happens in England.

Patrick Reilly (1986), too, agrees with Peter Marks and he states that “Orwell seeks to strengthen socialism through attack, restore it saving powers by exposing its quack practitioners” (165). This perspective also indicates why capitalism is inevitably considered as oppression and injustice and the existence of the exploited working class society that Orwell depicts in his book. Orwell advocates that a reform is needed, considering the conditions of the miners in Wigan Pier.

Orwell's general idea is that socialism is no longer a movement of the working class. This movement is led by the bourgeois. Orwell argues that middle-class communists and socialists often speak against their own class, but on the other hand, they pretend to behave like the bourgeois. The socialists who make propaganda for ‘proletarian solidarity’ generally do not even have a lot of contact with the class they are ‘fighting for’. According to Orwell, a worker is better than a socialist because he takes socialism to mean justice and common decency. For many people who called themselves socialists, revolution is not a movement of the masses, but a set of reforms imposed by the clever ones upon the lower orders (Paras Mani Singh, 1987, 80).

George Orwell defines this situation as the diffusion of Socialist doctrine. He feels that it is wonderful in theory but in practice it is just a failure. The workers' control of the means of production, social justice and equality are all ignored. Then, socialism becomes only a ‘materialist

obsession' for people to fill their belly (Patrick Reilly, 1986, 165). So, in its materialist obsession, as Reilly states socialism gives the impression of caring only for the belly ignoring the other vital parts of the theory. Orwell says 'a human being is primarily a bag for putting food into' (*The Road to Wigan Pier*, 165). Orwell uses 'fat' and 'fat-bellier' to contempt and rebuke those who elect the belly as the ruling organ and says: "with their eyes glued to economic facts, they have proceeded on the assumption that man has no soul, and, explicitly or implicitly, they have set up the goal of a materialistic Utopia" (*The Road to Wigan Pier*, 188).

Orwell calls upon all exploited workers like Marx, like Sinclair, to be on the Socialist side. Paras Mani Singh (1987) explains his attitude: "he believed that everyone who knew the meaning of poverty and had a genuine hatred for tyranny and war would be on the Socialist side" (81). His call is for the middle-class, too, because the depression caused some changes in the English class system. Middle class gradually became unemployed and therefore they became proletariat but as Singh puts 'without adopting a proletarian outlook. He states that 'Orwell simply pitied the plight of the people who were being robbed off and bullied by the same class system' (ibid, 83). Orwell describes and idealizes a working-class interior 'where you breathe a warm, decent, deeply human atmosphere' in the 7th chapter. He initially regards the workers as the 'smelling workers' because of his taught middle-class prejudice. He gradually changes and becomes Orwell, who is a Socialist. The transition occurs both in his writing from negative to positive, from his prejudice of dislike toward the working class to an admiration and this can also be regarded as his journey to Socialism: the road to Socialism! This transition is another evidence for his desire for Socialism. Stephen Ingle (1993) proposes that 'Orwell established a brand of socialism rooted in the working-class values of solidarity, equality and what he called decency and justice' (114).

CONCLUSION

Although George Orwell and Upton Sinclair are from different countries and write different times in different literary genre, it is assumed that similar conditions may get the authors to suggest similar solutions for them. They share relatively identical worldviews on the social issues of the period in which they live. For this reason, it is supposed to provide the readers a better understanding of the motive that lead the writers to reflect the social problems. As this discussion in the paper suggests, Sinclair and Orwell criticize the social and economic forces that cause above mentioned

problems like class struggle and the related social problems for which they suggest socialism. After publishing the books, they have great influence on the readers and therefore on the society, and this helps an awareness of the conditions to which the laborers are exposed. As Roger Webster states 'literature, rather than being a passive reflector, reinforcing established values and norms of society, can become an active agent or catalyst for social change' (1990: 67). The social change comes very soon. *The Jungle* launches a government investigation and makes the Food Act signed. In *The Road to Wigan Pier*, Orwell's speaking out for the rights of the working-class, his attack on socialism and its practitioners, and the class struggle receive a wide audience. Jeffrey Meyers (2000) notes that "Orwell's 'propaganda' as 'an emotional plea for Socialism addressed to comfortable people'" (137). Orwell's scold on the clashes of the class is focused on the English class system. It may be claimed that his collecting facts on the working-class life in the mines could change the prejudice and fear of the middle-class against the working-class. The middle class are afraid of the workers because they are ignorant, dirty and smelling badly. It can be claimed that his sympathy towards the workers can eliminate the middle class people's prejudice. He tells us a story about his boyhood. Like many middle-class people, Orwell was brought up to believe that working class people smell. This autobiographical part of the book can play an indirect and didactic role meant to the English middle class. Finally, the works under discussion can be regarded as the literary works of social change that possibly convert people from indifference to a socialist awareness and commitment. Although the countries are different, England and the United States, the troubles of the working class are similar, and the authors respectively reveal their observations on this issue in these works. Therefore they both underline their feelings and ideas on socialism as an immediate solution for the problems they observe in the working class.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to identify the views of George Orwell (1903-1950) in *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937) and Upton Sinclair (1878-1968) in *the Jungle* (1906). They share identical solution, which is the socialism, for the problems they observe in Wigan Pier and the Packingtown. The accounts of their personal experiences among the workers in those industrial areas of the two countries are vividly described.

The works of each author are explored through social-realist perspective and the social Darwinist ideas and found out the similarities between them although they belong to different countries, period of time and literary genres. The social problems depicted reveal the same horrible working and living conditions in which the characters are forced to struggle to live. The sociological investigations of the industrial areas indicate the social injustice, poverty, terrifying mining and meat-packing factories and filthy slum living.

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