Journal of Humanities, Music and Dance
ISSN: 2799-1180
Vol : 03, No. 01, Dec 2022 - Jan 2023
http://journal.hmjournals.com/index.php/JHMD
DOI: https://doi.org/10.55529/jhmd.31.13.16

Understanding Oscar Wilde's Critique of Charity in The Soul of Man under Socialism

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Received: 22 September 2022 **Accepted:** 02 December 2022 **Published:** 06 January 2023

Abstract: Charity is a voluntary act of alms giving to those in need. It is a moral virtue preached in all religions. Surprisingly, Oscar Wilde criticized it in his book, The Soul of Man under Socialism. However, a hermeneutic study of the book reveals that Oscar Wilde does not see charity as ontologically evil but as a veil to the evil of capitalism which is poverty. It does not allow the masses to have actual experience of poverty inherent in capitalism, which is very necessary for conversion from capitalism to socialism.

Keywords: Oscar Wilde, Socialism, Capitalism, Charity, the Soul of Man Under Socialism.

1. INTRODUCTION

Charity is a voluntary giving of alms to those in need. As a moral concept, it etymologically originated from the French word charite, which is a derivation of Latin word caritas meaning generosity (Online etymology Dictionary, 2022). It is regarded as a virtue as well as a religious duty both in Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Budhism and many others.
In Judaism, tzedaka (a Hebrew term) literally meaning righteousness but is commonly used to connote charity. Torah gives command that we must do charitable works. It is therefore a command not a mere voluntary virtue. The Torah requires that ten per cent of a Jew's income should be directed towards righteous deeds (Halevy, 1972). In Christianity Jesus Christ fed five thousand people free of charge. He taught believers to be merciful to the poor, help those in need and to do so without publicity (Mathew 6:30). Islam identifies two methods of charity: Zakat and Sadaqah. Zakat is one of the five pillars of Islam. It requires that a believer should give 2.5% of his savings as Zakat in every Islamic calendar provided that the savings is beyond the threshold limit which is determined by Islamic authority. Sadaqah is a free will contribution. It can be given in form of one's money, time, talent or material resources. There is no limit to sadaqah (Tauber, 2022). In Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism, charity is called Dana or Daana and is regarded as an important religious duty (Owen, 1991). It is defined traditional text, state Krishna and Manoj as " any action of relinquishing the ownership of what one is considered or identified as one's own, and investing the same in a recipient

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without expecting anything in return"(Krishna and Manoj, 2008). Rigveda also emphasizes on the importance of charity works which can take forms of feeding others, helping those in need, philanthropic public projects and unconditional and unattached giving without expectation. Charity is one of the religious requirements to get to perfection (paramita).
However, Oscar Wilde in his book, The Soul of Man under Socialism criticizes charity (Wilde, 2012). His critique of the virtuous act which every religion and every morally sound person holds in high esteem appears very strange. This motivates us into this research with the aim of finding out why and how he condemns the act of charity.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Considering that this work is a qualitative research, our data come from library materials. The Soul of Man under Socialism serves as a primary source of our data whiles other materials as secondary sources (Wilde, 2012). Since this work is an attempt to interpret the text with the aim of understanding why and how he criticized charity, the philosophical tool that is the most appropriate is nothing but hermeneutics. Hermeneutics is a method that deals with textual interpretation with the aim of arriving at the exact meaning and intent of the writer. It is a method that promotes textual comprehension through exposition. It is also known as exegesis. In other words, we are going to do a little exposition on The Soul of Man under Socialism. We are not studying everything in the text but are concerned with Oscar Wilde's notion of charity as contained in the text.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Oscar Wilde in The Soul of Man under Socialism advocates for socialism against capitalism. According to him, the worst evil of capitalism is poverty which affects the majority of the masses. "They find themselves surrounded by hideous poverty, by hideous ugliness, by hideous starvation. It is inevitable that they should move by all this" (p. 7). But with conversion of private property to public property, under socialism, the evil of poverty will be done away with. "Under socialism, all this will, of course, be altered. There will be no people living in fetid dens and fetid rags, and bringing up unhealthy, hunger-pinched children in the midst of impossible and absolutely repulsive surroundings" (p. 7). The security of society will depend on the state. He adds:
Socialism or whatever one chooses to call it, by converting private property into public wealth, and substituting co-operation for competition, will restore society to its proper condition of a thorough healthy organism, and insure the material well-being of each member of the community. It will in fact, give life its proper basis and its proper environment (p.7).
Oscar Wilde did not think in the direction of public poverty which socialism might bring if people do not work. There must be work for food and basic needs of man to be produced and distributed, but Oscar Wilde sees the state as an unlimited supplier which can cater for the needs of the masses whether there is work or no work. Actually, socialism encourages laziness and this can lead to mass poverty contrary to the thought of Oscar Wilde. In other words, contrary to Oscar Wilde's dream, socialism can lead to greater poverty if not well managed.
Oscar argued against charity which he sees as a veil that covers the evil of capitalism. Charity is not ontologically evil if one really understands Oscar Wilde's philosophy but it

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leads to deception, and serves as Karl Marx opium of the masses. It clouds the evil of capitalism, and prolongs the movement from capitalism to socialism. According to him, the emotions of man are more easily stirred up by suffering than man's intelligence. Out of such emotion, men adopt altruism as a solution to the problem of those that suffer instead of finding a way to deal with the root of the suffering. "But their remedies do not cure the disease: they merely prolong it. Indeed, their remedies are part of the diseases" (p.7). In similar vein, he writes:

Sympathy with pain there will, of course, always be. It is one of the instincts of man. The animal which are individual, the higher animals, that is to say, share it with us. But it must be remembered that while sympathy with joy intensifies the sum of joy in the world, sympathy with pain does not really diminish the amount of pain. It may make man better to endure evil, but the evil remains (pp.30-31).

In other words, charity does not solve the problem of poverty created by capitalism. It rather coats the symptoms while the root cause (capitalism) remains unsolved. "They try to solve the problem of poverty, for instance, by keeping the poor alive; or in the case of a very advanced school, by amusing the poor" (p.7). The solution to poverty is conversion from capitalism to socialism, and not acts of charity. Arguing against the utilitarian value of charity, Oscar Wilde writes, "But this is not a solution: it is an aggravation of the difficulty. The proper aim is to try and reconstruct society on such a basis that poverty will be impossible. And the altruistic virtues have really prevented the carrying out of this aim…" (p. 7). This implies that charity which the poor receive both from government, Non-governmental Organizations, charity organizations and philanthropic rich persons make it difficult for the evil of capitalism to be fully realized. One wonders whether such welfare is ever enough to hide the evil of poverty as Wilde thought. Wilde therefore is of the opinion that charity should stop. The question is who will stop it? How can it be stopped? Wilde did not give any concrete answer to this. Wilde also did not give a road map on how to arrive at socialism as Karl Marx advocated revolution, rather Wilde banishes charity. It may be that for him, once charity is abolished, the poor would revolt and this leads to socialism.

More so, Wilde condemned philanthropists and likened them to worst slave owners who were kind to their slaves so that they could not realize-the true nature of their plight and rebel against them. "Just as the worst slave-owners were kind to their slaves, and so prevented the horror of the system being realized by those who suffered from it, and understood by those who contemplated it, so in the present state of things in England, the people who do most harm are the people who try to do most good" (p.7). Wilde somehow contradicted this position that charity always comes from malicious intent when he affirmed that people help out of sentiments, out of emotion which is stirred up by suffering. In other words, his argument here does have enough weight.

In addition, Oscar Wilde argued that "they do so on the ground that such charity degrades and demoralizes. They are perfectly right. Charity creates multitudes of sins"(p. 8). But how does charity lead to a multitude of sins? This, he did not explain, but his emphasis is that charity militates against conversion from capitalism to socialism.

4. CONCLUSION

Though Oscar Wilde criticized charity because it makes it difficult for the evil of capitalism to be obvious, he does not regard charity as ontologically evil. A study of his short story, The

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Model Millionaire indicates that Oscar Wilde cherishes charity as a virtue which all must practice (Wilde, 2022). Akudolu (2022) commenting on the moral value of the story reveals that the "finding of this work is that altruism, almsgiving, charity and selfless interests are great values which attract blessings from God and men" which must be pursued and practiced to achieve a humane society. Oscar Wilde therefore values charity as a virtue to practice but his passion for socialism led him to exaggerations, contradictions and unwarranted comments against charity which gives him a bad image.

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