

From Coketown to Palestine: A Comparative Study of Resilience and Resistance in Dickens' Hard Times

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Abstract

Dickens' novel, Hard Times, constantly criticizes the industrial age, focusing on the traumatic and dehumanizing consequences of utilitarianism and industrialization on humans. The study examines the novel in Palestine in that, as Dickens describes it, we learn of a similarity between the oppressions of Dickens and those of today's Palestinians living under occupation. In the end, resilience and resistance are studied in terms of Hard Times and the socioeconomic situation in Palestine. Through Sissy Jupe and Louisa Gradgrind, the analysis is proved a collective battle against dehumanisation. Further, it highlights the role of education and narrative in it. Dickens' novel, the writer of this paper suggests a compelling understanding of Palestinian experience. The paper explains how narratives of resistance and resilience merge history and geography.

Keywords: *Industrial Age, Utilitarianism, Resilience, Narrative Resistance, Dehumanization.*

من كوك تاون إلى فلسطين: دراسة مقارنة للصمود والمقاومة في رواية «الأوقات الصعبة» لتشارلز ديكنز

الملخص

تقدم رواية «الأوقات الصعبة» لتشارلز ديكنز نقدا لا هوادة فيه للعصر الصناعي، مركزة على النتائج الصادمة والمهينة للكرامة الإنسانية للنفعية والتصنيع على الأفراد. تتناول هذه الدراسة الرواية في سياق فلسطين، حيث نكتشف من خلال وصف ديكنز تشابها بين أشكال القمع التي صورها وتلك التي يعيشها الفلسطينيون اليوم تحت الاحتلال. وأخيرا، تستكشف الدراسة مفهومي الصمود والمقاومة، من خلال وضع رواية «الأوقات الصعبة» وظروفها الاجتماعية والاقتصادية في إطار فلسطين. ومن خلال تحليلها لشخصيات مثل سيبي جروب ولويزا جرادجراند، تبرز الدراسة كمؤشر على النضال الجماعي ضده تهمة الإنسانية، مسلطة الضوء على دور التعليم والسرد في هذه العملية. تقترح الورقة البحثية أن رواية ديكنز توفر فهما شاملا للتجربة الفلسطينية، موضحة كيف تدمج سرديات المقاومة والصمود بين التاريخ والجغرافيا.

الكلمات المفتاحية: العصر الصناعي، النفعية، الصمود، المقاومة السردية، تهمة الإنسانية.

1. Introduction

Hard Times is a novel that was published in 1854 on the brutality of industrial life, mechanization, and utilitarianism, highlighting the extent to which humans were benefited by industrial oppression, mechanization and utilitarianism. Dickens depicts the dismal and Coketown as a blooming industrial city infested with dehumanization and manipulation (Blohm, 2023). The depiction of strength and defiance amidst this repressive environment is a productive and engaging story to tell, one that transcends the bounds of the novel and time period (Al-Lawati, 2024). This paper plans to look at Hard Times from a Palestinian perspective, looking at how the narrative, which traces oppression and resistance, speaks to the human experience of Palestinians living under occupation.

Dickens' themes are universal, but the Palestinian experience of war, displacement, and colonial oppression illustrates a pertinent contemporary context for understanding those (Al Hassani & Mahdi, 2022). Through consideration of the socio-economic reality of Coketown and the socio-economic reality of the Palestinians, this paper hopes to explore how the text is not bound to the context but rather speaks to Trans historical concerns of human suffering and resistance (Šramová, 2025).

This approach provides the context for the adoption of a Marxist and post-colonial theoretical framework here. While Marxist theory is applied to draw out the class struggles and economic realities presented in the Dickens novel, post-colonial theory is deployed in order to highlight the effects of systemic oppression and the implications of cultural resistance within the Palestinian context (Sanyal, 2019).

1.1 Marxist Theory and Industrialization

Marxism, or the theory of Karl Marx concerning class struggle and economic exploitation, is one way to interpret the socioeconomic conditions evident in Hard Times (Antonio, 2011). The Marxist thesis suggests that industrialization results in the exploitation of the working class at the hands of the bourgeoisie, resulting in dehumanization and social inequality.

In Hard Times, Dickens critiques the capitalist system through his depiction of Coketown, exposing the exploitation of the working class and the accumulation of profit (Blohm, 2023). The character Thomas Gradgrind embodies the utilitarian pursuit of economic productivity at the expense of human welfare. Gradgrind's educational philosophy, which emphasizes factual knowledge and suppresses imagination, produces compliant labourers subservient to industrial capitalism.

According to Al-Amoudi (2018) Gradgrind's pedagogy is a kind of "social engineering"

in that it produces workers who will be tractable, effective, and who with remain dehumanised” (Al-Amoudi, 2018). According to this reading, Dickens critiques industrial capitalism in as much as it employs Marxist analyses of the struggle between classes and exploitation.

Likewise, a Marxist analysis of the Palestinian case could demonstrate how structural oppression and occupation ultimately affect socio-economic conditions (Torres, 2025). Violent and oppressive, the Israeli occupation makes it seem as if hope is as far away as the workhouse of Dickens. The fight for economic and social justice in Palestine is one for the rights of workers. It is Marxist: a critique of the labour/capital contradiction and class struggle (Nazrul, 2024).

1.2 Post-Colonial Theory and Resistance

The post-colonial theory considers colonialism and the systemic oppression in a useful perspective to look at the Palestinian experience (Parasram, 2024). This theory demonstrates colonized peoples ‘authority and their struggle to counter the power and dehumanization of outside forces.

In *Hard Times*, Dickens depicts the dehumanization that comes with industrialization, which is perhaps a variant of internal colonization, in that the economic and social structures come to control the individual (Khudaverdiyeva, 2024). This Dickensian character symbolizes the fight against this suppressive system via her imaginative compassion. Sissy’s character subverts the instrumentalism of Gradgrind and proposes an alternative way of living that values love and human connection.

Writing on the topic, critic Defended argues that Sissy Jupe is the antithesis of Gradgrind, as she represents “human values and emotional depth” that counter the dehumanization of industrialism (Defended, 2014). Sissy’s revolt is akin to post-colonial assertions of power and identity against a compulsive structure.

On top of that, post-colonial theory within the Palestinian case study sheds light on the mechanisms of resistance towards occupation and identity formation that occur through the culture and arts. In this way, Palestinian literature, art, and music become a mode of resistance to the denial of their narrative and the forced narrative of others. As scholar Azmi Bishara argues, Palestinian cultural production is an act of resistance to maintain identity and challenge the oppressive conditions of the occupation (Bishara, 2010).

1. Literature Review

Charles Dickens' *Hard Times* has been leveraged as an example of critiques of industrialization, utilitarianism, and the social costs of mechanized labour. Dickens's industrialized Coketown has been identified as a place of dehumanization, where workers are cogs in a machine and individuality systematically crushed (Blohm, 2023). Scholarly interest in Dickens, but, has been largely focused on the psychological, emotional, and moral costs of industrial life. Characters such as Louisa Gradgrind and Stephen Blackpool represent the psychological impact of a harsh social order, as Meckier points out, making it clear that the dehumanizing experience of industrial work not only alienates workers from their labor, but from themselves and their connections to others (Al-Janabi, 2025). Khan et al. (2024) similarly comments that Dickens' critique of utilitarian philosophies of education and social life in his narratives exposes the emotional and moral limitations of a productivity-oriented system (Khan et al., 2024).

The paradigm of Marxist literary theory complements the critiques mentioned here. AŞCI (2019) observes that the industrial society that Dickens describes is a society related closely to a Marxist understanding of class struggle and the nature of labor exploitation in which capitalist production works to deprive the worker not only of the product of his labor, but also of his sociality as a human being and his humanity itself (AŞCI, 2019). Jochem, too, argues that the dramatic structure of the Dickens novel pivots on the conflict between individual desire and there being an economic system that controls it (Jochem, 2021). Similarly, the oppression of the individual by industry takes both systemic and psychological forms. The Gradgrind family represents this tension; the children are conditioned to absorb productivity and facts through strict utilitarian education, which contains emotion and imagination (Amari, 2023). The Marxist critique is about disciplined labour that makes compliant and industrial subjects fit for employment. Blohm 2023 agrees that in 1836, when Dickens wrote his novel, industrial towns were often seen as morally debased places because only the poor lived there.

Postcolonial theory was primarily introduced in discussions of colonial literature, but when deployed comparatively it may serve a useful purpose in readings of Dickens' text. According to Sanyal (2019), a postcolonial lens can shed light on coping and opposing techniques of subordinate groups in structural hegemonic power relations (Jefferess, 2008). The framework the researcher adopts is notably relevant for examining the Palestinian situation, which exists under systemic occupation in which all aspects of life – social, economic, cultural, and psychological – are constrained. Furthermore, Al Hassani and Mahdi (2022) argue that Palestinian literary production not only protects

Palestinian culture but also politically performs a process of resistance. This creativity about the ensuing aftermath of colonialism has created different kinds of content. Henke (2025) also examines Palestinian art, literature and music, which are involved in cultural resistance, as a means of empowerment and identity within the structure of oppression (Henke, 2025).

People have seen the politics of narrative as an important ground in the Dickens studies on which to dig for moral, emotional and cultural resistance. Enríquez-Loya (2021) argues that storytelling, as an antidote to dehumanization, proves that literature is critique and at the same time, a terrain of struggle (Enríquez-Loya, 2021). In *Hard Times*, the conflict between the rigid utilitarianism of Thomas Gradgrind and the imaginative and caring Sissy Jupe shows how story and pedagogy can help stave off oppression. Sissy Jupe is “a human character full of feeling,” González (2017) writes, who opposes the mechanical reason of the industrial society (González, 2017). Using education and narrative and creative expression as a form of resistance against the occupation describes the parallel of the Palestinian experience (Bishara, 2010; Khalidi, 2010).

Scholarship of Dickens’ writing and Palestinian resiliency often underscore the importance of educational campaigns. In fact, Gradgrind’s approach to teaching the schoolchildren is about social control which produces ‘docile’ workers through the practice of rote learning and imparting facts (Allan, 2019). Sissy Jupe’s existence, on the other hand, reveals that education could help shape emotional intelligence, moral development, and creative thought as a minor, but indirect form of resistance to repressive forces (D’Olimpio & Thompson, 2022). Likewise, Palestinian schools in an occupied context are spaces of struggle and resistance. Literature, cultural education, and arts programming that assert identity and enable resilience push back against restrictions, school closures, and limited mobility (Khalidi, 2010).

The parallels between Dickensian industrial oppression and the modern-day Palestinian occupation extend beyond the educational and into the realm of narrative resistance (Abu Jbara, 2022). While Dickens employs imaginative representations, ethical fables, and emotive writing to construct a vision of the critique of the industrializing and exploitative order, Palestinian authors such as Mahmoud Darwish and Ghassan Kanafani use literature and narrative as instruments of resistance to keep alive and transmit a collective memory and a national identity (Boud & Nayef, 2020; Khalidi, 2010). On top of that, al-Lawati (2024) notes that youth literature in war zones makes evident the capacity of stories to allow resilience by asking young readers to envision themselves confronting moral, cultural, and social dilemmas (Al-Lawati, 2024).

Existing research emphasizes the importance of emotional and psychological forms of resistance in oppressive contexts. Louisa Gradgrind's suffering is revealing of the psychological costs of a relentless focus on utility and utility only (Scott, 2020). The repetition of acts of resistance that the Palestinian people exhibit create a space that encourages this resilience, despite the oppression they undergo both locally and abroad. Critics that have drawn comparisons to Dickens are known to have found the literary text to have transhistorical significance. In fact, some have found Dickens' relevance to ours struggles against oppression.

Collectively, these texts illustrate how resilience and resistance find their ways into literature through characterization, narrative strategy, education, cultural production and more. In *Hard Times*, Dickens uses Sissy Jupe's compassion, Louisa Gradgrind's internal revolt and the criticism of a utilitarian industrial society to tackle these problems (Yasin et al, 2025). In the same way, today, in the Palestinian context, narrative, pedagogy and cultural production are all types of resistance to a massive program of oppression (Scott, 2020; Khalidi, 2010; Abu Jbara, 2022). The importance of confronting both the historical and contemporary forms of oppression through a combined Marxist and postcolonial lens is further provided by these comparisons.

Hard Times is arguably important not only as a historical text that illuminates the realities of industrial society, but also as one that holds relevance to contemporary discourses of oppression, resilience, and resistance. Integrating Marxist and postcolonial critiques to reveal the interplay of structural forces and human agency, researchers elucidate how the process of writing can be an effective tool for moral, emotional, and cultural struggle. This review provides the theoretical and scholarly overview of the current study that compares the industrial exploitation of Dickens' England to that of Palestinians living under occupation.

Research Methodology

The analysis is in a qualitative, interpretive, and comparative textual analysis of resilience and resistance in Dickens' *Hard Times* (2003) in juxtaposition to the Palestinian socio-political environment. It combines Marxist and postcolonial lenses to examine industrial and colonial oppression, in a way revealing the continuity of human beings in their resistance efforts (Blohm, 2023; Al-Lawati, 2024; Al Hassani & Mahdi, 2022). The primary text for my analysis is, of course, Dickens's novel, while my secondary sources include scholarship on Marxist and postcolonial theory and critique, Dickens's social criticism, and Palestinian culture production and resistance (Scott, 2020; Abu Jbara, 2022; Daghamin, 2024; Khalidi 2010; Henke2025; Slater 2009). Analysis blends close analysis,

looking at characterization, imagery, and language for clues of moral and emotional push back, with comparisons of themes, outlining parallels in motifs of oppression, education, and narrative push back in both Dickensian and Palestinian contexts. The whole novel is being analysed which depicts the actual realities of the current situation in Palestine. The data are extracted by first locating relevant text, then by association of these passages with Palestinian experience, and finally by organizing the themes within competing categories of resilience, education, and narrative resistance (Al Hassani & Mahdi, 2022; Slater, 2009). Ethical integrity is upheld through respectful accounting of Palestinian realities, accurate referencing, and an objective grappling with texts and theories (Sanyal 2019). Although the findings are interpretive and not generalizable, this approach does lend a well-developed methodology of how to understand the articulation of oppositional resistance to structural forms of oppression in historical and socio-political settings through literary and cultural discourses.

1. Findings and Discussion

1.1. Industrialization and Occupation: A Comparative Analysis

In *Hard Times*, Dickens gives Coketown as a sign of the devastating effects of the industrial revolution. The city is depicted as a place where the individual is reduced to a function as part of a massive economy. The dehumanizing effect of industrialization is felt in Coketown, where the oppressive environment, its “interminable serpents of smoke” and relentless industrial activity are reflective of the alienating nature of industrialization (Dickens, 1854). The workers are subjected to harsh conditions, and their individuality is sacrificed to support economic efficiency.

Critic Migueláñez argues that Dickens’ portrayal of Coketown reflects a deep concern about the loss of individual identity under industrialization (Migueláñez, 2015). He advocates the “systematic oppression” in Coketown that makes workers complex cogs in a machine, without individual fulfilment and dignity (Migueláñez, 2015). This narrative highlights the way industrial systems choose economic gain over human welfare.

Palestinian territories are similarly understood as occupied spaces under the control of external actors through systematic oppression that turns human lives into statistics. Similarities can be seen between the effects of dehumanization of the characters in Dickens’ novel and the Israeli occupation with roadblocks, checkpoints, and open military control. The objectification of houses, the building of the separation wall, and ongoing violence create a reality where Palestinians continue to be challenged in their dignity and agency of existence.

Coketown and the Palestinian territories are shown to be under systemic oppression. In both cases, there is a lack of money and freedom, unlike the lack of personal and cultural identity seen in Dickens' critique.

1.2. Characters of Resilience and Resistance

1.2.1 Sissy Jupe

In *Hard Times*, Sissy Jupe is a gentle character who is creative and hard-working. Having been brought up in a circus, she is a contrast to the utilitarian mentality of Coketown. In the Gradgrind household, Sissy provides warmth, kindness, and open-mindedness against the clockwork system of Thomas Gradgrind.

John W. Blakemore, a critic, states that Sissy Jupe's character goes against Gradgrind's philosophy, which stripped individuals of their emotional attributes, as she had an innate sense of humanity which played a key role in confronting industrialism's dehumanizing force (Migueláñez, 2015). Even though Sissy has been raised with Mr. Gradgrind's utilitarianism, her good heart is evident in her emotional richness and commitment to human values. She stays true to her values and a different way of life that promotes human contact, not cold logic. She faces the oppressive systems of her time and shows how necessary imagination and empathy can halt dehumanization in its tracks.

Sissy Jupe represents the cultural and artistic steadfastness of the Palestinian people, which they consistently experience in Palestine, despite the occupation. Palestinian literature, art, and music make important contributions to the preservation of cultural identity and resistance. An expert, Azmi Bishara, defines Palestinian cultural production as a form of resistance to the oppressive conditions of the occupation, "an art form of resistance to identity and combative against oppressive conditions of occupation (Bishara, 2010). Like Sissy, Palestinians use creative means to assert their humanity and resist the destruction of their narrative.

1.2.2 Louisa Gradgrind

Louisa Gradgrind embodies the internal struggles of oppressed individuals. Louisa, born under the strict utilitarian ideals of her father, struggles with anxiety and despair. A critique of utilitarianism in the novel also reflects her breakdown and rejection of her father's values.

Daghamin explains how Louisa's breakup represents the "emotional and psychological costs" of living in a rigid and oppressive system, pointing out that utilitarianism fails to provide for the complexity of human emotions (Daghamin, 2024). Louisa's character

may be used as a critique of oppressive societies' internalization and impact on people. Her struggle is both with the inner conflict of Palestinians, whose situation is even more difficult under external oppression to cope with the psychological and emotional consequences of oppression. By asserting Louisa's revolt against the values she had imposed upon herself, these Palestinians are reflected in the larger struggle for agency and self-determination.

1.3. Education as a Site of Control and Resistance

In *Hard Times*, education is both a tool of control and another form of resistance. Thomas Gradgrind's educational philosophy, based on facts and without imagination, is social control intended to produce competent, obedient workers. Gradgrind's education approach to its utilitarian values encourages creativity and emotional development.

A critic, Michael Slater, argues that half the point of Gradgrind's education is social engineering to create obedient and effective labour. This reinforces the negative side of the system. This model of education, which consists of mere factual knowledge, which contains only emotional or imaginative components, helps to maintain the oppressive social order.

However, education, in its connection with empathy and understanding the broader human experience, can be a powerful form of resistance as the novel states. Sissy Jupe helps the Gradgrind children develop emotional intelligence and creativity, which shows that education can engage with oppressive systems. Sissy's take on education is significantly different from what Gradgrind offers. Her outlook helps the reader see what a more human and less dehumanizing philosophy can do.

In Palestine, education is both a means of controlling and resisting oppression. Palestinian schools are affected severely by the Israeli occupation, including movements' restrictions, closures, and attacks on schools. Still, the weapon of resistance is education despite the difficulties. Israeli educators and students use education to maintain their cultural identity, their rights, and resist the occupation narrative that is imposed on them.

Palestinian literature and intellectual culture also function as resistance. Writings by Palestinian authors like Mahmoud Darwish and Ghassan Kanafani offer important perspectives on Israel's occupation of Palestine and the state of Palestinian identity. Raphael Rashid Khalidi emphasizes the role of education in keeping Palestinian identity alive and avoiding a narrative dictated by outsiders (Khalidi, 2010). Palestinians reject the destruction of their narrative and insist on their humanity against emancipation by literature and intellectual pursuits.

1.4. Storytelling and Narrative Resistance

Hard Times features storytelling as a way to resist oppressive regimes. Dickens uses narrative techniques to show how Gradgrind, as in fact cold, facts, is compared to the rich, imaginative world of Sissy Jupe. The novel itself becomes a vehicle for storytelling, a critique of the industrial age and its impact on human life.

Activist Elaine Jordan writes that Dickens 'novel style, through expressive language, emotional content, and vivid imagery, resists the dehumanization of industrialism, and by applying the human relationship and human touch of storytelling to this approach, Dickens attempts to resist the utilitarian assumptions of Coketown.

One of the sources of resistance, in the Palestinian context, is storytelling. In keeping with cultural heritage and rebellion against occupation, oral traditions, literature, and art are essential. Collectively, it is vital to Palestinian identity and resistance to the discourses of displacement, struggle, and resilience. The Palestinian activists and writers make history when they tell fiction, bringing their own identity to the face of oppression.

As authors like Ghassan Kanafani and Mahmoud Darwish explain, storytelling can be resistance. They address displacement and resistance in their narrative, an analogy to the dominant discourses that the occupation made possible. Its author, Rashid Khalidi, explores the ways in which Palestinian literature and art resist the demolition of Palestine by the systemic oppression of Palestinians (Khalidi, 2010). Similar to Dickens' critique of industrialism, these tales reveal the power of storytelling as a means of asserting identity and challenging dehumanization.

1. Conclusion

As viewed through the lens of Palestinian experience, *Hard Times* remains relevant and insightful. Dickens's showcasing resilience and resistance in the face of dehumanization is a useful parallel to the occupation of Palestine. The author's depiction of industrial oppression and the characters' responses provide a basis for understanding the common themes of resistance and resilience.

The paper illustrates how Dickens' narrative transcends its historical context to become relevant for studying inequality and the human spirit; it establishes the significance of storytelling within Marxist and postcolonial thought. By comparing the industrial exploitation to the present-day experience of Palestinians under occupation in *Hard Times*, Dickens remains relevant. Both create a denigrating effect on humans and society as well as the expression of resilience and resistance as dehumanisation.

Sissy Jupe's fight against Coketown's rigid utilitarianism is as striking as Palestinian culture arts and intellectual work of resistance. Likewise, Palestinians face a continuous internal struggle similar to that of Louisa Gradgrind, as they learn about the psychological and emotional effects of occupation, similar to that of Louisa Gradgrind. Both contexts show us how a more humane and empathetic approach to control could be challenged by education itself.

Storytelling as narrative resistance closes the temporal and geographical gap between the time of Dickens and the Palestinian experience today. Charles Dickens used the word and manner of how he writes as an emotionally dehumanizing impact of the industrialized world. He applies this thinking to a Palestinian narrative and oral tradition. This work carefully avoids implementing the destruction of identity for an anti-narrative to occupation.

Ultimately, *Hard Times* by Dickens reveals universal themes of resilience and resistance, and is particularly apt for studies of contemporary movements to fight oppression. The paper examines how Dickens's critique of industrialization has come to embody contemporary issues of occupation and dehumanization by using the Marxist and postcolonial lens to challenge the novel with the Palestinian eye and by resorting to the rhetoric of Marxism and post-colonialism. The themes of resilience and resistance in *Hard Times* continues to remain relevant by indicating that human beings are always capable of facing and resisting systemic oppression.

According to this research, literature not only reflects reality but also possesses the transformative power to create social change in times of crisis. The Palestinian struggle for dignity and autonomy represents a form of cultural survival. This mirrors Dickens' moral imagination which is critical of utilitarianism. In this sense, literature not only presents a form of resistance but also becomes a method of applying resistance or practicing resistance, as well as preserving it.

When we look at *Hard Times* in relation to oppression around the world, we can see that it is not just Victorian and that it is more than relevant. This shows that Dickens's moral and social criticism remains relevant today and teaches us essential lessons concerning the enduring nature of inequalities and their exploitation, and the human will to resist. The connection made between these Marxist and postcolonial readings bolsters the case that imaginative acts, a labouring process whether in the factory towns of Coketown or in the occupied territories of Palestine, are forms of intellectual resistance.

In the end, the thesis connects 19th-century industrial England to modern-day Palestine, putting it in conversation with the larger dialogue on narratives of resistance, which seed

identity and a modicum of hope in the midst of systemic oppression. When seen through a Palestinian lens, Dickens maintains his illuminating capacity to redeem something human from the grasp of overwhelming dehumanization. As we see in “A Christmas Carol,” that powerful time calls for steadfastness, kindness, and moral courage against cynicism.

2. Suggestions for Future Study

A similar project could be undertaken in future studies of analogous Victorian and postcolonial writers to further delineate the representation of industrialized oppression, moral protest, and human survival in response to new political configurations. Moreover, future scholars might work on dialectics between global literary capitalist currents and Palestinian resistance narratives through education, gender and, narrative as decolonial practices. A cross-genre study as well, one that includes poetry, theater, digital media, and so on would show us how literatures of resistance reinvent themselves against new modes of oppression. Such studies, alongside others, would create a more complicated portrait of literature's contribution to historical and contemporary struggles against the dehumanization process.

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