

# The Invisible Hands: Commerce, Labor and Migration in Indian and World Literature.

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## **Abstract :**

This research paper examines the persistent problem of child labor and exploitation through a comparative analysis of Charles Lamb's essay *The Praise of Chimney Sweepers*, Charles Dickens's novel *Oliver Twist* the child-rights advocacy of Kailash Satyarthi. By integrating literary representations with modern social activism, the study reveals the severe physical, psychological and social harm inflicted on children who are forced into hazardous and degrading forms of labor. Such conditions deprive children of their fundamental rights to education, personal safety and the opportunity to experience a secure and meaningful childhood. Lamb's essay exposes the grim realities endured by young chimney sweepers in eighteenth-century England and condemns the moral hypocrisy of a society that tolerates child suffering for economic gain. His work highlights how children were treated as expendable labor rather than as individuals deserving care and protection. Similarly, Dickens's *Oliver Twist* vividly portrays the suffering of orphaned children subjected to cruelty and exploitation within workhouses and early industrial systems. Through Oliver's experiences, Dickens critiques the inhumanity of institutional practices during the Industrial Revolution and exposes the systemic neglect of vulnerable children. Extending this discussion into the contemporary world, the global activism of Kailash Satyarthi demonstrates that child labor remains a critical issue today. His advocacy emphasizes that poverty, social inequality, migration and lack of access to education continue to fuel child exploitation across the globe. His work draws attention to interconnected forms of abuse, including trafficking and commercial exploitation, which contribute to modern-day slavery. By linking historical literary texts with present-day realities, this research underscores that child exploitation is not merely a relic of the past but an ongoing global crisis. The study concludes by emphasizing the need for shared responsibility, international cooperation and sustained reform efforts to eradicate child labor, protect children's rights and foster a future grounded in dignity, justice and compassion.

## **Key Words :**

*Child exploitation, migration, trade, globalization, capitalism, industrial development, labor abuse.*

## **Introduction :**

The struggles of at-risk children have been a persistent social concern, powerfully reflected throughout literary history. Charles Lamb, a significant writer of the Romantic period, exposes the brutal realities of child labor in his essay *The Praise of Chimney Sweepers*. This poignant work reveals the perilous conditions faced by young chimney sweepers, often between the ages of six and twelve, who were forced to clean narrow, soot-filled chimneys in the homes and businesses of England's wealthy elite. Lamb's vivid portrayal condemns a society that exploits its most vulnerable members, stripping children of their innocence, dignity and

fundamental rights. Similarly, Charles Dickens, one of the foremost social critics of Victorian England, offers a scathing critique of child exploitation in his novels *Oliver Twist*, *David Copperfield*. Deeply influenced by his own experiences of poverty and hardship, Dickens presents the suffering of orphaned and marginalized children trapped within oppressive systems such as workhouses and factories. Through the tragic journey of *Oliver Twist*, Dickens exposes a grim world of crime, deprivation and moral neglect, where children are driven into exploitation and criminality by an indifferent and unjust society.

In the contemporary context, Nobel Peace Prize laureate Kailash Satyarthi has dedicated his life to combating child labor and defending children's rights on a global scale. Through his activism and influential speeches, including his Nobel Prize acceptance address, Satyarthi highlights the continuing prevalence of child labor worldwide. He emphasizes how poverty, migration, inequality and lack of education continue to rob children of their childhood, freedom and dignity, underscoring the urgent need for collective global action. By drawing connections between historical literary representations and modern social advocacy, this study underscores that child exploitation is not confined to the past but remains a pressing global issue. A comparative analysis of these voices reveals the necessity of sustained efforts to protect children's rights and ensure a future in which every child can grow and thrive free from exploitation and oppression.

### **Aim of the Research Paper :**

This research paper aims to examine the representations of child labor, migration and trade in the works of Charles Lamb, Charles Dickens and Kailash Satyarthi, highlighting both historical and contemporary dimensions of child exploitation. Through a comparative literary and social analysis, the study seeks to emphasize the urgent need for unified global efforts to safeguard children's rights and promote a world where every child can flourish without the burden of labor, abuse, or inequality.

### **Critical Analysis :**

Charles Lamb's essay *The Praise of Chimney-Sweepers* offers a compelling critique of child labor and social exploitation in nineteenth-century England. Lamb exposes the appalling conditions endured by young chimney sweepers, typically between six and twelve years of age, who were forced to clean narrow, soot-filled chimneys in the homes of the wealthy. Coming largely from impoverished families, these children were compelled to sacrifice their education, health and childhood in exchange for meager wages, revealing the deep-rooted economic inequalities of the period (Lamb).

Lamb's portrayal emphasizes both the physical dangers and emotional dehumanization suffered by these children. Often sent alone into confined and hazardous spaces without any form of protection, chimney sweepers faced constant risks of injury, suffocation and long-term illness. The image of children blackened with soot and struggling through narrow flues reflects society's callous disregard for their welfare. Through evocative metaphors comparing the children to birds that pick up crumbs and cats that lick milk, Lamb underscores their innocence and vulnerability. These images expose the moral hypocrisy of a society that exploits the defenseless while simultaneously claiming civility and progress (Lamb).

The practice of chimney sweeping was closely tied to issues of migration and commerce in nineteenth-century England. Many children were transported from rural areas to urban centers with promises of employment, only to be subjected to extreme exploitation. In "The Praise of Chimney Sweepers," Charles Lamb employs irony to describe chimney sweepers as "a distinct order of beings," portraying them as pure and cheerful despite their immense suffering (Lamb). This ironic tone exposes the absurdity and cruelty of a social system that normalized child labor for economic profit. Lamb's critique highlights how commercial interests consistently overshadowed ethical responsibility, allowing such inhumane practices to continue

unchecked. Similarly, Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist* serves as a powerful condemnation of the social and economic conditions of Victorian England, particularly the exploitation of impoverished children. The novel exposes the harsh realities of poverty, institutional neglect and child labor, demonstrating how rigid social structures perpetuated inequality. Oliver, an orphaned and abandoned child, symbolizes countless vulnerable children forced to endure deprivation and abuse. The workhouse system—marked by hunger, neglect and humiliation—represents the state's failure to protect its most defenseless citizens (Dickens).

Dickens further develops themes of labor and exploitation by depicting children compelled to work in dangerous and degrading environments, often at the cost of their education and well-being. Oliver's experiences reveal how children were treated as commodities, manipulated and controlled by those in power. The novel also addresses migration, as Oliver's movement from the countryside to London reflects broader patterns of rural-to-urban migration during the Industrial Revolution. However, Dickens emphasizes that such migration frequently intensified exploitation rather than providing economic security, trapping children in persistent cycles of poverty and crime (Dickens).

In *David Copperfield*, Charles Dickens extends his critique of child labor and social injustice through David's traumatic experiences at Murdstone and Grinby's warehouse. Compelled to work long hours under degrading conditions for meagre wages, David endures both physical exhaustion and emotional neglect. His vulnerability as a young migrant in London exposes the severe risks faced by children who are forced to survive in unfamiliar urban spaces without protection or guidance. Through this portrayal, Dickens strongly condemns the social and economic systems that enable such exploitation, anticipating concerns later articulated by modern child-rights movements (Dickens, *David Copperfield*).

Taken together, the works of Charles Lamb and Charles Dickens uncover the historical roots of child exploitation while emphasizing its deep connections with poverty, migration and commercial interests. Their literary critiques expose how economic ambition often overrides moral responsibility, resulting in the normalization of child suffering. These nineteenth-century representations resonate powerfully with contemporary global efforts to eradicate child labor. Both authors reinforce the idea that exploitation is not merely an individual failure but a systemic injustice that demands ethical accountability and sustained social reform. The similarities between Dickens's *David Copperfield* and *Oliver Twist* are particularly striking, as both narratives foreground the suffering of vulnerable children within societies that repeatedly neglect their welfare. The ordeals endured by the young protagonists parallel real-world instances of child labor and exploitation in contemporary India, especially in sectors such as garment manufacturing and agriculture. These parallels underscore the persistent struggle for children's rights and highlight the urgent need for collective action to safeguard vulnerable populations.

An examination of *David Copperfield* offers deeper insight into the invisible forces shaping children's lives across the world, including poverty, migration and economic exploitation. Dickens illustrates how children are often powerless against such forces, thereby emphasizing the urgent need to prioritize their education, safety and emotional development. His critique of Victorian society makes it clear that systemic injustice—rather than individual moral failure—lies at the root of poverty and child exploitation. These concerns remain highly relevant today, as child labor, forced migration and socio-economic inequality continue to affect societies globally. The novel thus serves as a powerful reminder of the importance of collective responsibility in building a more just and equitable world (Dickens, *David Copperfield*).

Kailash Satyarthi's address "Let's March—All Children Free from Slavery" functions as a compelling call to action against child labor and exploitation. Satyarthi highlights the stark contrast between the innocence of childhood and the brutal realities of slavery, emphasizing the necessity of unified global efforts to protect children's rights. His use of rhetorical questions—such as whether the world is too poor to offer children a toy

and a book instead of forcing them to carry a gun or a tool—exposes the moral absurdity of systems that permit child labor and violence (Satyarthi).

Satyarthi further draws attention to extreme forms of exploitation, including the use of child soldiers who are coerced into acts of violence, sometimes even against their own families. He urges governments to adopt child-centered policies and invest in education, asserting that every child has the right to life, equality and freedom. His criticism of misplaced societal priorities is particularly striking in his observation that while magnificent temples are constructed, countless children continue to wait for food. Through such powerful remarks, Satyarthi calls for a redirection of resources toward children's health, education and protection. Moreover, Satyarthi exposes the stark inequality between privileged and marginalized children. While children from affluent families are encouraged to pursue education and personal development, millions of disadvantaged children are deprived of basic necessities such as food, shelter and schooling. He illustrates this injustice through powerful examples—children stitching footballs they will never play with or working on cocoa farms without ever tasting chocolate. Many children from economically weaker backgrounds are forced into hereditary labor, with parents unintentionally reinforcing cycles of poverty by convincing them that such work is their destiny. In the twenty-first century, these conditions are unacceptable, as every child deserves the right to education, health and a secure childhood free from exploitation (Satyarthi).

In an era marked by rapid globalization and technological advancement, the world has become increasingly interconnected; however, empathy for vulnerable populations—particularly children—remains insufficient. As Satyarthi's advocacy demonstrates, millions of children continue to be denied education and a dignified childhood. The global community must move beyond narrow national concerns and recognize its shared moral responsibility to safeguard children's rights. The humanitarian efforts of individuals such as Sindhutai Sapkal, affectionately known as Mai, exemplify the transformative power of compassion combined with action. Devoting her life to the care and education of orphaned children in India, Sapkal demonstrated that individual initiatives, driven by empathy and commitment, can bring meaningful change even in the face of immense social challenges (Sapkal).

### **Conclusion :**

The writings of Charles Lamb, particularly *The Praise of Chimney-Sweepers*, together with Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist* and the child-rights advocacy articulated in Kailash Satyarthi's Nobel Prize lecture, collectively illuminate the enduring and universal struggle against child labor and exploitation. Through powerful literary representations, Lamb and Dickens expose the harsh consequences of industrialization, institutional neglect and social indifference that force vulnerable children into lives of labor. Their works reveal how economic systems shaped by commerce and migration often render children powerless and invisible within society (Lamb; Dickens).

Satyarthi's contemporary advocacy reinforces these concerns by emphasizing that child exploitation is not merely a historical injustice but a continuing global crisis. His address highlights the moral contradictions of modern societies that benefit from economic progress while ignoring the suffering of millions of children. By calling for unified international action, Satyarthi stresses the urgent need to prioritize children's rights to education, health, safety and dignity (Satyarthi).

This research affirms that the fight against child labor and exploitation requires sustained global cooperation and a renewed ethical commitment to the inherent worth of every child. By examining the invisible forces that continue to shape children's lives—poverty, migration and economic inequality—the study advocates for a future in which children are free to learn, dream and thrive without the burden of labor. Only through collective responsibility and compassionate action can a just, humane and equitable world be realized.

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