

An Analysis of Battle of Waterloo and Napoleonic era from the perspective of Victor Hugo's Les Miserable

¹Gunjan Jyoti Das

Abstract

The battle of Waterloo and Napoleon Bonaparte has a special place in the course of world history. The defeat of Napoleon Bonaparte in this battle led to restoration of pre revolutionary administration in France. The united anti-revolutionary group of Europe organized Vienna congress and restored the monarchial system again and made the all possible arrangements to put check on the revolutionary ideas in Europe. Before the further discussion on the consequence of battle of Waterloo, it is important to know the background of the event thoroughly.

Keywords: *Battle of Waterloo, Napoleonic era, administration in France*

I. Introduction:

The French revolution (1789) had changed the human history breaking the old feudal order of the society. But the last decade of 18th century was very pathetic for France. Revolution became out of control and it led to civil war in France. During the reign of terror king Louis xvi and Queen Marie Antoinette were guillotined by the revolutionary party of Robespierre. There were different parties like pro-monarchist, anti-monarchist and those who supported both. During this civil war many people were killed, the economy was spoiled, French society was in danger. Moreover, the other European powers made a combined force to invade France to end this revolution. The people of France were trying to come out from this revolutionary atmosphere, at this situation Napoleon Bonaparte, the son of revolution came as a savior for the French people. He guided the revolution and eliminated the foreign powers and brought glory for them. Taking the opportunity of the situation which was in his favor Napoleon, he snatched the political power of France through a military coup in 1799 and declared himself emperor in 1804. He made political, economic and social reforms based on revolutionary ideas and take France in to the zenith of its power. But still there were some groups who disliked the rule of Napoleon Bonaparte as they wanted to restore Bourbon dynasty again. Similarly some pacifist people were dissatisfied with this war like situation during Napoleonic era and criticized Napoleon for it. Napoleon was finally defeated in the famous battle of Waterloo by the

¹Guest Faculty, Department of History, Bhattadev University, Bajali

combine military force formed by anti revolutionary group under leadership of England. Napoleon was exiled in to the island of St. Helena where he died in 1821. After this victory against Napoleon, the anti-revolutionary group decided to shape the fortune of France by establishing Louise xviii, a puppet ruler from Bourbon dynasty. The congress of Vienna held in 1815 not only reduced the geographical boundary of France but also curtailed the political freedom of its people. Therefore series of revolution occurred in France to break this political system formed under foreign influence and to bring the days of glory. Amongst those revolutions the July revolution (1830) and February revolution (1848) were important. Therefore attempt is made to understand the importance of battle of Waterloo of 1815, through the eyes of French novelist Victor Hugo through his novel **“Les miserable”** published in 1862 and taken as primary book for the research paper. Victor Hugo has taken the historical episodes from the first French revolution (1789) to July revolution for the plot of his novel. **“Les Miserable”** remains one of the most powerful depictions of corruption and suffering. Les miserable tells the fictional story of Jean Valjean, a man who was unjustly been condemned to nearly two decades of prison for stealing a loaf of bread to save a starving child. The novel has given more emphasized on the battle of Waterloo and its results.

Objectives of the study:

The main objectives of this paper are to understand the political history of France under Napoleon Bonaparte and its impacts on society and the importance of the battle of Waterloo from the perspective of Victor Hugo

II. Methodology:

The research paper is based on analytical approach of research based on mainly secondary sources books, novels etc.

Interpretation of battle of Waterloo in “Less miserable”: The main story of this novel begins in 1815, the year when Napoleon Bonaparte was defeated in the battle of Waterloo and coming of Louis xviii in to power with the establishment of constitutional monarchy, more than two decades after the start of the French revolution. The novel reflects the miserable condition of the lower class of the French society and also has extensively interpreted the battle of Waterloo with different perspectives in the second part of the novel

“Hougmont,- this was a funeral spot, the beginning of the obstacles, the first resistance, which that great wood cutter of Europe, called Napoleon ,encountered at Waterloo, the first knot under the blows of his axe”²

Hougmont is the site of the beginning of the resistance to Napoleon, the beginning of his end. It was once a chateau, but now is only a group of farms. The word ‘wood cutter of Europe’ is used in positive manner on Napoleon. Napoleon who launched a campaign to clean the forest of Europe (arbitrary rule of Monarchs) faced first knot under the blows of his axe that was battle of Waterloo.

² Hugo Victor, op.cit, p- 515

“If it had not rained in the night between the 17th and 18th of June, 1815, the fate of Europe would have been different. A few drops of water, more or less, decided the downfall of Napoleon. All that providence required in order making Waterloo the end of Austerlitz was a little more rain, and a cloud traversing the sky out of season sufficed to make a world crumble”.³

“His plan of battle was, by the confession of all, a master piece. To go straight to the centre of the allies’ line, to make a breach in the enemy, to cut them in two, to drive the British half back on Hal, and Prussian half on Tongres, to make two shattered fragments of Wellington and Blucher, to carry Mont-Saint-Jean, to seize Brussels, to hurl the German into the Rhine, and Englishman in to the sea. All this was contained in this battle, according to Napoleon”.⁴

“In our opinion, a chain of accidents dominated the two leaders at Waterloo; and when it becomes a question of destiny, the mysterious culprit, comes upon the scene we judge like the people, simple minded judge.”

The first part of the volume2 of Les Miserable starts with the explanation of the Battle of Waterloo. In the above paragraph, the author Hugo is trying to blame the weather for the defeat in Waterloo due to the rain in the night of 17th June, 1815. The battle of Waterloo could not been begun until half-past eleven o’ clock, because the ground was wet. The Artillery had to wait until it became a little firmer before they could manoeuvre. Napoleon was an artillery officer, and he felt the effects of this. On the 18th June, 1815, he relied all the more on his artillery, because he had numbers on his side. Wellington, the British General had only one hundred fifty nine mouths of fire; Napoleon had two hundred and forty. If the soil would have been dry, the artillery was capable of moving, the action would have been begun at six o’ clock in the morning. The battle would have been won and ended at two o’ clock, before the coming of Prussian army. Moreover the plan of Napoleon Bonaparte was great to strike the enemy. He was genius in military skill but this time the destiny of this great man has cheated him. There is lots of opinion regarding the defeat of Napoleon in the battle of Waterloo. Some historians even have blamed Napoleon. It is definite that in a war one party would be victorious and one would be looser. But when it comes to Napoleon we people just explain it as will of destiny.

“Bonaparte, victor at Waterloo, would not harmonize with the law of the nineteenth century. Another series of facts was preparing, in which Napoleon no longer had a place. The ill-will of events had been displayed long before. It was time for this vast man to fall. His excessive weight in human destiny disturbed the balance. This individual alone was of more account than the universal group. Such plethoras of human vitality concentrated in a single head, the world mounting to one man’s brain, would be fatal to civilization if they endured. The moment had come for the incorruptible and supreme equity to reflect; and it is probable that the principles and elements, on which the regular gravitations of the moral order as well as of the material order depend, had rebelled. Steaming blood, overcrowded graveyards, and mothers in tears, are formidable pleaders. When the earth suffers from an excessive burden, there are mysterious groans from the shadow, which the abyss hears. Napoleon had been

³ Hugo Victor, p-525

⁴ Hugo Victor-527-528

denounced in the infinite, and his fall was decided. He troubled God. Waterloo is not a battle, but a change of front on the part of the universe.”⁵

The author Hugo has explained that a civilization can't be progress through a one brain and that is Napoleon. Napoleon through his rule has already done a lot for the world. His status is infinite. He was busy in wars in his whole life though for the great purpose but was also responsible for the destruction of it. Again it is natural where there is rise; there is fall or birth and death. Napoleon also could not get rid of it. The destiny which favored him a lot had disturbed the balance of the universe. The people became disappointed with him. It seemed that he was challenging the God with his undefeated mind. Therefore his defeat was destined.

“To us Waterloo was stupefied date of liberty”⁶

The author has explained that the date of the defeat in the battle of Waterloo was ending of liberty in France. Because, Louis xviii of Bourbon dynasty who occupied the throne of France after abdication was a puppet under foreign powers especially of England, therefore France lost her international freedom.

The battle of Waterloo, the revolving-door of governments, and the numerous street barricade rebellions of the city of Paris during the 1830s all serve as a background for the story. In doing so, Hugo portrays the life of the revolutionary middle class. His writing also focused on the workers and individuals who made great sacrifices to reform the country and build a democracy. The character Pontamercy was in Napoleon's army who was wounded in the battle of Waterloo save his Emperor Napoleon, for his bravery Napoleon rewarded him the “Legion of Honor”. Pontamercy survived but he was separated from his son due to the political conflict with his father in law after death of his wife. His father in law was a royalist and considered Napoleon and his supporter like Pontamercy as anti national. Pontamercy had no property he was dependent to his father in law. But later when son, Mariuos of Pontamercy came to know about the father and his ideology he revolted against his grandfather and became a Bonapartist or supporter of Republican government. Mariuos even participated in the revolution of 1830 against the Bourbon.

III. Conclusion:

Napoleon Bonaparte and the battle of Waterloo have been remained as popular theme to be researched among the scholars. As it is already mentioned in the novel “less miserable” that there were different groups in France as royalist, Bonapartist and republicans. Therefore there are different opinions regarding Napoleonic age. Both positive and negative images of Napoleon are portrayed by different writers, but most of the authors have depicted him as great man of France. The French revolution was misguided by its leader like Robespierre and they created anarchy in the whole country. Napoleon came as a son of revolution to protect the revolutionary ideas and stabilized the political situation of the country. Napoleon soon extended his control over almost whole Europe and introduced revolutionary reforms. Therefore the monarchial European countries like Russia, Austria and colonial

⁵ Hugo Victor, opp.cit, p-559-60

⁶ Hugo Victor, opp.cit, p- 593

country like England stood against the great Napoleon Bonaparte to maintain the pre-revolutionary administration, social order and balance of power in Europe. Thus the combined army of this anti revolutionary group of Europe attacked France again and again and finally defeated Napoleon in the battle of Waterloo, and exiled him in to St. Helena and curtailed the liberty of France by installing Bourbon monarch Louis XVII. It is said that change is inevitable. Though France lost the battle of Waterloo; the anti revolutionary group did not able to remove the memory of Napoleonic reforms and revolutionary ideas from his people. As a result the February revolution and July revolution occurred in different periods of time to end the foreign influence in France. Karl Marx in his book “The_eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte” has stated that Louise Bonaparte the nephew of Napoleon Bonaparte won the election in 1851 in vast majority because of the title Bonaparte. The common people of France hoped to bring the revolutionary ideas and the days of glory of Napoleon Bonaparte again.

References:

1. Hazarika Thaneswar, *Din-Dukhi*, R.G.publication, Gauhati, 2009
2. Hugo, Victor. *Les Miserable(1862)s* volume2, Biglow Smith and Company, New York 1949,
3. Online available: ([les miserables02hugouoff.pdf/ rakeshv.org](http://lesmiserables02hugouoff.pdf/rakeshv.org))
4. Marx Karl, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Rahul foundation, Lucknow, 2008 Prince Bonaparte Louis Napoleon, *Opinion and Policy of Napoleon*, Henry Colburn Publisher (Digital Indian Library, online pdf book)
5. Mahajan, V.D, *History of Modern Europe since 1789*, S.Chand Publication, New Delhi, 2016
6. Mukherjee L, *Europe since the French Revolution*, M.L Mukherjee publication, 2011