



AN INTERACTION BETWEEN GENDER AND CLASS IN ELIZABETH GASKELL'S *MARY BARTON*: A SOCIALIST FEMINIST STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Elizabeth Gaskell (1810-1865), a much ignored Victorian woman novelist, has been revisited with new visions in the recent years bringing forth the feminist, political and social significance of her writings. Gaskell's Mary Barton (1848) represents contemporary realism and social concern typifying the 'Women Question' and the life of marginalized working class people. In her novels Gaskell imparts important roles to women characters in the public sphere and social production refuting the traditional Victorian domestic ideology. This research is an attempt to explore the novel in the light of socialist feminism by seeking a link between Gaskell's address to 'Woman Question' and her address to the social problem of 'Class Conflict'. The interconnection between 'Woman Question' and 'Class Conflict' makes Socialist Feminist perspective an apt tool to examine this novel as Gender and Class are the two integral halves of Socialist Feminist Theory.

Key Words: *Elizabeth Gaskell, Mary Barton, Woman Question, Socialist Feminism, Gender and Class.*

Elizabeth Gaskell's (1810-1865) writings belong to the Victorian age when Feminism had not even taken the shape of a theory; indeed the term feminism came into existence "in the years immediately preceding the First World War" i.e. 1910s (Caine 4). Unfortunately Gaskell is considered as a minor woman writer of Victorian age and has been ignored by the feminists, "of all the enormous output of feminist literary criticism during the last fifteen years, none has been concerned to any major extent with Elizabeth Gaskell" (Stoneman 5). Gaskell's works were considered comparably less significant but a more conscious and unprejudiced study of Gaskell's writings reveals the vigorous feminist side of her writings. The present research reveals that her representation of complex and dynamic woman characters foreshadows a feminist age of self-discovery with a new dimension of socialist feminism of 1960s and 1980s.

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1P a g e



Socialist Feminism is an offshoot of the Marxist Feminism which came into existence in 1960s-70s. It is different from Radical Feminism and Liberal Feminism in terms of its ideology. Socialist Feminism emphasizes that the salvation of 'Woman Question' is the first and foremost prerequisite of salvation of Social Question of justice and equality and eradication of Capitalism. De Leon, in his translator's preface to August Bebel's *Woman under Socialism* in 1903 complies with the fact that, "Woman Question is the weakest link" in the capitalist armour, "The shot that rips up the wrongs done to her [woman] touches a nerve that aches from end to end in the capitalist world" (Bebel iii). Socialist feminism plays a crucial role in the class divided Victorian England as Gender and Class are the two integral halves of Socialist Feminist Theory. Marxist influence draws on the repercussions of capitalist class structure while the influence of Radical Feminism exposes the patriarchal system to be at the root of the women's oppression. Engel's systematic description of the origin of women's exploitation and subjugation reveals how the patriarchal system dialectically interconnected to capitalism and thus, "Engels, who is under-recognized as the original Marxist theorist of patriarchy and women's liberation, laid the basis for all the socialist feminist theory that would follow in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State.*" (Bauer).

Gaskell's writings witnessed a society which was marked by tremendous socio-economic upheavals by virtue of the Industrial Revolution. This revolution brought to the fore and even exacerbated two basic divisions of the society: the Class Division and the Gender Division, "The society in which Gaskell lived and wrote was intersected horizontally by class and vertically by gender divisions" (Stoneman 6). Gaskell's novels address both phenomena in her social quest by intrinsically relating the one with the other. The fusion of the two churns out the interlinked relation between capitalism and patriarchy which ultimately brings socialism into its terrain. This interrelation between capitalism, patriarchy and socialism made me choose the Socialist Feminist perspective as an apt tool for examining the works of Gaskell as gender and class being the integral elements of it. Unlike radical and liberal feminism Socialist feminism does not deal with gender oppression in isolation from other social oppressions "Socialist feminism is a dualist theory that broadens Marxist feminism's argument for the role of capitalism in the oppression of women and radical feminism's theory of the role of gender and the patriarchy" (Ehrenreich).

Gaskell's *Mary Barton* projects a combination of feminist consciousness and Marxist question of social equality of classes. Though the whole story revolves around the economic crisis of the poor workers Mr. John Barton being the heroic representative of the working class (as the novel was also named after him earlier), Gaskell comes up with a concurrent issue of women power moving hand in hand with the issue of class conflict. Patsy Stoneman argues that "the novel's presentation of class division is best understood in terms of conventional gender -role division" (Gaskell, *Mary Barton* 431). Gaskell also advocates



women's authority in various spheres and situations of life. Engels' description of the civilized stage of human life which gets more brutal with more civilization losing socialist and humane values is witnessed in *Marry Barton* when closure of the mill reveals the luxurious, carefree and insured life of the higher class of the society and lurid and pitiable life of lower section of the society with utter want, poverty, misery and death. The sensibility towards the pangs of poverty is present in poor for the poor that leads them to natural mutual strife and restlessness for each other's survival and solace. But this sensibility is dead among the materially accomplished class, "here humanity attains its most complete development and it's most brutish; here civilization works its miracles, and civilized man is turned back into a savage" (Gaskell, North and South xxii). Gaskell reveals the still retained humanism in the working class as contradictory to savagery of industrial class. This humanism of the working class men is revealed in their feminine services and caring to their fellow beings. Gaskell draws in feminist consciousness in working - out humanism and socialism.

It is noteworthy that *Mary Barton* instead of projecting patriarchal structure of society presents two contradictory 'ethical systems' of feminine values represented by feminised working class and masculine values, by authoritative capitalist class. The 'feminisation' of the working class is witnessed in their subordination to capitalist class, economic dependence and their segregation from their proper economic production. As John Barton's words, "we are their slaves as long as we work; we pile up their fortunes with the sweat of our brows and yet we are to live as separate as if we are in two worlds" (Gaskell, *Mary Barton* 11). reflect the condition of women in the world of patriarchal power politics being confined to the four walls of socially unproductive and unpaid domestic work of housekeeping, child rearing, sick nursing, caring, cooperating and being at the mercy of the ruling gender; these feminine gendered roles are interestingly also shared by working class men in *Mary Barton*. While on the other hand the authoritative capitalist class is masculinised with the quality of economic power, domination of the oppressed, injustice and aggressive use of law and order. The class division and oppression are studied through the lenses of gender division and oppression; thus gender and class issues are equally addressed by the author.

The departure of Mary Barton, Jem Wilson, Mrs. Wilson, Margaret, Will, Job Leigh to Canada getting out of the oppressive clutch of industrialised capitalist Manchester and forging their own world with self dignity simultaneously advocates women's liberation as well. So called class based paternalism by capitalists in the public sphere and by men in the private sphere is challenged by Gaskell. The novel also comes forth with the problem of streetwalkers/prostitutes as the result of capitalist system and sometimes challenging the concept of idle lady and advocating the economic independence of women through Mary's character introducing women into the public sphere in the male's world. Gaskell' *Mary Barton* addresses the class questions keeping in parallel with the women question and invests its sought-after probabilities in the character of Mary Barton making her the main driving force for the cause of working class.



Gaskell, like in other novels, in *Mary Barton* also challenges the ‘socialization of women and physiological misapprehensions as described by Kate Millet as significant constituents of patriarchal oppression of women. Mary Barton’s character is socialized against the principles of male dominant society as Mr. John Barton asserts, “I’d rather see her earning her bread by the sweat of her brow, as the Bible tells her she should do ... than be like a non-doing lady, worrying shopmen all morning, and screeching at her pianny all afternoon, and going to bed without having done a good turn to any one of God’s Creatures by herself” (Gaskell, Mary Barton 25). This assertion not only advocates economic independence of women but also her participation in the public social production. Similarly Mary’s stamina in her tough struggle through Jim’s trial process approves Millet’s arguments for physical power of women. According to Michele it is stressed from long that the weaker physiology and ‘psychobiological metabolism’ relegated her to unproductive and menial jobs while the men had boasted of a natural right to productive work. But Michele brings to light the new facts in her article “Women: the Longest Revolution (1966)” that “Domestic labour, even today, is enormous if quantified in terms of productive labour. It has been calculated in Sweden, that 2,340 million hours a year are spent by women in housework compared with 1,290 million hours in industry. In many peasant societies, women have worked in the fields as much as, or more than, men” (Mitchell 70). Thus it is not the biological difference but ideological and psychological tactics of keeping the women down. Gaskell routs capitalist patriarchal strategy of weakening the class struggle for justice by gender division of labour and power and cutting off the women from equal contribution to the process of social production. Rather Gaskell endows her women with equal power to combat the capitalist system of injustice shoulder to shoulder with working men, “Their skills and confidence rose, they stood in a new relationship of solidarity beside male workers against the bosses, and they brought home their own pay checks. Socialist feminism could come into its own” (Bauer). Again Gaskell hints at women question being an integral part of social question.

Gaskell also exposes one of the repercussions of capitalist society i.e. the problem of streetwalkers/ prostitution through the episode of Esther, Mary Barton’s aunt and thus brings forth the relation of class-structure to genders. Esther, a beautiful working factory-girl is tempted by a young capitalist man showing her the dream of higher class society was left bereft of her dignity with the only choice of becoming a streetwalker. This industrial novel also addresses to the sufferings of working class women. The factory girls were regarded as morally degraded and impure unlike the ‘angel in the house’. Mrs. Gaskell in *Mary Barton* “makes John Barton unwilling to have his daughter in the mills, and she shows Esther going from the factory to become the mistress of a man who later brought her to life on the streets”(54). They were considered as even inferior to a servant in a middle-class household. “Bessy in *North and South* wanted her younger sister to become a servant; she kept her out of the mills” (54). The condition of women- dressmakers was none the worse in terms of working hours, wages and threat to the wrong by idle rich young lads. It is evident as



described in the first chapter as well that the young and beautiful girls of working class were beguiled and entrapped by the higher class men nourishing the dream of becoming a higher class “lady”. But Mary’s rejection of Harry Carson’s temptation indirectly rebuffs Capitalism. Marriage of Mary and Jem Wilson also overthrows patriarchal power politics by shifting power to Mary in her choice of love and power of control. This is another example of a marriage of mutual love rather than a business affaire of private property.

Depicting vulnerable life of the working class poor Gaskell’s story focuses and sympathises with the workmen hero, John Barton. From the very beginning of the story John Barton plays a crucial role being completely devoted for the upliftment of the working class with his inner humanism. But as most criticized turn of focus in the story towards the role of Mary Barton draws attention to father-daughter relationship and thus brings together the issues of class and gender; John Barton representing the class question while Mary Barton, women question. Gaskell’s most of the heroines lose motherly care in the very earlier stage of their life against such background Gaskell brings out the significance of father’s role in socialization of the female child and thus brings about change in the social psyche through revelation of female child’s intellectual, physical and moral mettle by father.

Gaskell lays all her sympathies with John Barton in his struggle for social justice but she disapproves his anticipatory aggressive and violent action of “political murder” of Harry Carson. Somehow Gaskell appears to be presenting an alternative in form of Mary Barton with a pursuit of her destination rather intellectually with utter persistency and stability of character. Gaskell again seems to be advocating woman’s role in the class conflict. Mary stands as a go-between; between the two violent forces of John Barton on one side and Mr. Carson on the other, both being refuted and diluted through reconciliation at the end, “John Barton dies penitent, and the elder Carson repents of his vengeance and turns, as the sympathetic observer wanted the employers to turn, to efforts at improvement and mutual understanding” (Gaskell, *Mary Barton* 426). Mary’s victory in the trial also wins her independence, she saves her love from conviction and hanging, and she takes care of her father. Mary stands erect in the public sphere at the trial. Like in *North and South* in *Mary Barton* also Gaskell upholds the socialist feminist view of free play of private and public spheres in women’s life “She has helped bring about some reconciliation between master and men. She has moved beyond normal spheres of action for a woman in a novel: from private to public space, from silence to speech, from flirtation to love (Gaskell, *Mary Barton* 433).

According to Marysia Zalewski Psychoanalysis became an integral part of socialist feminism with the influence of Juliet Michele’s article ‘women: The Longest Revolution’ (1966) Gaskell systemically applies this feature of socialist feminism by shaping her characters with utterly transformed social and cultural construction of femininity from psychological point of view. Mary Barton is an independent girl in her own right refuting the social-cultural imposture of being like an ‘angel in the house’. “Michelle’s article and subsequent book

(1974) alerted feminists to the need for a capitalist and psychic revolution. Feminists could use psychoanalytic theories to explore and expose the construction of gendered identities or subjectivities with a view to working out how to achieve a change in the negative aspects of such construction” (Zalewski 7). According to which it is not the biological difference that constitute ‘womanly’ woman but social and cultural impingement of spurious truths on human psyche to be an inferior subject. In both *Mary Barton* and *North and South* Gaskell has upset domestic ideology of gender role by providing an alternative of different psychological conditioning of the gender and applied feminised socialization of men in the course of the plot. As Colby says, “The men in the novel combine traditionally male qualities of strength with traditionally female qualities of caring; conversely, Mary develops male traits of independence and toughness” (150).

Confirming socialist feminist view that “women reasoned and thought differently to men”, Gaskell thus allows her women characters to supersede the male character in her novel (Zalewski 9). In *Mary Barton* Gaskell pushes Mary to the centre bringing forth he potential and different mental calibre though the character of John Barton plays a crucial role in the plot of the story. But his masculine aggressive action and his giving in to the addiction to opium, drinking and smoking which shows his weakness of character relegate him to the back stage. She seeks only in her women required potential and possibility of establishing a social change. All Jem, Job Leigh, the advocate, her father are guided by Mary and charmed by her power and positivity. “Moreover, she inverts the power relations in the rescue sequence by placing Jem’s life in Mary’s capable hands” (R. Colby 164). Similarly in *North and South* Margaret becomes the respite and source of power for all. She is endowed with power to hold everything in its place; whether it is Bessy and Higgins the suffering working class, Mr. Thornton an estranged Capitalist or her own family she meticulously manages both the spheres, public and private.

Gaskell relates class question with the question of working women and has taken up the issues of the vocations available in the contemporary society; mill girls in *North and South*, factory girls and dressmaker in *Mary Barton*, governess in *Ruth*; “Mrs. Gaskell recorded a similar disaster in the person of Mrs. Wilson, who had "cotched her side again a wheel . . . it was afore wheels were boxed up" (Gaskell, *Mary Barton* 245). In *Mary Barton* Mrs. Gaskell’s description of pathetic working condition of women workers stands out large and louder as in the following picture of home surrounding of a cotton worker:

It [the street] was unpaved; and down the middle a gutter forced its way, every now and then forming pools in the holes with which the street abounded . . . As they passed, women from doors tossed household slops of every description into the gutter; they ran into the next pool, which overflowed and stagnated. Heaps of ashes were the stepping-stones, on which the passer-by,

who cared in the least for cleanliness, took care not to put his foot (Gaskell, *Mary Barton* 83).

In *North and South* the character of Mrs. Devonport and in *Mary Barton* the character of Mrs. Boucher are cast into the same crisis as they both lose their husband are left alone with the responsibility of their children in a capitalist world. They are impelled to provide next generation of workers with the stigma of hunger, want, incompetence and unintelligence the result of political economy of capitalism.

But at the same time Gaskell also promotes new spheres of profession for women of their own choice in Margaret's choice to become a professional singer pursuing her hobby. The introduction of the new possibility of vocations for women with a self identity and economic independence is at sharp contrast to capitalist vocation based on oppression and exploitation. Thus in every part of the novel Gaskell has brought about an equation between gender and class generating space for Socialist Feminist perspective.

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