



SOCIAL CHANGE THROUGH THE AGENCY OF WOMAN: SOCIALIST FEMINIST READING OF ELIZABETH GASKELL'S *NORTH AND SOUTH*

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Abstract

Elizabeth Gaskell (1810-1865) began her literary career in an era when Feminism as a theory was not even in existence. Unfortunately Gaskell was considered as a minor woman writer of Victorian age and had been neglected by the feminist critics, "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, 2006: 5). The present paper is a humble attempt to revisit one of her industrial novels namely, *North and South* through the lenses of Socialist feminism. The works like *Capitalist Patriarchy and the Case for Socialist Feminism* of Zillah Eisenstein (1980), *Capitalism and Women's Liberation* of Michelle Barrett (1997), and *The unhappy marriage of Marxism and feminism: towards a more progressive union* of Heidi Hartmann (1981) bring Marxism and Feminism together and put forth an argument that woman's emancipation and socialist social structure are interrelated. A socialist feminist reading of *North and South* delineates how Gaskell brings about a social change through the agency of the female protagonist, Margaret Hale.

Keywords: Elizabeth Gaskell, North and South, patriarchy, capitalism, socialist feminism

Feminist dimension in Gaskell's novels seems to have stemmed from her belief in Unitarianism. Gaskell was under great influence of Unitarianism that believes in equality of men and women and advocates their equal participation in political, scientific and socio-economic domain. Such a frame of mind incited Gaskell's novels to formulate a social order devoid of the demarcation of public and private sphere. Her writings advocate women's proper sphere and their participation in labour. Gaskell, by introducing her heroine into the public sphere and making her the leader in the class conflict oversteps women's domain which is limited to domesticity and ushers her woman protagonists into

men's domain of political, economic and social significance. Gaskell's writings bring forth the dual theory of Radical feminism and Marxist feminism that on one hand challenges 'sexual politics' of patriarchy by proposing an alternative system of sociological, psychological, ideological, political and physiological upbringing of gender based on equality and on the other hand buttresses women's strong economic independence and an upper hand in the social production advocating socialist social structure.

The power – structured relationships and arrangements whereby one gender is controlled by another i.e. sexual politics of patriarchal system is

overthrown by Gaskell by endowing Margaret Hale with power in a family which consists of a father and an elder brother. The whole family is dependent on Margaret; it is she who goes forth to confront the life's challenges and takes all important decisions. At the moment of crisis of her mother's funeral Margaret sheds off emotional weakness, psychologically attributed to females, and gets armed with mental toughness; "The father and brother depended upon her while they were giving way to grief; she must be working, planning, considering; even the necessary arrangements for the funeral seemed to devolve upon her" (Gaskell, 1994: 255). Margaret overturns the values imbibed by socialization in a patriarchal society that sermonize women to be idle and subordinate tools at the mercy of men. Margaret criticizes the luxurious 'honey-trapped' women of higher middle class. On one side she strives for the working class women's justice while on the other hand, she lashes out at the 'wooden-dummy' of upper class women. Equal significance is imparted to masculine and feminine roles, both are equally important in both public and private life, "Gaskell represents working-class family life as enacting positive values of cooperation and shared work ... Gaskell is recommending as alternative to the gendered organization of labour in the home" (Colby,1995: 9). Thornton is converted into a domestic provider with feminine qualities while Margaret is imparted with masculine quality to carry out decisions in both the spheres and to resolve class conflict in public life. Gaskell not only imparts social equality but economic independence in order to shift the power to women in this power game of patriarchy; it is evident in Margaret's becoming the landlord of Mr. Thornton and her participation in the public social production. Gender equality is the first step to socialism through elimination of patriarchy and thus capitalism or class conflict; "Through victory in the power politics of gender, Margaret Hale has also made an advance in the power politics of class" (Ingham,1996: 71). In other words socialist values that all the elements of the society being of equal importance and subject to equal justice by the virtue of universal fraternity are rejuvenated through Gaskell's writings.

Gaskell marks a parallel comparison between the 'patriarchal gender system' to keep women under power and 'patriarchal capitalist system' to overpower workers turning both into mere 'useful tools'. As in patriarchal gender society men consider themselves as the master of women, the mill owners in the patriarchal industrial society consider themselves as the paternal authority of the workers. But Margaret exposes the irony behind this convention "the masters would like their hands to be merely tall, large children- living in the present moment- with a blind unreasoning kind of obedience" (Gaskell, 1994:119). The similar politics is played in the patriarchal society against women in which women's natural growth is deliberately stunted by patriarchy turning them into "monster of depravity and incompetence" (Gaskell, 1994: 167). Both the workers and women are regarded as unfit by nature for independent action by so called paternal systems. Pushing women into marginalization is a hardcore politics/strategy of capitalism so that women can be used as an instrument of reproduction to maintain Capitalist patriarchal system. Depriving Women of economic independence and alienating them from public life help to develop 'hands' with brains sans reasoning power. Therefore capitalism provides ground for a patriarchal society and thus for gender and class oppression equally. The elimination of women oppression may directly hit upon the spinal cord of capitalism as Bebel says, "It is wise tactics and strategy to attack an enemy on his weakest side; The 'Woman Question' is the weakest link in the capitalist armour" (Bebel,1917: 3). Gaskell's writings approach women's question through socialist feminist ground addressing women's question and class conflict simultaneously through the agency of women; Gaskell proposes a social change through the agency of women.

Gaskell's works favour a thorough political and social change by advocating women's 'participatory democracy' in labour and her proper sphere. Socialist feminists believe that gender and economy jointly structure male dominance that encodes separate roles for men and women. Gaskell's "use of the language of political economy in the discussions of conditions in Milton" interlinks

women's question with class question (Colby, 1995: 160). Gaskell's work supports the thought expressed by August Bebel in *Women under Socialism*, "In this capitalist society Woman and the workingman have, since old, had this in common—*oppression*"(1917: 9). Working women are doubly oppressed in the capitalist society which gets benefitted by imparting 'wage slavery' i.e. economic dependence by lowering their wages and 'sexual slavery' on the other hand by depriving them of power. Emancipation from wage slavery leads to economic independence directly marring the sexual slavery. Thus economically independent women can equally stand by workingmen in their fight for the common cause towards socialism. Gaskell draws a parallel between 'women's oppression' and 'class oppression' and seeks solution through women's emancipation. Through women's emancipation Gaskell hits at the root of capitalism as in *North and South* Margaret Hale "as a result of her social displacement from a middle-class position and setting, she becomes the locus of conflict between workers and capitalists: North and south" (Ingham,1996: 60).

August Bebel says, "Unquestionably, monogamous marriage, which flows from the bourgeois system of production and property, is one of the most important cornerstones of bourgeois or capitalist society" (1917: 86). Marriage in the capitalist society is a business rather a union by virtue of mutual love and fitting moral and physical values and is based on the measures of materialist profit and loss. Fanny, Mr. Thornton's sister is married off to a well established industrialist irrespective of their wide age difference that is very negligible as far as materialistic profit is concerned. Fanny and Edith give in to the role of private domestic labourers. Same is the case of Edith's with captain Lennox. Through her choice of love and equal mutual spiritual values with dignity in marriage with Mr. Thornton Margaret weakens another pillar of capitalism. Margaret is determined enough "not to let physical attraction give him power over her" (Gaskell, 1994: 320); she does not submit to mental, intellectual and philosophical slavery to Mr. Thornton. She is conscious of the difference of her thought over the justice of working

class people on humanitarian ground with that of Mr. Thornton. Margaret resists a marriage of two mentalities with disparity of principles and a marriage that will relegate her to a position of socially and economically dependent subordinate in a sexual power game: "Margaret only submits to marrying Thornton when she has reduced him to a state in which she can, through her collaborator Higgins, control his actions as an employer. His cast-iron convictions as to the shiftlessness of his employees melt. He not only employs Higgins though he is trade unionist, but after discussion with him takes Carlyle's (and Margaret's) about creating something more than a 'cash nexus' as a link with his workers" (Colby, 1995: 49). This equal claim to the power in gender- class will ultimately lead to social equality of economic –class as private patriarchal property will turn into a social property and the process of production and reproduction or child rearing will become a social responsibility.

Unlike other Victorian writers Gaskell's writings do not focus on only the personal life of courtship and marriage of women and oversteps into the social sphere. There are evidences when we find Margret overthrowing sham patriarchy. Following socialist feminism Gaskell makes Margret the leader of movement for classless social equality. She takes up the expedition to bring forth the question of working class by plunging into verbal arguments with Mr. Thornton advocating social and democratic rights of the working class at the stake of her traditionally expected womanly attributes in the male dominated culture. Margaret criticises Thornton's calling the working people as mere 'hands' and embeds her justification of their being individual human beings and subject to equal social justice. Margaret achieves an edge over Thornton in verbal as well as logical understanding of action. Margaret makes Thornton empathise and understand the deathlike dire facts of the life of working class by introducing Mr. Higgins who represents the working class in the novel. The commencement of strike for equal wages, Ms. Bessy's victimization to poverty, Mr. Boucher's suicide due to strike failure, dilapidated condition of Mrs. Boucher and her children and Margaret's striving for their solace finally brings Thornton on

equal grounds with Margaret's arguments. Margaret succeeds in developing humanitarian values in Mr. Thornton through a personal interaction between the master and the working class, "once brought face to face, man to man, with an individual of the masses around him, and (take notice) out of the character of master and workman, in the first instance, they had each begun to recognise that "we have all of us one human heart" (Gaskell, 1994: 500). This new-found socialist value is witnessed in Thornton's rejection of using creditors' money at the stake of workmen's interest and steps down to a position of an employee by abandoning his mill.

Margaret's relation with Thornton brings out the gender conflict while her relation to workers, the class conflict. Personal turns political; Margaret's personal quest for "sexless purity" and purposeful existence of life is sought through a political issue of class conflict (Colby, 1995: 48). Somehow it is worked out that gender politics stems out from class politics that sidelines women power from economic and political substantiality in public life and social substantiality in private life. Margaret's victory in her socialist mission makes Thornton, in Colby's view: Resolve on a more humane conduct of his affairs, based on rejection of his own false class assumptions. To bring this about Margaret has become a 'masculine' agent and Higgins a 'feminine' persuader, thereby subverting the notion that ideally men and women are necessarily complementary to each other in all respects. It is only when that idea is broken down that the corset of class begins to disintegrate. (Colby 1995, p. 75)

Gaskell's novels bring her forth as a non-conformist through her treatment of the female protagonist of her novels. She questions the Victorian domestic ideology and the identity and the quality of femininity attributed to woman by Victorian male dominated society. "The process of shifting the significance of conventionally 'masculine' and 'feminine' qualities also involves, in Gaskell's hands, a re-examination of the concept crucial to the Victorian construction of femininity-motherhood" (Ingham,1996: 76).

Margaret upholds the cause of the working class and identifies her thought of justice with them

through adopting their 'language'. She is chided by her mother using the words like 'sack of work' and 'knobsticks' but she defiantly sets argument for her favour for it being the part of Industrial North and her relation with the working class society through Bessy and Higgins. Margaret compares it to military slang of Edith's military officer husband and Mrs. Hale is, "duly shocked by wilful comparison between 'factory slang' and upper-class affection" (Ingham,1996: 65).

Socialist feminist is an amalgamation of radical feminist view of only the 'men' being the oppressor and socialist view that it's the system that is responsible for the oppression. Gaskell equally takes into consideration both the factors of women's oppression. On one side Gaskell addresses the psychologically conditioned economic and reproductive factors of oppression of the 'other' sex as formulated by Simon De Beauvoir (1949) while on the other hand she addresses capitalist structural factors of women's oppression as explained by Engels (1972) and August Bebel (1917). Gaskell's novels press forward Juliet Mitchell's "argument for the simultaneous necessity of radical feminist consciousness and of the development of a socialist analysis of the oppression of women" (1971: 182). Gaskell through her women characters brings forth feminist consciousness as the radical feminists suggest and economic and political liberation simultaneously. Gaskell presents Margaret as a propagator of Socialist values as Mr. Bell asserts, "she's a democrat, red republican, a member of the Peace Society, a socialist" (Gaskell, 1994: 393).

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