



**George Meredith's *Lord Ormont and His Aminta* and Elizabeth Gaskell's *Cranford*:  
A Comparative Feminist Study**

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**ABSTRACT**

The present paper is also a humble attempt at reintroducing Gaskell as a nonconformist by comparing delineation of the female protagonists in Meredith's *Lord Ormont and His Aminta* (1894) and Gaskell's *Cranford* (1851). In his broad outline Meredith's novel seems to be endorsing 'emancipation of women' within an oppressive patriarchal culture but ironically denies self-governing sovereignty to woman. Gaskell's woman characters in *Cranford* showcase self-governance in every facet of life either economic or social.

Key words: Gaskell, Meredith, Aminta, Cranford, Self-Governance, Emancipation

Elizabeth Gaskell's *Cranford* (1851) depicts a female community in a village constructing their own world without men with self-government in each facet of life either economic or social. *Cranford* overturns the Victorian ideology of male-dominated culture within which female plays out her conventional role as both economically and socially subservient to men. It proposes a replacement of a societal structure of male dominance and masculine rules to a structure dominated by women and feminine sensibility. In sharp contrast to *Cranford*, George Meredith depicts a men's world in *Lord Ormont and His Aminta* (1894) in which a woman is treated as an inferior subaltern who needs to be controlled by "male colonial authority" (Carens 805): Aminta, the female protagonist, rebels against her overbearing husband, Lord Ormont, eventually abandoning him to live with her lover, Matthew Weyburn. In his broad outline the novel seems to be endorsing 'emancipation of women' within an oppressive patriarchal culture but ironically denies self-

governing sovereignty to woman. Timothy L. Carens has rightly said, "The novel works to replace the destructive dynamic of oppression and rebellion with a colonial relationship characterized by the concern of the government and consent of the governed" (Carens 807).

The opening lines establish *Cranford* as a female domain, "In the first place, *Cranford* is in possession of Amazons"; Men are conspicuously absent, "whatever does become of the gentlemen, they are not at Cranford. What should they do if they were there?" for everything from keeping the gardens to settling questions about literature or politics, the ladies of Cranford are, Gaskell says, "quite sufficient" (Gaskell, *Cranford* 1-2). Cranfordian ladies secure unity between separate individuality and independent womanhood that shows their managerial skills. Through this literary effort, Gaskell subverts the centrality of 'centre' (men) by putting the 'other' (women) in the centre in the Victorian binary model, "In *Cranford* Gaskell offers a social model which operates under values

which run counter to those of the capitalist patriarchy" (Colby 33).

Meredith presents a world where man is the 'centre' confirming Victorian ideology of male-dominant culture. From the very onset of the novel, he presents woman as a thing of contempt in the eyes of men. As Matey, Aminta's lover, says to his classmates, "You're going to be men," meaning something better than women. There was a notion that Matey despised girls" (Meredith 5). Here a woman is a marginalized and inferior other who needs to be tamed by the authority of men. In contrast to Gaskell's Cranford, Meredith seems to be approving the capitalist patriarchy by making a man as woman's God,

Women, to whom the solitary thought has come as a blown candle, illumining the fringes of their storm, ask themselves whether they are God's creatures or man's ... They are of the tribe too long hereditarily enslaved to conceive an abstract. So it is with them, that their God is the God of the slave, as it is with all but the bravest of boys (Meredith 111).

Gaskell draws attention to female sensibility that works behind evolution of this self-made community. Cranford is inhabited by a number of single and elderly ladies who have made their own self-rules and regulations to follow, "so be at liberty after twelve—from twelve to three are our calling hours ... and also, that you are never to stay longer than a quarter of an hour" (Gaskell, Cranford 4). They set the way of life simple as in accordance with nature and humanity, "the inhabitants of Cranford kept early hours, and clattered home in their patterns, under the guidance of a lantern-bearer, about nine o'clock at night; and the whole town was abed and asleep by half past ten" (Gaskell, Cranford 5). It is a mutually acknowledged gentility to conceal 'unacknowledged poverty'. Displaying a "kindly esprit de corps," the Cranfordians "overlook all deficiencies in success when some among them tries to conceal their poverty" (Gaskell, Cranford 4). These ladies always follow an 'elegant economy' adopting own set of values in material life, keeping early hours, serving simple refreshments at

entertainment, and dressing simply. It involves careful regulation of means and ends ignoring arrangements for social amenities,

If he walked to or from a party, it was because the night was so fine, or the air so refreshing, not because sedan-chairs were expensive. If we wore prints, instead of summer silks, it was because we preferred a washing material; and so on, till we blinded ourselves to the vulgar fact that we were, all of us, people of very moderate means (Gaskell, Cranford 7).

Further, the hostess works side by side with her servant, tending to the cakes, while, all along, the narrator says, "she knew, and we knew, and she knew that we knew" (Gaskell, Cranford 5). The ladies constituted their own social practices and rituals that allow women to support each other and resolve all economic and social problems together with mutual feminine cooperation. All the lives of Cranfordians are managed efficiently by these elderly ladies with mutual concern despite the crisis, disappointments. Collectively they constitute the functional entity that Cranford and so in this respect are all equally important, "To make a community is a political act, it is a way of consolidating power for the uses of its members. By organizing and defining themselves within a community, the Cranford ladies create an environment which serves their needs and interests" (Colby 25).

In Meredith's world Men rule the roost, "I say, a nation, to be a nation, must have men" (Meredith 55) and women are slaves to them as Lord Ormont arrogantly asserts that "women are happier enslaved and they are inanimate automatic machines, who lay them down at last, inquiring wherefore they were caused to move" (Meredith 336). It is men who make the laws for the fair sex and women are considered as devoid of mind as Aminta also confesses that she does not know what to think on some subject; she is advised by Lord Ormont that "if a man states the matter he thinks, and a woman does but listen, whether inclining to agree or not, a perceptible stamp is left on soft wax" (Meredith 155). Women have to look upto their male superiors for moral and intellectual

guidance; women's virtue lies in her fidelity but "the infidelity of men doesn't count. They are affected by the changing moons" (Meredith 160).

Masculine sensibility is based on capitalist economy as against women's 'elegant economy' of 'esprit de corps', that desires to acquire the possession of all; the women are treated as 'man's creation' who aspires to possess her as a property as Lord Ormont asserts possession of his wife "I have a jewel" (Meredith 123). According to Carens the novel treats Women as an uncivilized colony who is cultivated by 'colonial male authority', "It is Lord Ormont, however, that Meredith most fully develops a model of colonial male authority that acquires legitimacy by effecting the moral and intellectual progress of its subjects through sympathetic understanding and "persuasive" direction (Carens 810).

Although Gaskell's ladies believe that "to be a man was to be "vulgar", they extended their courtesy to gentlemen who interrupted their peaceful domain (Gaskell, Cranford 12). As in the case of Mr. Signor Brunoni, when he falls ill and is in financial need, all the ladies begin to provide assistance to the Brunoni family. Miss Matty takes the lead by sending the sedan-chair for him, Lady Glenmire provides the medicine, Mrs. Forrester makes some bread-jelly, and Miss Pole keeps visiting them at all hour. Here Gaskell emphasizes the humanity and moral values against materialism as the base of female community.

In the further course of the novel after Miss Jenkyns death the community functions under the leadership of Miss Matty who leads a liberating change in her community with freer attitude towards men and class distinctions. As she depicts these changes, Gaskell is suggesting that the leadership of women will lead to more flexible and humane social arrangements. Miss Matty serves as a social mediator, when Mrs. Jamieson's behaviour strains social relations in Cranford and she persuades her neighbours to accept the socially unequal marriage of Mr. Hoggins and Lady Glenmire. Miss Matty thus functions as a progressive leader of her community, calling for changes which will enhance the lives of the

inhabitants of Cranford. At each stage Gaskell's female community challenges masculine ruled culture with its own set-up of values.

Miss Matty's character challenges the Victorian ideology of separate spheres for men and women in which women ruled the domestic realm and men the world outside. Miss Matty is the leader, a household manager, a shareholder, and also a female enterpriser. Shopping for a new silk, Miss Matty overhears the shopman rejects a neighbour's five-pound note; with the "soft dignified manner peculiar to her ... which become her so well" Miss Matty takes action in this situation, offering the man five sovereign for his note because, as a shareholder, she sees herself as responsible for the protection of her community (Gaskell, Cranford 187). Miss Matty exhibits remarkable courage and strength when faced with the possibility of financial ruin as the town and country Bank fails, causing Miss Matty to lose a large portion of her income. When a look at the account book reveals that she will be left with only thirteen pound a year, Miss Matty becomes despondent, "but after tea", the narrator say, "we took to our work," (Gaskell, Cranford 193) indicating that in this case as in others, the Cranford ladies work together to handle difficulties. The young narrator, Marry Smith says, "It was an example to me ... to see how immediately Miss Matty set about the retrenchment which she knew to be right under her altered circumstances" (Gaskell, Cranford 195).

In contrast to the character of Matty, Aminta the female protagonist of the novel has been enslaved by Lord Ormont by accepting her as a mistress but denying her the title of Countess of Ormont. She is deprived of love and respect by a husband of her father's age, she is harshly denied admittance to his home in Steignton without his permission and she has no claim to independence and individual thinking and helplessly follows the laws of her depraved husband.

Eventually Aminta overcomes her cowardice "I have no husband to defend me—I must do it for myself" (Meredith 219). She leaves her husband and considers herself responsible for

inducing him into an "alliance with an inexperienced girl of inferior birth" (Meredith 397). Free from the bonds of 'injustice' as personified by Lord Ormont, Aminta is now claimed by 'justice', personified by Matthew Wayborn as he says, "Aminta, my beloved, if you are free, I claim you" (Meredith 390). Divesting his heroine a self-governing independence and responsibility for own development, Meredith arranges for a reformed male authority as he doubts Aminta's ability to self-rule. In Lord Ormont, Matthew, "the civilizing authority, gradually reforms Aminta into a likeness of himself. Despite her remarkable advances, however, the narrative continues to disclose traces marks of essential difference and inferiority" (Carens, 2001).

Aminta's mind is gradually conditioned by Matthew's thought loosing hold of her own cognitive thought process; she admits that she is morally and intellectually inferior to him. Matthew is her master, full of "spiritual valiancy", "cheerful courage, skill, the ready mind, easy adroitness, and self-command ... to imitate was a woman's utmost duty" (Meredith 333). Aminta credits Matthew with ability to discern character and thoughts of his subordinate, "How did he learn to read at any moment right to the soul of a woman?" (Meredith 335). She admits that she is not worthy of her male superior, "oh! I am not the girl you loved. I would go through death to feel I was, and give you one worthy of you" (Meredith 390).

In contrast to Aminta, Gaskell has conferred upon her woman character social as well as economic empowerment. They sustain themselves with self-support and allowing their domestic skills to transcend the border of public work setting. Gaskell's women are not dependent on men for their survival. Miss Matty's experience with household management prepares her to run a successful business. Though little doubtful in the beginning Miss Matty overcomes her fear and is armed to challenge the social ideology that officially segregates women out of the public, productive sector of the economy with new business venture of selling tea.

Gaskell's empowered woman merchant also challenges the masculine commercial ethos in the workplace as Colby says, "Gaskell implies that the strictly competitive structure of business will be infused with the womanly values of cooperation and mutual support" (Colby 32). This is experienced in an episode when Miss Matty is reluctant to sell tea while Mrs. Johnsons, a neighbour, includes the item in his shop; consequently, she confides to him her plans and inquires whether they are likely to injure his business. Although Mary Smith's father calls this idea of hers "great nonsense," questioning how tradespeople "were to get on if there was to be a continual consulting of each other's interests" her action ultimately serves her own interests, for Mr. Johnson subsequently sends customers to her, claiming that Miss Jenkyns had the really good choice teas (Gaskell, Cranford 220). As Elizabeth Langland has noted, Miss Matty actually "establishes an edge over her competitor by telling him that she will not compete" (Colby 40).

Aminta is overpowered by masculine values; she admits supremacy of Matthew's values and principles. She develops interest in his thoughts on girl's education and co-education with gender equality and starts fantasizing about taking an active role in his academy as teacher of the female students. But astonishingly Matthew's school described at the end of the novel has no female students but only boys and Aminta's dream to be a professional teacher is reduced to a mere school housekeeper, "It will be heavy, if the school ... and I love our boys. I am fit to be the school-housekeeper; for nothing else" (Meredith, 415). Matthews commitment to coeducation evaporates without explanation and again Aminta is denied a self-hood and equality,

Her dream of professional agency holds out the hope that the civilizing missions will indeed fulfill its promise to lead the oppressed woman forth into the enlightened world of sexual equality. Matthew, however, firmly restricts the agency to which the woman ... has access. Her vision of professional fulfillment remains a dream (Carens 41).

Meredith's concept of women's emancipation only based on the model that "emancipates them from oppressive authority, but also subordinates them to beneficent rule" of male authority (Carens 814). While Gaskell's *Cranford* vouchsafes the true emancipation, whether social, economic and political, to women that imparts self-governing sovereignty in each aspect of life. It does not put women under surveillance of male reformer, indeed empowering women to bring about reformation.

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