

# A Reading of “Female and Feminine” Images in *North and South* From a Feminist Perspective

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**Abstract**—Elizabeth Gaskell is one of the most famous female writers of the Victorian age. *North and South* is one of Mrs. Gaskell’s three social novels. Influenced by feminism, Mrs. Gaskell mainly emphasizes the idea of equality between men and women, that women should be in control of their own lives, have their own ideas, be independent and be strong. This essay mainly represents different female as well as “feminine” male characters in this novel which serve to highlight the ideal perfect female image from a feminist perspective, focusing on the feminist ideas and reflections projected behind these characters. This article aims to reveal that in modern society, harmony and equality between men and women are of great importance in building a harmonious society.

**Index Terms**—*North and South*, Elizabeth Gaskell, feminism, “female and feminine” images

## I. INTRODUCTION

The 19th century saw the emergence of a large number of outstanding novelists and works in England when the variety and number of works were unprecedented. Unlike other periods before, women writers became up-and-coming and occupied an irreplaceable position at that time, which broke the dominance of men throughout the entire literary world. In nineteenth-century British literature, female consciousness came to the fore and developed gradually. The Brontë sisters and George Eliot were in that group, while people seemed not to pay much attention to Elizabeth Gaskell at the time. In China, the study of Elizabeth Gaskell began to grow in the 1980s as a result of Marx’s influence and the increased attention paid by critics to industrial fictions and the class struggle therein. The issue of women in the Victorian age has been known as one of the major interests in Elizabeth Gaskell’s novels, the novel *North and South* being one of her masterpieces.

## II. THEORY AND SYNOPSIS OF *NORTH AND SOUTH*

### A. *Feminism*

Feminism is a social theory and political movement created and launched to promote equality between men and women, with a focus on analyzing gender inequalities and promoting the rights and interests of the vulnerable female group. The different schools of feminism share a basic premise: women are an oppressed and discriminated group worldwide. Feminism is based on the fact that current societies are built on a patriarchal, male-centered system. Feminist theories are diverse, but they all boil down to one phrase: to achieve equality between men and women for all mankind.

The first stage probably met its start at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. One of the contentions was gender equality, which was the equality between men and women. It is generally acknowledged that the second women’s liberation movement met its start in the 1960s-1970s, and lasted until the 1980s, whose focus was to eliminate the differences between genders. Another result brought by the second feminist movement was the research of gender and the rise of the study of feminism. As a consequence, there have been numerous genres of feminism. Society was a social ideology with the center of patriarchal consciousness for a long time. Therefore, with the influence of the concept formed in this ideology, people began to define the world from the perspective of patriarchy and took this kind of description as truth improperly. That is, they thought this kind of concept was definitely right and beyond doubt. Feminists issued their challenges to some perceptions that people deeply held before. There were numerous schools of feminism, but the fundamental focus was to fight for gender equality and change the current situation where women were oppressed by discrimination.

### B. *The Author*

Elizabeth Cleghorn Gaskell (1810-1865), whose actual name was Elizabeth Cleghorn Stevenson, was an English short story writer in the Victorian age. Her novels involve social moral and ethical problems. She is often named Mrs. Gaskell. At that time, she was famous for her gothic novels. After that, her industrial fictions, which mainly describe the feelings of young women from the middle class and a detailed portrait of the lives of different strata of society, became more popular. Among Gaskell’s best-known novels are *Mary Barton* (1848), *Cranford* (1851–53), *Ruth* (1853), *North and South* (1854–55), *Sylvia’s Lovers* (1863), *Wives and Daughters: An Everyday Story* (1865).

Having lost her mother at an early age, Elizabeth Gaskell was placed in foster care with her aunt in the town of

Knutsford and attended school in the neighboring town. The culture, customs, and religious beliefs of this quiet and remote town became the material for her later writing. She read more books than her peers, therefore, was more sensitive to the changes and progress of society. In addition to this, she was nurtured by the literature cultivation of her father since childhood and was influenced by her father's and her aunt's pious religious faith. Elizabeth married William Gaskell, a Unitarian minister in Manchester, at the age of 22 and settled in Manchester after their marriage. Manchester was in a period of social transition following the Industrial Revolution, which undoubtedly influenced Elizabeth to some extent. At the same time, Mr. Gaskell was influenced by his religious teachings and would not force his wife, Elizabeth, to stay at home bringing up their children. Unfortunately, however, her only son died in infancy. To ease the pain, Elizabeth Gaskell began to write with the encouragement of her husband. The social status of women in England was very low at the time and women had no independent legal status, so Elizabeth published novels under her husband's name. As a vicar's wife, Elizabeth often cooperated with her husband in charity work, caring for the poor and sick. As a result, she had the opportunity to come into contact with industrial workers who lived in difficulties while having class consciousnesses and to learn about their lives and thoughts.

In addition to her family environment, Mrs. Gaskell maintained good friendships with the Brontë sisters. After Charlotte Brontë's death, Mrs. Gaskell was invited to write a biography for Charlotte. Elizabeth Gaskell was greatly influenced by Charlotte's portrayal of independent, courageous female characters. In addition, Mrs. Gaskell was acquainted with many feminist pioneers. Several novels influenced by feminism were published not under Gaskell's name, but under Stevenson's, which was her name before marriage. Although her work was published under her husband's name, Elizabeth maintained her independence. As her last social novel, *North and South* is regarded as Gaskell's "most original work" (Pittock, 2000, p. 538). The images of new women can help better understand and interpret Gaskell's new idea of female morals and social reformative ideology (Zhen, 2014). Mrs. Gaskell is a feminist writer, as evidenced by the feminine norms she promoted.

### C. *Social Background and North and South*

In eighteenth and nineteenth century, women in England had very low status and were not only economically and politically dependent, but also restricted in their access to education. Women were considered to be inherently less intelligent than men. The majority of women at the time seemed to acknowledge this perception and were unaware of their dependency (Che, 2003). Mrs. Gaskell made a breakthrough in the socialization of female consciousness, bringing it into the field of society and making it integrate with the practical politics sphere. Individuals seeking to realize their self-worth must communicate and integrate with society, and women must engage with the wider world in order to realize their worth. *North and South* is Mrs. Gaskell's bold foray into the social domain. She took a major step forward in women's consciousness, liberating them from their previously conservative emotions and experiences and extending the horizon for feminism to move into the wider social sphere.

*North and South* was published in 1855. It is a social novel. The story took place in the period of the Industrial Revolution. It told the story of a family who lived in the rural south compelled to move to an industrial town in the north of England, which was a completely new place for them. The novel describes the overwhelming power of the Industrial Revolution. With the background of the labor conflicts, *North and South* not only contrasts the differences between the industrialized north and economically backward south, telling the influence of this industrializing city on inhabitants in both living styles and minds, but also depicts the life and struggle of the working class in Manchester, presenting the perceptions of mill owners and workers in Milton.

Margaret was coerced to leave the tranquil South, Helstone, to the entirely unfamiliar northern town, Milton, because her father, the priest, resigned. Unlike the warm and comfortable Helstone, Milton was cold and messy, which was a mill town in the north struggling to survive in the Industrial Revolution at that time. The road was no longer full of fragrant flowers and grasses, replaced by rude workers, cotton workshops with flying cotton. Margaret came from a parish priest family. Since she was young, Margaret had been receiving the privileged education of the rural South. In unfamiliar surroundings, Margaret was shocked. She hated dust and noise there. In addition to the incompatibility of the new environment, there were also the rude attitude of local people, the arrogance of the younger industrialist John Thornton and his harshness toward the workers, which left her with an extremely bad first impression of Milton. However, her father became the teacher of one of the mill owners John Thornton coincidentally. Thornton had a crush on Margaret Hale, but Margaret clearly showed her dissatisfaction with and prejudice against such a vulgar and uneducated class as Thornton. She refused his courtship. These two protagonists were like the South and the North, opposite but closely connected. But she had to acclimatize herself to a completely different lifestyle after arriving in Milton. With a deep understanding of Milton as time goes by, Margaret gradually changed her former improper attitude toward workers. She came into contact with and showed understanding for the suffering behind the rude temper of the workers, stood firmly on their side, and fought with them against poverty and illness. Margaret also converted her previous stereotype of John Thornton because not only Thornton gave consideration to her, and helped her silently for a long time, but also she came to understand Thornton's real heart for mill workers. With the gradual disappearance of the misunderstanding between the two sides, Margaret helped Thornton when he was in financial difficulties, and eventually, they became lovers.

## III. IMAGES OF FEMALES IN *NORTH AND SOUTH*

### A. *The Oppressed Plight of Women in the Patriarchal Society*

*North and South* not only shows the concept of a collision between the conservative South and the industrial North in Victorian times, that is the contradiction of women between staying at home to raise their children and going to work in the factories, but also describes the differences in the social status of men and women in the industrialized society of the North, in other words, female workers were oppressed by male workers in addition to being oppressed by factory owners. Once in the industrial city of Milton, a picture of multiple contradictions intertwined slowly unfolds, allowing the reader to see the social conditions of women, who were not only psychologically traumatized, but also physically afflicted by the male-dominated society.

Spirituality, the patriarchal ideology of the Victorian age confined married women to the family field. Mrs. Hale is good by nature, but she is not a virtuous wife in the traditional sense. She places the burden of improving the quality of her life on her husband's shoulders (Chen, 2012). Although there was much to sympathize with, at the beginning of the novel, Mrs. Hale was portrayed more as a vain, discontented woman. And in Milton, she was portrayed as a sentimental patient who regretted the changes in her life. On arriving in Milton, she could not bear the industrial fumes and her condition worsened, culminating in her death in a foreign land. Mrs. Hale's tragedy ultimately stemmed from the patriarchal society, where middle-class women were denied the right to participate in social affairs and work. They had no means to earn a living and improved their lives, let alone fulfill their ambitions. Women could only count on their husbands. Mrs. Hale's tragic life story was the inevitable result of the class divisions in Victorian society and a vivid portrayal of the constant conflict between the weaker female side and the stronger male side in the gender struggle.

However, even the heroine, Margaret, suffered from spiritual oppression from a patriarchal society. Her beauty and southern aristocracy conquered the men around her, but she rejected their marriage proposal because she did not love them. Even the doctor for her mother was enchanted by her. When Margaret first arrived in Milton, she was so shocked and ashamed that she could only go home and hide due to the stares and blatant comments on her appearance from the male workers she met on the street. She was the "other" to men, an object to be observed and gazed at, and their possessiveness of her was palpable. She was just "prey" in their eyes. During the commotion outside Thornton's factory, Margaret used her body to block a stone thrown at him, which was misrepresented as affection for Thornton. Then rumors arose, as it would be highly inappropriate for a woman to do so in Victorian times. She was troubled by these stares and was ashamed of Thornton's unsuccessful marriage proposal. When she accompanied her brother to the station late at night and was involved in a murder, she became the subject of rumors again. She lied about her alibi to protect her fled brother and was even more distraught when she knew that the man responsible for the case was Thornton. Women's behavior in the male-dominated society is the object of men's scrutiny and women are subject to pressure from male society when their acts "exceed what are proper".

Physically, Bessie was oppressed by capitalist and patriarchal exploitation. Bessie, a girl of similar age as the heroine Margaret, worked in a textile mill in her early years to support her family, but suffered from lung disease due to inhaling large amounts of cotton lint. It was when her health became unbearable that she stopped working. Despite her desire to live in nature, away from the polluted industrial town of Milton, she could change neither her miserable fate nor the inequalities of society. She was dying, teetering on the edge of life and death. However, her father, bent on joining his fellow workers in fighting with the factory owners by going on strike, ignored her wishes and acted arbitrarily regardless of her feelings. She worried about her family and at the same time had a longing for death. She was a victim of the male-dominated society. The machines invented by male ingenuity and the workshops they built always oppressed the female workers. Poor workers of both genders had to work in factories that symbolized male authority in order to survive. Nevertheless, in addition to being oppressed by the factory owners, the female workers were also oppressed by the male workers.

### B. *Female Character's Rebellion Against the Patriarchal Society*

Margaret, the heroine, showed strength and courage when she faced the tough reality. The last day came when the Hales had to leave their hometown. Margaret had to be strong to handle all these things:

They could not understand how her heart was aching all the time, with a heavy pressure that no sighs could lift off or relieve, and how constant exertion for her perceptive faculties was the only way to keep herself from crying out with pain. Moreover, if she gave way, who was to act?... Besides, was Margaret one to give way before strange men, or even household friends like the cook and Charlotte! Not she (Gaskell, 2005, p. 47).

She also took on the burden of her family alone, helped her father find a new place to live, and grew into an independent, confident woman. When the maid complained about her father, she rebuked and showed her authority. After living in Milton, she gradually understood that only changes can keep her improving. Margaret did not want to conform to the social dogma of the time as can be seen from her preference to walk and go out alone without a female companion. She, a woman, protected an able-bodied man, Thornton, which was a reversal of social roles. Bold and brave, intelligent and clever, she sacrificed her integrity and honesty for the sake of her family and quietly endured the vilification of others. When it came to her marriage, she sought true love. Different from women's traditional views on marriage, she would not accept a marriage without love. The marriage between the heroine and the factory owner reflected the reconciliation between men and women, factory owners and workers, North and South. Margaret's marriage to the progressive industrialist Thornton represented Mrs. Gaskell's idea of social reform in her attempt to

create a new social order. Through the figure of a new woman who connected North and South, Mrs. Gaskell reflected on how middle-class women act as mediators between “two Nations”, seeking mutual understanding and integration between gender, class, and civilization.

Mrs. Gaskell not only brought women into society, but also demonstrated their abilities and qualities in the socio-political sphere. Although Margaret was inspired by Thornton, her growth and maturity relied largely on her own. Furthermore, Margaret's intellectual maturity represented a shift from traditional social concepts to a new value system. Mrs. Gaskell was intended to illustrate the simultaneous development of female and social consciousness. Margaret helped to rejuvenate Thornton's bankrupt factory using her inherited wealth, which showed Thornton's dependence on Margaret on the one hand, and reflected a pioneering sense of women's participation in the economic life of the new society on the other. The heroine, Margaret, fitted the new feminine profile desired by Mrs. Gaskell: independent-minded, compassionate, highly reflective, and economically powerful. The new feminine characteristics facilitated the heroine's exploration of new social and ethical relationships, the establishment of a new industrial order, and the realization of her ideals of social reform.

In addition, Mrs. Thornton was another one in this novel who rebelled against the patriarchal society. Mrs. Thornton, the main character John Thornton's mother, is a strong and tough woman. Mrs. Gaskell described Mrs. Thornton as “strong and massive...(a) firm, severe, dignified woman” (Gaskell, 2005, p. 71). More than ten years ago, Mrs. Thornton's husband died and her family was in a very difficult situation. Amid such hardship, she carefully looked after her family and educated her two children. Her son, John Thornton, said:

I had such a mother as few are blest with; a woman of strong power, and firm resolve.... Week by week our income came to fifteen shillings, out of which three people had to be kept. My mother managed so that I put by three out of these fifteen shillings regularly. This made the beginning; this taught me self-denial.” (Gaskell, 2005, p. 79)

It was Mrs. Thornton's integrity and great perseverance that enabled her and her children to survive in this cruel industrial city. She gradually helped her son, John Thornton, to establish a cotton spinning mill. Meanwhile, Mrs. Thornton was proud of her son, so when she heard that Margaret had rejected her son's proposal of marriage, she became resentful and was prejudiced against Margaret because she thought that Margaret would take Mr. Thornton away from her. She would then no longer be the mistress standing by Mr. Thornton's side. She would lose her position in the family and the factory, and Margaret would take her place as well. After the death of his father, John Thornton took his father's place in the family and became the highest-ranked member of the family. Mrs. Thornton's possessiveness of her son was not only a result of a mother's love for her son, but also of her obsession with the family's financial power. As a result, she saw Margaret as a rival who could take her place. But Mrs. Thornton was essentially a good woman. She simply did not know how to express or show her feelings. Moreover, Mrs. Thornton despised coward women and admired Margaret's forthrightness, courage, and constancy.

Overall, Margaret is representative of the new woman who dares to break away from the secular constraints and live the life she wants. Margaret's knowledge of political and economic life gives us hope and confidence in her future. It is a full recognition by Mrs. Gaskell of women's ability to participate in social life. Both Margaret and Mrs. Thornton have their own ideas and do not follow trends or are fettered by the patriarchal society, but pursue the way they want to live. Such independent women deserve our respect, and it is their presence that contributes to social development in a more equitable direction. These two women's new femininity mirrors Gaskell's moral ideal of womanhood.

#### IV. “FEMININE” MR. HALE

In addition to the “real” women in the novel, Mrs. Gaskell portrayed Margaret's father, Richard Hale, as a “feminine” figure. Rather than the most common strictly patriarchal figure in Victorian literature, Mr. Hale was an inclusive and gentle father, maternal in nature and different from the typical characteristics of traditional men and fathers.

Mr. Hale's feminine tendencies were presented in the description of his appearance:

The lines in her father's face were soft and waving, with a frequent undulating kind of trembling movement passing over them, showing every fluctuating emotion; the eyelids were large and arched, giving to the eyes a peculiar languid beauty which was almost feminine (Gaskell, 2005, p. 75).

The words “soft”, “waving” and “beauty” that the narrator used to describe Mr. Hale's appearance are essentially words commonly used to describe women, not to mention the direct use of the word “feminine”.

Moreover, not only does Mr. Hale lack the ability to earn a living, but he also shows hesitation and doubt at his spiritual level, leaving the impression of ‘essential weakness’ (Easson, 1980, p. 40). At the beginning of the novel, he suddenly felt that his conscience no longer allowed him to continue his duties as a clergyman, and he intended to give up his parish work. But he did not dare to talk about it with his wife and had to ask his daughter Margaret for help:

‘What does mamma say?’ asked she, with a deep sigh.

To her surprise, her father began to walk about again before he answered. At length he stopped and replied:

‘Margaret, I am a poor coward after all. I cannot bear to give pain. I know so well your mother's married life has not been all she hoped—all she had a right to expect—and this will be such a blow to her, that I have never had the heart, the power to tell her (Gaskell, 2005, p. 30).

After that, he gave up his stable career as a county priest and moved his family to the industrial city, Milton. In the

overall story of the novel, only his renunciation of the priesthood and his challenge to religious authority were described as courageous, showing the capacity of a man to act boldly. But in fact, he did not take the substantive action of challenging the authority of the Church, choosing instead to leave in a worldly-wise way, and he did so with a sense of melancholy and distress in the meantime. He has been portrayed throughout the whole story as a timid, weak Mr. Nice Guy. His image seems to have become inextricably linked to defining labels such as “femininity”, “weakness” (Easson, 1980, p. 39; Lansbury, 1975, p. 116) and is even sometimes bluntly referred to as an “ineffective man” (Zlotnick, 2001, p. 105).

#### V. CONCLUSION

Throughout nineteenth-century British female literature, it shattered the bound of male superiority and brought women, who had been left out and discriminated against, to the center of the literary world, showcasing women's wit, courage, and charisma. Based on her own experiences, Mrs. Gaskell created a wave of female consciousness awakening in her work, as can be seen in *North and South*.

Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* not only depicts women who struggled to survive in a male-dominated society, including those who suffered physical trauma, mental anguish, and eventual loss of life, as well as those who rebelled against male domination and grew into independent women. There is also one “feminine” male character, Mr. Hale. These characters are all necessitated in narrative function, contributing to the characterization of Margaret, the heroine of the book, and highlighting the image of the “perfect independent” woman that Mrs. Gaskell has in mind, thus revealing the importance and necessity of women's independence and non-submission to the patriarchal society in modern society.

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