

KNOWLEDGE

A Multidisciplinary e-Journal

Journal Website:

<https://www.vivekanandacollegeforwomen.org/ejournal>**Character and Environment in the work of Elizabeth Gaskell****Sukanya Bhadra**, Assistant Professor, Department of English.

Vivekananda College for Women, Kolkata, West Bengal, India

ABSTRACT: *The word ‘environ’ seeks and presupposes to encircle a habitat with humankind at its centre. In the nineteenth-century, in the wake of the Industrial Revolution, and contemporary scientific discoveries and theories about man and his environment, the term began to assume an all-encompassing meaning—cultural, social, economic psychological, and moral circumstances. This paper attempts to re-locate the works of Elizabeth Gaskell within this changing context wherein she seeks to accommodate conflicting ideologies and discourses.*

“If the world stood still, it would retrograde and become corrupt....” (*North and South*)

At the beginning of Queen Victoria’s reign tenets of natural theology—specially the belief that God created the universe and was in control of the processes by which man and animals adapted to their environment—still found wide acceptance amongst people in England. By mid-century, however, Victorians had to contend with new ideas of time and space emerging from proto-anthropological and geological studies. While theocratic assumptions viewed the world as a convincing demonstration of a divine benevolence, an ordered, harmonious habitat with humankind at its centre, biological and geological sciences ran counter to such views positing instead that species evolved and faced extinction in a random manner within a context of “the survival of the fittest.”¹Theories of natural selection, propounded by Charles Darwin and Charles Lyell led to a frightening disjunction between traditional doctrines and scientific thought. Along with such changes in the understanding of the origin of the universe the nineteenth-century witnessed dramatic social changes with the onset of industrialization. The Industrial Revolution marked a major turning point in the relationship between man and his environment. The movement from an agrarian-centred culture to an urban one was accompanied by life-changing circumstances. In the wake of industrialization and emerging scientific discoveries and theories about human existence the term ‘environment’ began to assume a more comprehensive significance that included cultural, social, economic, psychological, and moral conditions.

Literature has always reflected this dialectical knowledge (episteme) as it explores the variegated societal rubrics of race, class, gender along with the terra incognita of human consciousness. Terry

Eagleton posits the view that literary works “are forms of perception, particular ways of seeing the world; and as such they have a relation to that dominant way of seeing the world which is the ‘social mentality’ or ideology of an age” (Ch.1). Mid-Victorian fiction, especially ‘condition-of-England’ novels (so called because they dealt with the condition/circumstances/environment of the nation as a result of industrialization) reveals huge trepidation about the future of England as it gave up its natural agricultural roots. Class and gender roles began to be re-defined. The middle-class acquired unprecedented power and control, regulating all aspects of civil and political life. Women’s lives began to be governed by domestic ideologies devised by patriarchal authorities who sought to restrain middle-class women and keep them within the household. Victorian cultural production—novels, poetry, visual culture— often drew on the epistemological conventions of natural history to shape their narratives. By the 1840s, natural history came to be associated with the study of plants, animals, and all that obtained in man’s immediate environment and this was reflected in the texts that dealt with both the ‘condition-of-England’ debates as well as other topical concerns.

Elizabeth Gaskell (1810-1865), one of the foremost novelists of the Victorian era, was familiar with the intellectual and cultural discourses that permeated her age. Her social circle included the most famous names of the time, while Charles Darwin was a distant relative who had visited her home in Manchester. Gaskell enjoyed the comforts of her middle –class life, being the wife of a prominent clergyman but she also had first-hand knowledge of the privations endured by the working classes as a “visitor”² to their homes. Writing under the shadow of political chaos in France, industrial unrest in Britain and the emergence of radical ethnographic theories, she was highly conscious of the delicate nature of social stability. Throughout her corpus Elizabeth Gaskell exhibits an acute awareness of the influence of environment on human behaviour and actions. In this paper I will deal with two of her works, one a fictional account of industrial England, the other, a non-fictional account of the life of her famous contemporary female writer, Charlotte Bronte. Both books illustrate Gaskell’s familiarity with the new scientific and social theories being advanced at the time.

In her much-appreciated ‘condition-of-England’ novel, *North and South* (1854-55), the ‘North’ signifying the industrial, urbanized north of nineteenth-century England, and the ‘South’ , the agrarian landscape that the North was replacing), Gaskell gives a realistic account of the changes besetting the nation. Although Gaskell grew up in the idyllic village of Knutsford and yearned for its simple lifestyle, she, nevertheless, understood and appreciated the necessity and advantages of the new mechanical forces that were overtaking society, manifest in the industrial town of Manchester where she spent her married life. One of her basic assumptions about human life is that character is influenced by environment and, therefore, subject to change. However, even these changes are not final or

unchangeable: Gaskell's characters alter the design of their towns, homes even their personal behaviours as they journey through life. All constructions, she posits, are subject to reconstructions. *North and South*, as the title so explicitly makes clear, is a novel that deals with the polarity between industry and agriculture and the disparate lifestyles that the two regions represent. While a vast body of nineteenth-century literature idealized the rural past (the poet Wordsworth readily comes to mind even to non-English Literature students), there was a corresponding body of writing that could value the benefits of industrialization. Gaskell's novel, interestingly, unites both perspectives, thus re-conceptualizing the older, effete systems of commerce and governance. In the figure of her heroine, Margaret Hale, Elizabeth Gaskell embodies the two ways of life that were in collision. As Margaret proceeds towards adulthood, she internalizes the different aspects of her changing environment. By the end of the novel she attains a maturity and stature that constitutes the sum total of her varied circumstances. Gaskell believed that the physical and social environments in cities and towns have a major influence on such human characteristics as emotional and physical health, as well as vocational choices. As a writer of fiction she applies this belief when she uses a particular geographical and historical setting to represent a particular social, moral and psychological environment:

The daily life into which people are born, and into which they are absorbed ... form chains which only one in a hundred has moral strength enough to despise (*Ruth*, 7).

Character formation, then, is highly dependent on geographical settings. Margaret Hale, the nineteen year-old heroine shuttles from London to her native village home, Helstone, and back again to the industrial town of Milton-Northern. As a result of this constant shifting Margaret experiences the so-called idyllic life as well as the rough and tumble of industrial existence. Her innocent life as a village parishioner's daughter is drastically altered as she enters the new environment:

It is the town life, said she. Their nerves are quickened the hustle and bustle and speed of everything around them, to say nothing of the confinement in these pent-up houses, which of itself is enough to induce depression and worry of spirits (*North and South*, 79).

In Gaskell there is an uneasy attitude towards the great town and this is consistent with western experience since the Industrial Revolution. Manchester was the epitome of the quintessential industrial town. Smoke is the first thing that one notices—

For several miles before they reached Milton, they saw a deep lead-coloured cloud hanging over the horizon in the direction in which it lay...Nearer to the town, the air had a faint taste and smell of smoke....Quickly they were whirled over long, straight, hopeless streets of regularly-built houses, all small and of brick. (*North and South*, 66).

Smoke and walls not only signify physical hazard but also symbolize threats to personal autonomy. The houses are small and tightly packed—human beings are subordinated to the environment. The neighbourhood where they settle is aptly named ‘Crampton’. Besides dangers to health, crimes such as murder, assault, rape, and robbery were constant threats.

Gaskell sought a middle ground by attempting to merge rural practices with the industrial aspects of modern life. The novel delineates a desire for a happier existence by advocating a blending of the natural, feminine components of the past with the industrial and masculine components of the future. Class and gender issues, she attests could be resolved by a merging of the two ways of life in a progressive re-conceptualisation of the social structure. If the streets appear “hopeless”, they have also allowed Thornton, the book’s dominant male character, to walk down its path and establish himself from being a nobody to becoming the leading industrialist of the town. Later, the same streets will empower Margaret in becoming an independent woman by leaving her sheltered home-life behind. In *Female Heroism in the Pastoral*, Gale David posits that the rural and urban are associated with gender distinctions:

The urban landscape...was seen to represent an extreme form of the so-called “masculine” side of the human temperament in its characteristic activities of force of arms, devotion to labour, and pursuit of wealth and fame. Conversely, the rural landscape signified an equally fixed stereotype of the “feminine” in its rapt preoccupation with emotional expressiveness and physical beauty (1).

In *North and South*, Margaret Hale’s approach to the issues confronting her immediate environment becomes a metaphor for the nation as a whole. The novel, a sort of bildungsroman, features Margaret’s maturation as she moves from a naive teenager to a mature, intelligent woman who decides her own future. This growing-up process involves a casting off of the regressive, static tendencies of the South and the adoption of the progressive values inherent in the industrial North. What we have, then, is a confrontation between the female/private/rural and the male/public/urban worlds. Helston, her childhood home, thwarts her maturation as it is far removed from the reality of the outside world. She refuses a highly lucrative marriage offer choosing instead to remain with her “mother-father-anywhere away from him”. The shift to the town gives her character an adult perspective as she moves from the indoor feminine to the outdoor masculine world. At the same time she brings with her the humanitarian approach that she learned in the South and applies it to the new environment. As Dorice Williams Elliott says “keeping the sympathy and sincere interest in the poor that she learned as a rural clergyman’s daughter, Margaret modifies her attitudes and adapts her charitable practices to fit the new social circumstances she encounters in the industrial North”(383). In her novel, Elizabeth Gaskell does not portray the South as “good” and “idyllic” and the North as “evil” and “polluted”, but rather

she presents a new and astute understanding of the possibilities of societal transformation that industrialization presented.

Using a starkly different genre Elizabeth Gaskell takes up the real-life character of Charlotte Brontë, her famous contemporary female writer, to once again show how character is influenced by environment. Her biography of Charlotte Brontë, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857) was written primarily at the instance of Brontë's father, Patrick Brontë, who wanted a "good" woman who knew his daughter to publish her life-story and thus revise the aspersions cast upon his daughter's character, when alive. Gaskell's life of Brontë has been acknowledged as one of the foremost examples of biographical writing where her subject's character has been given a sympathetic, but true, rendition. In portraying her subject as a mild, gentle, 'harmless' woman Elizabeth Gaskell was, no doubt, securing her own position as a genteel middle-class 'domestic' woman who was doing her duty. Victorian domestic ideology looked down upon 'working' women. Gaskell's attempt was to redress this thinking by showing women novelists as house-bound women who rated their domestic life above other work. In order to do this Gaskell resorted to the usual techniques of biographical writing by evading/including/sometimes changing known features of Brontë's life. Her declared aim was—"the more she was known the more people would honour her as a woman, separate from her character of authoress" (Uglow, 391). Nineteenth-century readers equated Charlotte Brontë's emotionally-charged writings with her own life rather than as constructed works of fiction. They were shocked at the outpourings of passionate feelings by her heroines in contrast to the submissive manners required of women in traditional Victorian society. Brontë, once her identity became known—for she wrote under a male pseudonym—began to be castigated as a coarse and 'unnatural' woman novelist whose plain and delicate exterior belied the emotions expressed in her books. Elizabeth Gaskell draws upon a discourse of natural history popular at the time in writing Brontë's life-story. She presents the conditions under which Brontë wrote as being responsible for *what* she wrote. Thus, environmental conditions are shown to affect human behaviour. What emerges is a complicated narrative of the relationship between place and person. Gaskell presents Haworth village, where Brontë grew up as rough, bleak uncivilized. *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* begins with a detailed description of the Yorkshire countryside where Patrick Brontë brought his ailing wife and their children:

The air is dim and lightless...the vegetation does not flourish, it merely exists; and, instead of trees, there are only bushes and shrubs about the dwellings....Stone dykes are everywhere used in place of hedges; and what crops there are, on the patches of arable land, consist of pale, hungry-looking, grey-green oats....All round the horizon there is this same line of sinuous wave-like hills; the scoops into which they fall only revealing other hills beyond, of similar colour and shape, crowned with wild, bleak moors—grand,

from the ideas of solitude and loneliness which they suggest, or oppressive from the feeling which they give of being pent-up by some monotonous, illimitable barrier, according to the mood of mind in which the spectator may be(11-13)

Amidst this gloomy environment stands the parsonage, “a house of grey stones”, surrounded on three sides by church, school-house and graveyard (“terribly full of upright tombstones”), where the Bronte family members, one by one, find their final rest. The narrative then shifts to the inhabitants who display a “peculiar force of character”. It is a “wild, rough population” that inhabits this area, which, Gaskell says, may be “attributed to the freedom of mountain air and of isolated hill-side life.”The men are “not emotional; they are not easily made into friends or enemies....They are a powerful race both in mind and body, both for good and for evil.”Into this bleak and stark environment, Mr. Bronte arrived with his already sick wife and six small children. The family is reduced in number with the mother and two eldest daughters dying not long after their arrival. The patriarchal, authoritative Reverend brought his sister-in-law to look after the remaining children, three daughters and one son, of whom Charlotte was the eldest. It fell upon Charlotte to look after her younger siblings in the motherless house. Once again Gaskell stresses upon the circumstances surrounding their lives “the daughters grew up out of childhood into girlhood bereft, in a singular manner, of all such society as would have been natural to their age, sex, and station.”Throughout her biography Gaskell is insistent that Charlotte’s life and character grew out of her circumstances. She finds it ‘necessary’ to locate her subject within her ‘context’, i.e. the social, political, and cultural organization of the institutions within which the Brontes lived.

Chapter 2 of the book starts with Gaskell asserting that “For a right understanding of the life of my dear friend, Charlotte Bronte, it appears to me more necessary in her case than in most others, that the reader should be more acquainted with the peculiar forms of population and society amidst which her earlier years passed, and from which both her own and her sisters’ first impressions of human life must have been received” (17).Charlotte, Emily, Anne and Branwell Bronte, four gifted children, created strange imaginary landscapes within which they lived and their adult fictional creations were extensions of their childhood experiences.Elizabeth Gaskell writes: “The difference between Miss Bronte and me is that she puts all her naughtiness into her books, and I put all my goodness. I am sure she works off a great deal that is morbid *into* her writing and *out* of her life” (*Letters*, 228). This is a masterstroke by Gaskell— she defends her friend’s moral character while admitting, at the same time, that she may have had ‘naughty’ impulses which she inserts into her books. As for these unruly impulses they were mainly environmentally determined. This is a realist novelist’s rendering of life—that human beings are shaped and formed by a complex mix of external and internal pressures, a belief influenced by the scientific theories being circulated at the time. Although both these works were

published before Darwin's book came out, knowledge of his theories regarding evolution were being broached in intellectual circles. Enlightened Victorians found themselves at the convergence of myriad intellectual currents that were floating around. (The prominent late-Victorian novelist, Thomas Hardy, displays in his writings the same existential and ontological concerns about man's nature and place in the universe).

While *The Life of Charlotte Bronte* was informed by an ethnographic worldview wherein geophysical conditions determined human character, Gaskell's industrial novel, *North and South*, sought to resolve the urban/rural dichotomy that had become the reality of contemporary nineteenth-century life. In the midst of unprecedented social and cultural dislocation Elizabeth Gaskell's works, though riddled with antinomies, strived to negotiate with the paradoxes and complexities confronting humanity.

Notes

The phrase was coined by the great nineteenth-century philosopher, Herbert Spencer, in his *Principles of Biology* (1864), after he read Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*

Charles Darwin, best known for his contributions to evolutionary theories. Charles Lyell, foremost geologist of his time. In his *Principles of Geology* (1830-33), he argued that the age of the world was greater than was generally assumed.

In Victorian society, women of the upper and middle classes, especially wives of clergymen, "visited" the homes of the poor to help them.

References

David, Gale. *Female Heroism in the Pastoral*. London: Routledge, 1991. Print.

Eagleton, Terry. *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota, 1996. Print.

Elliott, Dorice Williams. "Servants and Hands: Representing the Working Classes in Victorian Factory Novels." *Victorian Literature and Culture*. 28.2000.

Gaskell, Elizabeth. *North and South*. London: Penguin, rpt. 1997.

----- . *Ruth*. London: Penguin, rpt.

----- *The Life of Charlotte Bronte*. London: Penguin, rpt.

Uglow, Jenny. Elizabeth Gaskell. London: Faber and Faber, 1993. Print.