

UGC Sponsored Minor Research Project:

Elizabeth Gaskell: Revisiting a Victorian Woman Novelist through Feminist Lens

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Objectives of the Project:

- a. To bring Elizabeth Gaskell's writing to the fore as she is little known to the students because amidst the many wonderful Victorian writers she is the least taught writer.
- b. To explore Gaskell's writing in the context of contemporary Feminist Theories. Gaskell is one of women writers who wrote about working class women but unfortunately feminist critics have not shown a justifiable interest in her.
- c. To develop a new insight into the feminist study of literature through the proposed research work.

Summary of the Findings:

Gaskell had to go through various kinds of condescension right from the publication of her first novel till quite some time after her death. Her name had gone into oblivion for being a submissive, conventional and emotional woman writer writing with no purpose. 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.

In her novels Gaskell proposes an alternative social structure based on equality and compassion which is accomplished and managed through the agency of women by imparting them important roles in the public sphere and social production refuting the traditional Victorian domestic ideology. The interconnection between 'Woman Question' and 'Class Conflict' brings Socialist Feminism into its play to examine her novels as Gender and Class are the two integral halves of Socialist Feminist Theory.

Gaskell also draws attention to the role of women's 'elegant economy' and 'domestic economy' in the process of social production. Women's domestic economy with cultural capital is put against men's capitalist economy with material capital towards the contribution in the social productivity refuting the traditional ideology that nullifies women's role in social production. Gaskell also quashed the culturally conditioned psychological perspective towards married women's domestic position in a middle class as an 'angel'.

Gaskell exposes the double standard of Victorian society which condones sexual adventures for men but condemns women for a single lapse. Gaskell challenges the Victorian delineation of 'purity' and 'impurity', Gaskell resists the Victorian concept of femininity as culturally excluded other and redefines feminine position in society.

Female community depicted by Gaskell is characterized by self-government in each facet of life whether economic or social. It 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 directed by women and feminine sensibility.

Gaskell instils her heroine with autonomy and self-reliance rejecting the sympathy and superiority of male characters. Gaskell's women characters seem to put a threat to patriarchy in every stage of the story and rejects 'Victorian male assumption of moral authority.' In place of depicting women's subjugation by men Gaskell explores new reality of role and significance of women's domestic economy in the world at large. The recent feminist investigation of Gaskell's writings by the critics like Patsy Stoneman, Nancy Chodorow, Hilary M. Schor etc. place Elizabeth Gaskell as a major Woman Writer.

Contribution to the Society:

Women's Studies are the need of the hour as to bring about a social change for the upliftment of women. The present research helps to develop a new insight into the significance of the role of women in the society and the need of her participation in the social, political and economic life.