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**MRS. GASKELL'S NORTH AND SOUTH AS PRECURSOR
ECOFEMINIST NOVEL**

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Abstract

Ecofeminist literary criticism is one of the growing fields. It maintains tracing ecofeminist ethics in contemporary literary works. Nevertheless, its interest in the classical text grows recently. The novel *North and South* is one of the classics of English Victorian literature. Earlier readings assess the novel as an industrial novel. It explores the female's roles, class division, and the possibility of women's emancipation. The paper, however, is a rereading of Mrs Gaskell's *North and South* through ecofeminist lenses. By applying the ecofeminist theory to the novel, the paper finds that the novel can be considered a precursor to the ecofeminist novels. The paper displays how subtly the author tries to subvert the Western dualism and hierarchy, which are the central pedestals of human and nature persecution. Through the social network, whose core is Margaret- the protagonist-, the author displays the condemned persecution people suffer under the patriarchal and capitalist regimes. Besides, on the characters' tongues, the author also disseminates ethics of care, interconnectedness, and plurality. The novel displays the symbiotic relationship of social classes from one side and man and nature from the other.

Keywords: Mrs. Gaskell's, *North and South*, Victorian Novel, Ecofeminism, Working class, Capitalism, Woman, Nature.

Introduction

Any novel philosophy takes its time to reach its matureness. Ecofeminism as a philosophy is relatively new. It has not yet reached its matureness since *Le Féminisme ou la Mort* (Feminism or death) (1974), a book written by the French writer Françoise d'Eaubonne in which she introduces the term ecofeminism. Ecofeminism is a selective blend

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between environmentalism and feminism. The core thought of it is the interconnectedness of all creatures: human, nonhuman, and plants. Their relationship is integral and symbiotic, necessitates, according to the ecofeminist philosophers, defying the concept of duality that sets the boundaries between the human beings according to their gender, sex, class, from one side, and human and the nonhuman from the other. The woman is central to this philosophy because women's subjection, in the Western creed, is correlated to the subjection of nature. "ecofeminism's basic premise is that the ideology which authorizes oppressions such as those based on race, class, gender, sexuality, physical abilities, and species is the same ideology which sanctions the oppression of nature" (Gaard, 1993, p 1). Thus, the path to women's emancipation is entwined with hindering climate change, patriarchy and capitalism.

Nevertheless, beliefs of any philosophy may be scattered in literary works earlier to its appearance as an independent concept. Literary scholars, whose interest in ecofeminism is increasing, start to trace the ethics of ecofeminism in classic literary works such as Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. They dig hard to show the objectification, subjection and oppression of both women and nature. For instance, Lesley Kordecki's article, "'Like a creature native': Ophelia's death and ecofeminism." Kordecki displays the typical relationship between Ophelia and flora and fauna. In the scene of Ophelia's death, in which she looks like mermaids and her body is covered with spring weeds, she becomes identified with nature. The author states that Hamlet's sole loyalty to the patriarchy represented by his father's ghost and his maltreatment of Ophelia lead to his destruction.

Kordecki foregrounds the significance of Shakespeare's treatment of Ophelia in *Hamlet*, particularly Gertrude's eulogy. Ophelia functions as a kind of reverse referentiality. Rather than the nature imagery functioning as a symbol for human attributes and attitudes, Ophelia's mistreatment, instead, functions as a symbol of the abuse, silencing, and destruction of the natural world. (Murphy 2018, p 2)

Moving to the eighteenth century, Calley Hornbuckle, in her article "Anna Letitia Barbauld's ecological sensibility," presents Barbauld as a striking example of an ecofeminist woman poet. She is one of the antivivisectionists who claim that scientific experimentation does not justify the pain the animals endure because of vivisection. According to Hornbuckle, Barbauld exceeds her Romantic contemporaries such as William Wordsworth in her "egalitarian "Romantic ecology.":

Hornbuckle cogently adumbrates Barbauld's expansive concept of subjectivities radically proposing an egalitarianism far beyond the democratic ideals of male thinkers of her day. Turning a poetic form popular in the Enlightenment against its male practitioners, Barbauld writes a mock heroic, "The Mouse's Petition," to

decri environmental injustice and to emphasize intersubjectivity against an anthropocentric subjectivity that renders the rest of sentient life mere object of scrutiny (Murphy 2018, p 2).

Thus, one may safely state that ecofeminist ethics are scattered now and then in the literary awareness of the western culture but did not prevail until the revival of environmentalism and feminism in the seventeens of the twentieth century. As for the subject of this paper, it hovers around the ethics of ecofeminism that may be found in English novel in the Victorian era, specifically in Mrs Gaskell's *North and South*. The liberal education the author has received; the morals she preaches and implements in her deeds and writings nominates her to be a precursor of ecofeminist novelists. According to Ynestra King Ecofeminism is a theory and practice:

While King carefully defines ecofeminism and explains her theory, she is also an activist. She recognizes that theory does not always translate easily into practice, but that theory often follows practice, trying to express the understanding behind actions people are taking already. For King the vision of ecofeminism and its politics must be joined. Praxis is central; people must "take direct action to effect changes that are immediate and personal as well as long term and structural" (Campbell, 1994, p 91).

Discussion

Mrs Gaskell or Elizabeth Cleghorn Stevenson was born in London in 1810. Her mother descends from a rural family, while her father descends from a naval family. Characters and settings of both the naval and rural traits are portrayed in Gaskell's novels. Elizabeth's mother died when she was a child. Her mother's sister 'Aunt Lumb ' takes care of her in Knutsford until she becomes twelve. Then she goes to school in Warwickshire, where she "receives an education which encourage her to read widely, and to adopt an understanding liberal attitude to the world" (Brodetsky, 1986, p. 5). Moreover, her father, a Unitarian Minister, teaches her Latin, French and Italian languages. Her residence in Knutsford is reflected in the splendid description of natural landscapes in her novels (Brodetsky, 1986, p. 5).

Gaskell writes five novels, novellas, short story collections, and poetry. She also writes a biographical work about Charlotte Bronte, *The Life of Charlotte Bronte* (1857). Much of her novels are based on actual events, settings and characters she has encountered in her life. She marries William Gaskell, a highly respectable Unitarian Minister. The couple moves to live in Manchester, an industrial city that is represented in many novels such as Dicken's *Hard Times*. Tessa Brodetsky remarks that Mr and Mrs Gaskell dedicate a great deal of their time to help and educate poor people. Mrs Gaskell witnesses the drastic changes in society as the significant population of agrarian workers move to live and work in the

industrial cities hoping to live a better life. The majority of those workers encounter disillusionment because of the gap between the efforts they exert in factories, and the meagre wages they receive, which leave them hardly surviving. Moreover, they live in crowded houses near the factories, lacking proper sanitary means (Brodetsky, 1986, p. 8).

In a way or another, the novel is a documentary to the onset of the Anthropocene² epoch whose hallmark is the Industrial Revolution. That epoch witnesses the transition of England from an agricultural society into an industrial one. People migrate from the countryside into manufacturing cities to live a better life, especially after the number of enclosed lands had increased. People can no more cultivate any land freely to gain their daily food.

The processes of enclosure created a landless working class that provided the labour required in the new industries developing in the north of England. The more productive enclosed farms meant that fewer farmers were needed to work the same land, leaving many villagers without land and grazing rights. The advent of machinery in the late nineteenth century had superseded much of the old skilled work, rendering such ancient skills as thatching, hedge laying and slashing, drain laying, mowing and shearing as lost arts. Furthermore, falling prices resulted in farmers economising in the use of farm labour; the neat appearance of their farms more or less suffered as a consequence (Billington, 2018, p. 23).

Children and women work in factories beside men but with lower wages and the same working hours. Children work in textile mills, mines, factories. They also work as chimney sweepers, domestic services...etc. Working conditions in mines, for instance, were horrible, and their dire consequences on children were very significant because of their weakness:

One of the on the job aspects of Victorian Child Labor was the dreadful working conditions. This was particularly magnified in the coal mines. It was dark in the mines making it hard to see and at times would cause permanent problems with sight from the constant strain on the eyes. Due to a lack of proper ventilation, coal dust was very thick in the air. Considering that Victorian Children would work from 12 to 18 hours a day it is easy to see how respiratory problems could arise. There was constant noise, and rat infestation was very common in the mines. Some children developed permanent spine deformation from having to walk stooped over constantly. Explosions or cave-ins were an ever-present fear. Due to the lack of safety awareness in the mines and all of Victorian child labor for that matter, Death was a constant and ever-present danger. The Durham Mining Museum website has several lists of mine disasters with names and ages of the casualties (<http://www.victorianchildren.org/victorian-child-labor/>).

²Coined in the 1980s by ecologist Eugene F. Stoermer, and popularized at the inception of the twenty-first century by Nobel Prize-winning atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen, the Anthropocene is the proposed name for a new geological epoch defined by overwhelming human influence upon the earth. More specifically, the Anthropocene would mark a new epoch for the earth's lithosphere, its crust and upper mantle. Much of the initial evidence for this new lithospheric epoch came from geomorphology, particularly the recognition that large-scale impacts on the earth's surface from such human activities as mining, construction, and deforestation had come to surpass the effects of nonhuman forces (Grusin viii).

Gaskell's first novel *Mary Barton* 1848, establishes her reputation as a good novelist. Charles Dickens writes, "I do honestly know that there is no living English writer whose aid I would desire to enlist in preference to the authoress of *Mary Barton*" (quo in Brodetsky, 1986, p. 54). He publishes her novels in his magazine *Household Words*. Moreover, *Mary Barton* attracts the Scottish philosopher and essayist Thomas Carlyle (1795 – 1881), who becomes one of Gaskell's friends. He finds "Allusions to *Past and Present* abound in Gaskell's early novels, and *Mary Barton* addresses the Chartist struggle which Carlyle had treated in his 1840 pamphlet *Chartism*" (Cumming, 2004, p. 187). Carlyle writes a letter to Gaskell in which he praises *Mary Barton* and draws the writer's attention to the means by which she would be able to write better novels and be a great writer:

"Unless I mistake, you are capable of going still deeper into this subject, and of bringing up Portraits of Manchester existence still more strikingly *real*, --which later quality is the grand value of them in the end. ...to be concise; I mean not only in words only, but in the thought and conception; to reject the unessential more and more, and retain only the essential, at whatever cost of sacrifice:---this, well understood, is really the Law and the Prophets for a writer" (Cumming, 2004, p. 187).

Thus the author has consciously transformed the anthropogenic reality into a literary work creating as such new awareness. In *Mary Barton*, Gaskell tackles the problems of the working class, such as women who may fall to work in prostitution as Esther, desperate men who resort to drugs to escape their helplessness, and children who never get enough food.

Likewise, she does in *North and South* but with an elaborated and subtle manner that she suggests ideas to solve the problems. Mrs Gaskell uses the third-person narrator, which helps to provide an objective point of view for the controversial issues that are displayed in the novel. The novel is mainly set in three places: Milton, an industrial city in northern England, which represents Manchester; London, and Helstone in Hampshire, the south. The story revolves around three main Characters. Margaret Hale is a young beautiful, proud woman and daughter of a Unitarian Minister in Helstone who moves to Milton. Mrs Gaskell gives voice to the poor working class represented by Nicholas Higgins and his family and friends in the factory. Higgins is an industrial worker whom Margaret Hale befriends. He is an employee who organizes and runs strikes to get workers' rights. However, she also gives voice to the mill owners represented by Mr John Thornton, the local mill owner and a friend and student of Margaret's father. Thornton is the epitome of the self-made industry man of Milton.

Margaret's position in the novel allows her to argue and understand the employer's and the employee's problems and motives. She mediates between them, suggesting communication to solve problems other than strikes and violence. The novel develops

throughout Margaret's developing and changing thoughts. Margaret is the mouthpiece of the oppressed in the novel. She defends the cause of the working class. Throughout the novel, she demonstrates the impact of capitalism, patriarchy, and classism on the working class, especially women.

Ecofeminism in particular has a robust liberatory history, built around its recognition of the parallels between the structural binaries supporting the oppression of women and those supporting the exploitation of nature. Ecofeminists such as Vandana Shiva, Val Plumwood, and Greta Gaard have long been concerned to point out structural homologies between patriarchy, capitalism, racism, and technoscience, each of which depends on enforcing hierarchical dualisms between dominant and oppressed entities, often on behalf of the mutual liberation of women and nature (Grusin, 2017, p. ix).

Throughout the novel, there are more than three women whose lives were ended in a way or another because of capitalism and patriarchy. Bessy Higgins lost her mother in a previous strike because of hunger and illness. She then lost her life because her lungs were poisoned by the fluff of cotton when she was a child working in Mills. That white flying fluff could have been easily avoided if the owners of the Mills utilize an engine that would cost them a little extra money. Bessy turns into a direct victim of capitalism:

'Fluff,' repeated Bessy. 'Little bits, as fly off fro' the cotton, when they're carding it, and fill the air till it looks all fine white dust. They say it winds round the lungs, and tightens them up. Anyhow, there's many a one as works in a carding-room, that falls into a waste, coughing and spitting blood, because they're just poisoned by the fluff (North and South 102).

Like Ophelia in *Hamlet*, Bessy associated herself with nature when she realized her impending death. She yearns to be one with the sea, and with wildflowers in an imaginative place-"to the land o' Beulah" (89)- away from smoky and polluted cities, "I shall have a spring where I'm boun to, and flowers, and amaranths, and shining robes besides" (89). Bessy's agony and attitudes are disseminated along with the novel even after her death. Like Ophelia, Bessy is a symbol but "not a static romanticized version of the natural world, but a persistent reminder of human abuse, censorship, victimization, and even destruction of nature" (Kordecki, 2018, p. 10). Bessy is a representation of "the instrumental treatment of nature and its exclusion from ethical significance in western (now global) culture," as Val Plumwood states (1993, p. 6). Besides, Laurence Talairach-Vielmas thinks that social problem novelists consider Bessy's disease as an emblem stands for "capitalist exploitation or over-consumption, used as a trope for luxury *and* deprivation, Victorian novelists thus capitalized on the polyvalent meanings of tuberculosis, most especially in social problem novels, since the disease could serve as a "powerful leveller of class" (68). "

Similarly is the case of John Boucher and his wife. He works in the mill. He was not a skilled worker. He has eight children, and his wife was sick. Along with other workers, he cannot undertake the new procedures of the mills' owners who decide to lower their wages. The Union decides to make a strike. The owners' decision to employ Irish workers instead of Milton's causes agitation. The workers feel betrayed, and therefore they attack Mr Thornton's mill. Boucher was desperate and hopeless; therefore, he decides to kill himself.

The image of his death is highly symbolic. Neither does he hang himself nor cut his veins. He drowns himself in a shallow brook " 'Th' brook!--why there's not water enough to drown him!' 'He was a determined chap. He lay with his face downwards. He was sick enough o' living, choose what cause he had for it" (294). Boucher resorts to nature as a safe refuge from the unbearable agony of watching his children starving. Ironically, nature was tainted by capitalism because the cotton's mills polluted the brooks' water with dyestuff that stained Boucher's face. That image is a representation of Boucher's victimization and the responsibility of capitalism for his death. The image of Boucher's locks of hair and their divisions as if they were channels for water suggests the oneness between Boucher and nature. Boucher's body becomes a reflection of the earth's topographical expression. However, the tragedy of Boucher's family culminates with the death of his wife. She leaves eight children who were very young to work in the factory.

Owing to the position in which he had been found lying, his face was swollen and discoloured besides, his skin was stained by the water in the brook, which had been used for dyeing purposes. The fore part of his head was bald; but the hair grew thin and long behind, and every separate lock was a conduit for water (NS p. 295).

According to Elizabeth Carlassare (2000), ecofeminism as a social movement or as a theory aims at erasing all forms of oppression, and it strives for erecting "a politics for planetary survival and social egalitarianism" (1). Women and nature are the core of ecofeminism, yet the way to gain justice is holistic "[E]cofeminists are concerned about global sustainability as much as gender justice." States Ariel Salleh (1995, 26). Classism is one of the concerns of ecofeminism. In the novel, the author shed lights on the instrumental treatment of workers. The owners call them 'Hands'. According to the system, they are replaceable. The author strives via narration to fill the gap between classes.

Margaret Hale and Mr Thornton attract each other from the beginning of the novel. However, the stoic and idealistic Margaret denies her feelings because she thinks he is unfair to his employees. It happens that Margaret was in Mr Thornton's house at the time of the

strike. She pleads to him to go out and talk to the angry workers: "Go down and face them like a man. Save these poor strangers, whom you have decoyed here. Speak to your workmen **as if they were human beings. Speak to them kindly** [bolded words are mine]" (177). Thus she grasps that the employers do not consider the workers as full entities.

Mr Thornton has brought Irish workers to run the mill instead of his employees who go mad and attack the mill. The stubborn Mr Thornton agitates the angry mob more as he tells them that he will not send the Irish workers back that they attack him. Gaskell gives an extended passage in this scene to describe the mobs' motives and their psychological conditions. They are desperate. They have hungry families. They strike to get their rights and are betrayed and want to revenge:

Many in the crowd were mere boys; cruel and thoughtless,—cruel because they were thoughtless; some were men, gaunt as wolves, and mad for prey. She knew how it was; they were like Boucher, with starving children at home—relying on ultimate success in their efforts to get higher wages, and enraged beyond measure at discovering that Irishmen were to be brought in to rob their little ones of bread. Margaret knew it all; she read it in Boucher's face, forlornly desperate and livid with rage (*North and South* 177).

Mrs Gaskell demonstrates how the extreme class divisions, and inhumane working conditions, may shake the individual's faith. While poverty drives one to suicide, it drives the other to lose his belief in God's existence. Higgins finds difficulty in reconciling the situation with oneself. Higgins' doubts spring from his bitterness that the God who should have saved them lets them live in misery. He observes his beloved daughter Bessy deteriorating until she dies because of the careless mill owners. He finds no reason to live in misery and then moves to live in heaven or hell in the afterlife: "But Nicholas was neither an habitual drunkard nor a thorough infidel. He drank to drown care, as he would have himself expressed it: and he was infidel so far as he had never yet found any form of faith to which he could attach himself, heart and soul" (*North and South* 225). Thus, the author endows full dimensions to the representative of the working class, who symbolizes Chartists members at that time. Higgins is a man capable of attending philosophy classes, protesting for the rights of his community in civil ways, and negotiating with the mill's owners to find respectful means of living fair for both of them.

Nevertheless, was the middle-class safe from the oppression of official institutions and capitalism in the novel? Mrs Hale, throughout the novel, expresses her distress by shedding tears. Her tears were the only way to gain relief from her agony that she cannot see her only son. She cannot talk about her son with her husband, nor her husband consult her when he decides to leave the Church, "'I do think this is very strange--not at all right. I call it very unfeeling,' said she, beginning to take relief in tears. 'He has doubts, you say,

and gives up his living, and all without consulting me" (45). Mrs Hale's health declines step by step when they move to Milton because of its polluted air. She wants to see her son Frederick before she dies. The authorities convicted Fredrick of treason because he has participated in a mutiny in the British navy. He has written to his family long before the mutiny about the bad treatment of their captain. After the mutiny, he flees to Spain. Secretly he comes to see his mother before she dies. Her husband decides to leave the church and they become in shortage of money. Mr. Hale resigns his work as a minister in Helstone Church because he cannot conform to vows he no more believes in:

It is not a month since the bishop offered me another living; if I had accepted it, I should have had to make a fresh declaration of conformity to the Liturgy at my institution. Margaret, I tried to do it; I tried to content myself with simply refusing the additional preferment, and stopping quietly here,—strangling my conscience now, as I had strained it before. God forgive me! (*North and South* p. 36).

Thus, official institutions: the church, the navy, and capitalism crush their opponents and disintegrate the unity of families in the novel.

Regarding Ms Hale, the novel's protagonist, though she was obedient, chaste, charitable, and a loving daughter, she does not represent the idealistic epitome of femininity of the Victorian age—"The Angel in the House". That epitome "defined the Victorian thought of women as essentially the perfect mother; hence the domestic space was their natural place to be. Victorians conceived the perfect woman as pure, motherly, selfless and perfect; her life was to be devoted to others (obviously, to male others), without expecting anything in return" (Colom, 2020, p. 11).

Like Mrs Gaskell, Margaret is a woman of words and deeds. She used to be a philanthropist carrying baskets of bread and some food to the poor people in Helstone. She teaches children and visits sick people. As she comes to Milton, she befriends the Higgins' daughters Bessy and Mary, who are respectable and have dignity though they were destitute. Margaret continues to help people as she did before. She helps workers' families in time of the strike, especially the Boucher's. Boucher's wife shortly dies after him, and Higgins adopts the children. Margaret teaches young children to read and write. Thornton dismisses Higgins from the mill after the strike, but when he decides to move to the south to find a job, Margaret advises him not to go. She thinks that an energetic and expert worker like Higgins will not adapt to the slow rhythm of life in the south; therefore, she asks him to talk to Mr Thornton to employ him again. It seems that Margaret has learned to appreciate the role of the manufacturers and the workers in building the nation.

Since her early childhood, Margaret shows strength and pride. When her family sends her to London to live with her aunt Mrs Shaw, she manages to hide her tears in order

not to disturb her father, who checks on her before he leaves. Though she lives in London for a long time, Helstone remains her favourite place. Margaret is different from other girls of her age in that she does not pay great attention to fashion, playing the piano, singing, and needlework that is essential for any accomplished young lady prepared to marry at that age. Moreover, she has no title or fortune.

As her father realizes the grief of his daughter and his wife for leaving Helstone, he decides to retreat and stay in his work. Margaret shows a great deal of courage and honesty as she helps her father to stand for his beliefs:

I cannot bear it. I cannot bear to see the sufferings of others. I think I could go through my own with patience. Oh, is there no going back?' 'No, father,' said Margaret, looking straight at him, and speaking low and steadily. 'It is bad to believe you in error. It would be infinitely worse to have known you a hypocrite.' She dropped her voice at the last few words, as if entertaining the idea of hypocrisy for a moment in connection with her father savoured of irreverence' (*North and South* 56).

Furthermore, when the workers attack Mr Thornton's Mill, Margaret understands that he is in real danger, and she shields him with her body and receives a blow in her head. Her public act exposes her. However, when Mr Thornton, who admires Margaret from the beginning, proposes, she rejects him. She also rejects the proposal of another man. According to the Victorian standards of femininity, her acts are subversive because she rejects eligible men and encourages her father to challenge the religious authority of the Church.

She does not blame her brother when he participates in the mutiny and understands his motives. The newspapers describe him as "a traitor of the blackest dye" (180); however, the mother proudly asserts: "I am **producer of Fredrick** standing up against injustice, than if he had simply a good officer"[Bolted words are mine] (109). The mother ascribes his valour and agency to herself, indicating that her upbringing has produced a man capable of doing the right thing and that she is aware of her role as a mother. Moreover, Margaret reasonably justifies his standpoint: "loyalty and obedience to wisdom and justice are fine; but it is still finer to defy arbitrary, unjustified cruelty used – not on behalf of ourselves, but on behalf of others more helpless" (109). The mother and daughter stances are subversive because they oppose the authority and because they are of females. Patsy Stoneman states that:

Elizabeth Gaskell was anything but naïve about the relation between power and justice. When Margaret urges Frederick to stand trial, he tells her that a court-martial is not "an assembly where justice is balance and evidence forms only the other tenth" (253-4)". Those who are tried are hanged from the yard-arm (109). ...Frederick is heroic, but impotent; a handful of men cannot effectively challenge the armed forces and the law (Stoneman, 2006, p. 82)

Besides, Margarete stands by the side of the workmen and helps them. Colom believes that:

[E]ven though Gaskell does not resolve these defiant acts in a completely challenging way, this does not prevent the reader from recognising subversion in *North and South*. It is brave enough to try to defy the highly repressive social norms of Gaskell's times, even though patriarchy ends up restored, because this is what usually happened; after a lot of trying, finally, disruption will come (Colom, 2020, p. 29).

In Joyce Senders Pedersen words, Margarete and her mother are capable of excreting "moral agency". The main reason behind that is that they are educated women. According to Mary Wollstonecraft, women are innately capable of acquiring knowledge and rational thinking if they received the proper education: "As we are created accountable creatures we must run the race ourselves, and by our own exertions acquire virtue: the utmost our friends can do is to point out the right road, and clear away some of the loose rubbish which might at first retard our progress" (qtd in Pedersen 36). Through education that Margarete strives to disseminate in her society, she defies Dualism, "women's educational agency has in itself challenged dualistic thinking" claims Sarah Jane Aiston (2).

The family moves to Milton with their faithful servant Dixon. Mr Hale would work as a teacher in evening classes. Their income becomes much less than before. They almost know nobody in Milton except Mr Thornton, the tenant of the estate of their old friend Mr Bell. He then becomes Mr Hale best friend. After the death of Mrs Hale, Margaret accompanies her brother secretly to the railway station at night. Mr Thornton sees them together. He thinks that she is with her lover. The incident causes subsequent headaches for him. On the same night, an old fellow from the navy recognizes Fredrick at the station. He tries to catch him, but Fredrick pushes him away and rides the train. The man is found dead, and a man in the station testifies that he has seen Miss Hale in the station that night. To protect her brother, she testifies that she was not there. She then understands that Mr Thornton gives an order to close the case as he is one of the magistrates in Milton.

His behaviour marks a turning point in Margaret feelings towards him. It seems that she is not of the kind that follows her passions only, but his behaviour makes her respects him and loves him. Her father also dies, and she goes back to live with her aunt in London. Mr Bell, her father's friend, makes her the owner of his estates in Milton. At that time, Mr Thornton suffers from financial problems, and he is about to lose his mill when Margaret gives him money to invest it. Nicholas Higgins tells Mr Thornton that the man who accompanied Margaret to the railway station is her brother, encouraging him to propose again, and she agrees to marry him. Caroline Levine argues that, in concluding the novel in this way, Mrs Gaskell suggests the possible unity and collaboration of the one nation regardless of its class, region, or wealth:

The queenly Margaret Hale moves from the stable agriculture world of southern England with its aristocratic hereditary estates to the industrial north where factory smoke darkens the sky and fortunes are quickly made and lost. Though initially disgusted by the ugliness, newness and violence of the north she comes to celebrate the industrial economy as dynamic and vigorous, a source of energy for the nation as a whole. Joining Margaret, an heiress, to the industrialist John Thornton at the end, Gaskell imagines in terms a productive union of masculine and feminine, aristocracy and bourgeoisie, industrial north and agricultural south (Levine 2013, p. 97).

That "union", in Caroline Levine's words, is but the interconnectedness the ecofeminism asserts on. It symbolically concludes in the journey Mr Thornton has done to Helstone. The countryside he contemplates there and the rose he brings back with him to Margaret before he proposes again marks a new beginning for a nation Mrs Gaskell strives to unite via her novel.

Throughout the novel, Mrs Gaskell displays the difference between the rural and urban landscapes. In her way to Milton, Margaret describes the contrast between the beautiful landscapes of the agrarian Helstone and Milton: "Helstone is like a village in a poem--in one of Tennyson's poems" (NS, 12). She then describes the artificial and hectic lifestyle of Helston, a town she passes by on her way to Milton. People look preoccupied. The colours of their clothes are dim and grey:

Helstone itself was one long straggling street, running parallel to the seashore. It had a character of its own, as different from the little bathing-places in the south of England as they again from those of the continent....everything looked more 'purpose like.' The country carts had more iron, and less wood and leather about the horse-gear; the people in the streets, although on pleasure bent, had yet a busy mind. The colours looked grayer—more enduring, not so gay and pretty. There were no smock-frocks, even among the country folk; they retarded motion, and were apt to catch on machinery, and so the habit of wearing them had died out. In such towns in the south of England, Margaret had seen the shopmen, when not employed in their business, lounging a little at their doors, enjoying the fresh air, and the look up and down the street. Here, if they had any leisure from customers, they made themselves business in the shop—even, Margaret fancied, to the unnecessary unrolling and rerolling of ribbons. All these differences struck upon her mind (NS 58).

Then the author describes the gradual transformation of the topography of earth and the sky caused by the Anthropocene. The influence of the factories become evident, and the rural scene withdraws completely:

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. It was all the darker from contrast with the pale gray-blue of the wintry sky; for in Heston there had

been the earliest signs of frost. Nearer to the town, the air had a faint taste and smell of smoke; perhaps, after all, more a loss of the fragrance of grass and herbage than any positive taste or smell (NS 59).

Moreover, the author condemns the air, water, and noise pollution on the tongue of the characters: 'There is a continual smell of steam, and oily machinery—and the noise is perfectly deafening.' (NS 161). The author also displays the filthy and lousy living conditions of the working class in Milton.

Religious doubt is one of the themes of the novel. This theme is rarely displayed before the Victorian era. However, the issue of shaken belief is widely displayed in the Victorian novel through grim images of poverty, bareness, and unstable feelings:

The breakdown of a sense of social wholeness. The disorienting, sometimes hellish landscapes in Charles Dickens, the anarchic passions found in novels by the Brontë sisters, the sexual scandals unwittingly perpetrated by Hardy's characters—all betray the novelist's preoccupation with the loss of spiritual stability in a morally incoherent world. A very strong element in this lament beginning in the 1840s, was the novelists' concern with deepening alienation between the various social classes, especially in 'working class novels' like those of Kingsley, Benjamin Disraeli, and Elizabeth Gaskell (Kucich, 2013, p. 100).

Mrs Gaskell demonstrates how the extreme class divisions, and hard working conditions, may shake individuals' faith. While poverty drives one to suicide, it drives the other to lose his belief in God's existence. Higgins finds difficulty in reconciling the situation with oneself. Higgins' doubts spring from his bitterness that the God who should have saved them lets them live in misery. He observes his beloved daughter Bessy deteriorating until she dies because of the careless mill owners. He finds no reason to live in misery and then moves to live in heaven or hell in the afterlife: "But Nicholas was neither an habitual drunkard nor a thorough infidel. He drank to drown care, as he would have himself expressed it: and he was infidel so far as he had never yet found any form of faith to which he could attach himself, heart and soul" (NS 225).

However, Margaret never lost her faith which she translates into moral actions. Faith is very much suggested as a means of unifying the nation with its different intellectual trends, and that is clear in the scene in which the sceptical Higgins, the intellectual Mr Hale, and the woman of Church Margaret all knelt and prayed to God.

Conclusion

In the novel, Gaskell demonstrates the impact of capitalist, political, and religious persecution on individuals. Gaskell's implied suggestions identify with ecofeminist praxis. She suggests making better choices for the welfare of both the working class and the

manufacturers that could be achieved by communication and understanding. Nevertheless, Gaskell's hero is not from the aristocracy. After all, Mr Thornton has been crushed by the system before, but he could stand again. The economic system could have crushed him again if Margaret has not helped him. The second mean suggested is education for all. Margaret used to be a teacher for those who cannot afford to go to school. Educated women are capable of challenging the system and disseminate ethics of interconnectedness and care. Higgins cultivates his mind through education. Mr Thornton though he is rich and has social status, attends classes of philosophy and has prolonged discussions with his friend Mr Hale. The third solution is faith that does not necessarily submit to the authority of the Church. Though Mr Hale leaves the Church, he is not presented as an infidel.

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