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'MOLLY GIBSON' IN ELIZABETH GASKELL'S *WIVES AND DAUGHTERS* AND 'LOUISA' IN CHARLES DICKENS'S *HARD TIMES*: A COMPARATIVE FEMINIST STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Elizabeth Gaskell (1810-1865) and Charles Dickens (1812-1870) were the contemporary novelists of the Victorian Era. While Dickens is regarded as a well-canonized author in the Victorian literary canon, Gaskell was slowly trying to make her niche in an all-male Bastian, the world of writing. In fact Gaskell had been severely reproved for being a conventional, submissive, meek and conformist writer. The contemporary feminist critics refuted any political, social and feminist significance in her work. Gaskell has been revisited in this paper through the lenses of feminism by comparing the woman character in one of her novels namely *Wives and Daughters* and the woman character in a novel written by Dickens namely *Hard Times*. This comparative feminist study intends to reinstate Gaskell as a non-conformist and as an ardent champion of woman power by identifying her innate qualities of strength and self- reliance that have always been derecognized by male dominated society.

Keywords: Elizabeth Gaskell, Charles Dickens, Feminism, Victorian Era, Non-conformist, Comparative Feminist Study

Dickens's *Hard Times (1854)* begins with the theme of Utilitarianism a theory according to which an action is right only if it conforms to the principle of utility. This furthers the discussion to Fact versus Fancy. The bastion of 'Fact', being the eminently practical, Mr. Gradgrind, and his model school teaches nothing but only Facts. Any imaginative or aesthetic subjects are eradicated from the curriculum, but analysis, deduction and mathematics are emphasized. Against this backdrop, the novel presents a woman, Louisa, Mr. Gradgrind's daughter, who is caught up in the whirl of imposed teaching of 'Facts' and remains soulless. She can understand neither the facts of life nor the sentiments of her own. In contrast to Louisa, Gaskell's Molly Gibson in *Wives and Daughters (1866)*, judges her fancy and facts with her own conscience and decides on her own course of life with aplomb. As Colby rightly says, "I will argue that Molly does indeed develop in the course of the novel –from a naïve girl to an experienced, discerning woman" (3).

Along with other siblings, Louisa is indoctrinated from childhood into her father's rigid system, "a man of fact and calculations," whose credo is "you are to be in all things regulated and governed … by fact" (Dickens 3). Constantly being lectured at and groomed in father's imposed and dry beliefs, his children are manipulated and controlled until they are almost beyond hope of achieving any personal identity and viewpoint. Once Louisa

reaches adolescence, she tries to seek out alternative realms of experience, going secretly to the circus because she "wanted to see what it was like"; but this attempt of hers is frustrated by her father. Dissatisfied with the narrow boundaries that surround her life, Louisa possesses an "air of jaded sullenness". Dickens likens her to "a light with nothing to rest upon, a fire with nothing to burn, a starved imagination keeping life in itself somehow." Deprived of any play for what Dickens calls 'Fancy', Louisa is presented as doomed to be a victim of circumstances (Dickens 157).

As against Louisa we have Molly Gibson, restless, obedient, and alive to the possibility of life. It is noticeable that Molly is motherless and her identity is first shaped by her interaction with her father. Mr. Gibson loves his daughter, but does not express his affection overtly; "his most caressing appellation for her was 'Goosey', he took a pleasure in bewildering her infant mind with his badinage" (Gaskell 63). Yet early on, Molly grows to understand her father, and although he teases her and quizzes her, she feels free to confide in him. The kind of relationship Molly has with her father challenges her intellectually and supports her emotionally; it is "half banter, half seriousness, but altogether confidential friendship" (Gaskell 64). Although, friendly in nature with Molly, Mr. Gibson is of somewhat conservative temperament believing in common Victorian attitude that too much learning is dangerous for women. He does not always recognize what his daughter needs or what she is capable of rather he underestimates his daughter's intellectual requirements. To Miss Eyre, Molly's governess, he gives the following instructions:

> Don't teach Molly too much … she must sew, and read, and write, and do her sums. Many a good woman get married with only a cross instead of her name; it's rather a diluting of mother-wit, to my fancy; but, however, we must yield to the prejudices of society, Miss Eyre, and so you may teach the child to read. (Gaskell 65)

Following Mr. Gibson's instructions, Miss Eyre tries to keep Molly back in every branch of education, with the exception of reading and writing. But unlike Louisa, restless Molly fights and argues for more and desirous education as the narrator says, "it was only by fighting and struggling hard, that bit by bit Molly persuaded her father to let her have French and drawing lessons." Doctor Gibson's resistance to his daughter's education only increases her appetite for mental stimulation, "being daunted by her father in every intellectual attempt, she read every book that came in her way almost with as much delight as if it had been forbidden" (Gaskell 65).

Motherless, Molly Gibson comes across a number of women with different temperament like Miss Eyre, Mrs. Hamley, Lady Harriet, Hyacinth Gibson, Cynthia Kirkpatrick, the Misses Brownings, Mrs. Goodenough, and Aimee Hamley; but she refuses to follow the footsteps of any of them and Molly defines herself with her own conscience. Unlike Louisa, Molly is in accord with her emotions, feelings and intellect and chooses for herself the values that will govern her own life. As she undergoes this process, she must learn to separate truth from falsehood, to recognize her own feelings, and above all, to act as she sees fit, prepared for the consequences in contrast to Louisa.

Dickens portrays Louisa as meek and passive and full of profound sense of futility and purposelessness. Though unlike Molly, Louisa is not motherless but Mrs. Grandrind's intellectual and emotional existence is effaced by her father's presence. Befuddled from all of the stern teaching her husband insists on, she dismisses her children with the injection "Go and be something logical directly" (Dickens 61). Abdicating her maternal role, Mrs. Grandrind abandons Louisa making her vulnerable to the matrimonial designs of Mr. Bounderby. Aware that Mr. Bounderby is interested in her, yet ignorant of how to discourage or refuse him, Louisa simply endures his attentions. Dickens here emphasizes Louisa's sexual defencelessness. Louisa realizes her own deficiency but is unable to correct it, as she tells her brother, "I don't know what other girls know" (Dickens 91).

Molly is quick to perceive oppression, injustice and unfairness; she is quick to defend Miss Eyre, her governess, against Betty's constant criticism. When Betty speaks impertinently to Miss Eyre herself, Molly "flew out in such a violent passion of words in defence of her silent trembling governess, that even Betty herself was daunted" (Gaskell 67). Molly respects her governess but she protests submissive acceptance of injustice, "As she matures, Molly continues to stand up for women whom she believes to be wronged. Observing her governess shows Molly one kind of feminine response to oppression, a response that she rejects" (Colby 8).

Louisa seems to be at loss of strength to protest and dumbly accepts everything that comes her way like a robot devoid of feelings, emotions and conscience. When Mr. Gradgrind communicates with her about the marriage proposal, Louisa remains passive and unaffected. She submissively accedes to her father's instructions:

> As you have been accustomed to consider every other question, simply as one of tangible Fact … Now, what are the Facts of this case? You are, we will say in round numbers, twenty years of age; Mr. Bounderby is, we will say in round numbers, fifty. There is some disparity in your respective years, but in your means and positions there is none; on the contrary, there is a great suitability. (Dickens, 64)

The strongest attachment Louisa feels is to her brother and it is her brother's wish that she accepts Mr. Bounderby that decides Louisa's response to his marriage proposal. Alienated from the emotional resonance of such decision, Louisa considers her marriage from a purely practical point of view, reasoning that, since life is short, "while it lasts, I would wish to do the little I can and the little I am fit for. What does it matter" (Dickens, 64).

In his depiction of Louisa, Dickens implies that intellect is a harmful burden for a woman and that her natural realm is the realm of feeling. As Louisa's sorrow of being restrained from the free play of fancy and her inability to estimate the emotional aspect of life is expressed in the following lines:

> 'What do I know, father,' said Louisa in her quiet manner, 'of tastes and fancies; of aspirations and affections; of all that part of my nature in which such light things might have been nourished? What escape have I had from problems that could be demonstrated, and realities that could be grasped?' As she said it, she unconsciously closed her hand, as if upon a solid object, and slowly opened it as though she were releasing dust or ash. (Dickens, 66)

Louisa's lack of emotional development alienates her from others and from her own self. In a comment to the circus child, Sissy Jupe, Louisa reveals her feeling of perpetual estrangement, "You are more useful to my mother, and more pleasant with her than I can ever be ... You are pleasanter to yourself, than I am to myself" (Dickens, 67).

Molly fantastically copes up with her intellectual side and emotional side; each helps strengthen the other. Curious in all kinds of knowledge when Molly is visiting at Hamley Hall, Roger stimulates Molly's interests in nature by setting out his microscopic and some objects he has collected as well as by offering her scientific books. Later Mr. Gibson comments on the books Molly reads "such deep books—all about facts and figures" (Gaskell, 307). Even scholars are impressed with Molly. When Molly is introduced to the learned Lord Hollingford at all, she makes a favourable impression on the scholarly man, who exclaims, "What a charming little lady! ... Most girls of her age are so difficult to talk to; but she is intelligent and full of interest in all sorts of sensible things; well read, too she was up in Le Regne Animal." (Gaskell, 339)

Louisa is able neither to love nor to establish an empathic relation to others; she complains of having 'unmanageable thoughts'. But Molly has the power to love truly and deeply and to sustain her emotions. Cynthia, Molly's stepsister, possesses an "unconscious power of fascination" (Gaskell, 254). Nevertheless she lacks the capacity to love deeply, telling Molly, "I've not the gift of loving; ... I can respect, and I fancy I can admire, and I can like, but I never feel carried off my feet by love for any one" (Gaskell, 422). Despite her emotional disengagement, Cynthia deliberately and knowingly accedes to the marriage game, eliciting three serious proposals from men whom she does not love. In contrast, Molly feels deeply and is loyal to those with whom she forms close bonds. Molly's genuine grief over Mrs. Hamley's death makes Cynthia conscious of her own deficiency and prompts her remark to Molly, "I wish I could love people as you do, Molly" (Gaskell, 257).

Unlike Gaskell Dickens presents the fellow woman characters as hindrance to the advancement of the female protagonist. Louisa's own mother leads her daughter to the vulnerability and victimization to intellectual and physical incarceration of patriarchal system. While Mrs. Sparsit tries to spoil her life by inducing Louisa's fall to adultery, "Harthouse's pursuit of Louisa is presented through the voyeurism of Mrs. Sparsit who became an avid spectator to the process of seduction. She observes Louisa, in the words of Jacqueline Rose, with a

'relentless and punishing scrutiny,' in the course of which the whole concept of a woman's sexual "fall" becomes reified" (Michie 129).

Inexperienced with romance, Louisa is also ill-equipped to handle the sophisticated James Harthhouse. Realizing that the way to get to Louisa is through her brother, Harthouse pretends to be concerned about Tom's gambling debts, as well as his ungracious treatment of his generous sister. Louisa, unaware that she is being manipulated, begins to respond to Harthouse, who finally takes advantage of Bounderby's absence to declare himself her lover. Uncertain about her feelings, Louisa again abnegates her emotions and refuses Harthouse and returns to her father. Here Louisa fails to defend her self-respect and innocence; instead takes submissive stand to plead guilty as a 'fallen', "she is represented as "fallen," both because of her literal position and her description of herself" (Michie 130). After she throws herself into her father's arms; he tightened his hold in time to prevent her sinking on the floor, but she cried out in a terrible voice, "I shall die if you hold me! Let me fall upon the ground!" and he laid her down there and saw "the pride of his heart and the triumph of his system lying in an insensible heap, at his feet" (Dickens 204).

Molly is self-assertive to correct her elders when she sees that the relationship with Roger is being misconstrued, although Molly and Roger do later develop romantic feelings for each other, at this point they only share a deep friendship, based on common interests. This conversation with Miss Browning compels Molly to define for herself and to articulate for others the nature of her relationship with Roger Hamley. In so doing Molly separates herself from the narrow vision of the Brownings, who assume that any interaction between a man and woman implies a romantic involvement. Male-female friendship allows for the possibility of a relationship between men and women that was not based on courtship, courtship being the principal vocation of girls of Molly's age and class. When she finds Mrs. Gibson's attempt at manipulating the marriage of Cynthia and Roger repugnant she criticizes Cynthia's passive cooperation with her mother's plans. Molly says to herself that she, "would have resisted; have gone out, for instance, when she was expected to stay home; or have lingered in the garden when a long country walk was planned" (Gaskell 390). In response to a neighbour's suggestion that Mrs. Gibson should turn her attention to Molly next, Molly responds, "half angry, half laughing; 'when I want to be married, I'll not trouble mamma. I'll look out for myself'" (Gaskell 681).

Gaskell always highlights the role of women in the advancement of women in her novel by stressing female solidarity across and within classes. Molly is also surrounded by women who provide the kind of guidance that she needs to develop into a clear-sighted, strong, capable woman. Mrs. Hamley, Aimee Hamley, and Lady Harriet Cumnor all impart strong support and positive influences on the development of Molly. Nancy Chodorow has argued that "girls who are surrounded by a strong network of female relatives and female friends tend to develop a strong sense of selfhood. With the support of caring women, Molly achieves self-knowledge and self-confidence" (Colby 42).

A comparative feminist study of 'Moli Gibosn' in Gaskell's *Wives and Daughters* and 'Louisa' in Dickens *Hard Times* challenges the views of the critics like W. R. Greg, David Cecil, Raymond Williams and Arnold Kettle about Gaskell as a second rank and a meek writer with a feeble hold on structure and characterization. This study also exposes the relatively more conventional attitude towards woman characters in the novels written by highly recognized Victorian novelist like Charles Dickens. A comparison with her contemporary well canonized authors helped to redefine Gaskell's place in the Victorian literary canon by exploring a strong feminist dimension in her novel.

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