

## Search for Female Identity in an Urban Environment in Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* and Mrs. Gaskell's *Cranford*

Thackeray'nın *Vanity Fair* ve Mrs. Gaskell'in *Cranford* adlı Romanlarında  
Viktorya Dönemi İngiltere'si Şehir Bölgesinde Kadın Kimliğini Arama

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### Abstract

The Industrial Revolution has always preserved its significance not only in economic sphere but also in social and literary arenas where it has created some important changes in the lives of people. The very first thing it has affected is the living areas of people who have migrated from rural areas to the industrial and urban environments in order to find good jobs for better living conditions. The more people have worked in the new environments, the more they have learned about the new living standards and cultural differences. Thus, it is inevitable for this migration not to cause some social changes in the domestic and working conditions of women especially in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Victorian England in which it would create a kind of awareness of individuality in the minds of females who would ask for their rights politically through the Married Women's Property Acts of 1870 and 1882 that would be the recognition of the women politically and socially in a patriarchal society where women would have rights to own and direct their own financial incomes and properties by themselves in their own rights without the interventions of their husbands. These striking changes have also reflected in literature by various English novelists, especially by Thackeray in *Vanity Fair* and Mrs. Gaskell in *Cranford* from different perspectives. In relation to this argument, the major aim of this article is to show the rural women's struggle for survival morally, socially and economically in an urban environment through the literary works of two eminent authors of this period.

**Keywords:** The Industrial Revolution, Thackeray, *Vanity Fair*, Mrs. Gaskell, *Cranford*, Victorian England, Female identity.

### Öz

Endüstri Devrimi her zaman sadece ekonomik alanda değil insanların yaşamlarında önemli değişimlere yol açtığı sosyal ve edebi alanlarda etkisini göstermiştir. Bu etkilerden ilki daha iyi bir yaşam şartlarına sahip olmak amacıyla iş bulmak için köy hayatından, endüstrileşen ve kentselleşen şehir hayatına geçiş yapan insanların yaşam alanlarındaki değişimlerdir. İnsanlar, yeni çevrelerde çalıştıkça yeni yaşam şartları ve kültürel farklılıklar hakkında bilgi sahibi olmuşlardır. Ayrıca, bu göç kadınlarda bireyselliğin farkındalığı ve haklarını talep etmeleri konusunda özellikle 19. Yüzyıl Viktorya Dönemi İngiltere'sinde gerek ev gerekse çalışma hayatları üzerinde çok etkili olmuştur. Kadınların sosyal durumlarındaki bu yeni gelişmeler, içinde yaşadıkları bu ataerkil toplumda politik olarak da kabul görmüş, Evli Kadınların Mal Edinme Kanunları (1870 ve 1882), kadın haklarını savunan, onlara kendi haklarını ve eşlerinin müdahalesi olmadan mallarını yönetmelerini de kapsayan bir takım hakların Viktorya Dönemi kadınlarına verilmesini sağlamıştır. Bu çarpıcı değişimler edebiyatta Thackeray'nin *Vanity Fair* ve Mrs. Gaskell'in *Cranford*'una kadar pek çok dönem yazarının eserlerinde de görülmektedir. Diğer bir deyişle, bu çalışma, Thackeray ve Gaskell'in romanlarında, kırsal kesimden gelip şehir bölgelerine yerleşen kadınların, sosyal, ahlaki ve ekonomik yaşam savaşlarının bir incelemesini içerecektir.

**Anahtar sözcükler:** Endüstri Devrimi, Thackeray, *Vanity Fair*, Mrs Gaskell, Viktorya Dönemi İngilteresi, *Cranford*, Kadın Kimliği

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Historically, the Industrial Revolution in England, especially from the late eighteenth century onwards led to migrations from the rural areas to the industrial and urban centres. Inevitably, this had a lasting impact, especially, on the domestic and working conditions of the women who thus originally came from a rural background and were resettled in an urban environment to which they tried hard to adapt themselves. Partly due to their new economic circumstances under which they were able to earn a living, and also partly due to their growing consciousness of their inferior status in a male dominated society, they came to be aware both of their female and social identity, which essentially conflicted with the Victorian patriarchal and moral values and norms to which they had been subjected. This new development in the status of women was recognized by the political body, and there was a rising recognition of the rights of women, which was given expression through the Victorian enactment of the Married Women's Property Acts of 1870 and 1882. In literature, the new condition of women in search of their identity in an urban setting was reluctantly problematised by the Victorian writers in their writings from Thackeray Mrs. Gaskell. Moreover, J.S. Mill openly and polemically attacked the subjugation of women in Victorian society and strongly defended their rights. Given this broad context, this article is mainly concerned with an analysis of the growing female awareness of self-identity in a new urban environment as reflected in the works of the novelists above. In other words, the rural women's struggle for survival socially, morally and economically in an urban setting will be discussed with reference to Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* and Mrs. Gaskell's *Cranford*.

To go back to history, Christopher Hill, in the introduction of his book *Reformation to Industrial Revolution*, calls the time between 1530 and 1780 as "the period of social transition" (Hill, 1969, s.20) in England. This means that this transformation as a result of industrialization begins earlier than it is assumed to be. In 1530s, majority of Englishmen and women lived in the rural households in which they felt economically self-sufficient. They were the people who wore skins, sackcloth, and canvas or leather clothes and ate black bread. These things were so natural and did not create any inferiority complex for them as they knew nothing more than those things. But, approximately two hundred years later, by the 1730s, things would change and England would experience a great transformation by the Industrial Reformation and factory system which would enable people to live in brick houses, wear cotton clothes, and eat white bread. Plates and cutlery were accessible even to the lower class. This early industrialisation period not only made some drastic conversions in the lives of people but also brought along some of the very important factors that paved way to the identity formation of the rural class women who came to the countries as a result of the migrations due to the job facilities to the countries in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Average income statistics, done at the beginning of the century show that "more than half of the population was under the bare necessities of life" (Hill, 1969, s. 11) 2.825.000 out of total population of 5.550.500 lived "close to subsistence level" (Hill, 1969, s. 17); their incomes were around from 6£ to 20£ per year per family. There were also 1.990.000 people with incomes between 30£ and 60£ per year ( Hill, 1969, s. 18). None of these incomes would allow people to live in good conditions and lead them to move to countries with the hope of finding better living conditions. This migration played significant changes not only in the lives of men, but also in the lives of women in the name of individualization and identity formation. "The old household duties of spinning and weaving, making bread, beer, candles and soap and many others, were no longer necessary, since most necessities were now manufactures and could be bought at shops and markets" (Watt, 1967, s.44). Thus, it would not be wrong to state that the Industrial Revolution in England changed the basic way that people conducted their lives. No longer was the population more rural than urban.

The transportation industry exploded, and it was not really difficult to travel or move goods from one part of the country to another. For the first time there was easier access to people beyond the home village. The explosion of new factories and the mechanization of jobs inside those factories destabilized British social mores. Machines destabilized the way people made their living. No longer was the family a basic unit of production, and women went out to work in factories, instead of working at home. These changes had enormous effects on the balance of power between the sexes. As Victoria J. Chance clarifies “everyone was afraid of the effects of all these changes in society; people were afraid of that women were going to abandon their homes and to desert their children” (Chance, 2015, s.2). As a result, this change broke the dominant belief which emphasized the fact that women should be under the control and surveillance of men. Females were no longer bound by someone else’s definition of them, and were allowed to develop their own interests or to make meaning of their own life. Females tried to find and formulate their own identities by themselves. Accordingly, using the search for female identity in an urban environment in Victorian England, two important novels will be analysed: Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair* and Mrs. Gaskell’s *Cranford*.

In *Vanity Fair*, Thackeray creates a different and radical female character, Becky Sharp, who is searching for her own-self within a sick society which urges her to be a deceitful character to achieve her aim that is to be rich and have a status within that society. To achieve her aim, every way is possible. Becky Sharp who is “portrayed as a strong-willed and cunning young woman determined to make her way in society” (14) is shown in her own circumstances in poverty and disgrace. Different from the other characters in this article, Matty and Deborah in *Cranford*, she does not come from a mere rural background but a lower middle class. Her father is

an artist and had given lessons of drawing ... a pleasant companion ... with a great prosperity for running into debt, and a partiality for the tavern. When he was drunk, he used to beat his wife and daughter; and the next morning, with a headache, he would rail at the world for its neglect of his ... abuse.  
(Thackeray, 1963, s. 13)

On the other hand, Becky’s mother is a French opera girl, an artist. Compared to other females coming from the rural background, she should have been luckier in life, but her being orphaned at an early age, leads her to experience poverty and ill sides of life. Becky is a hero, living in mud but strong enough to survive the cruelties of the society. If she can survive this, she can survive anything. Being all alone in the world turns her to be the most ambitious and demanding female character searching for class mobility and her own identity through several tricks and to go against the established norms of the Victorian values. Her being taught the virtues of a young English gentlewoman at Miss Pinkerton’s Academy does not make her humble but greedy. Miss Pinkerton gives the definition of a gentlewoman in her recommendation letter written for Amelia Sedly who represents all the best qualities of a typical Victorian young lady. Miss Pinkerton describes her as:

a young lady not unworthy to occupy a fitting position in their polished and refined circle. Those virtues which characterise the young English gentlewoman, ... whose *industry* and *obedience* have endeared her to her instructors, and whose delightful sweetness of temper has charmed her aged and her youthful companions.

In music, in dancing, in orthography ... in every variety of embroidery and needlework, she will be found to have realised her friends' *fondest wishes*.  
(Thackeray, 1963, s.6)

Thus, it would not be wrong to state that in the name of Amelia, all the qualities that an idealized woman should have are presented. According to the norms of that time, young women were expected to be the embodiment of ideal female in the society with all the activities that were associated to them. The adventures of a low class aspirant to climb up the social ladder and acquire new identity as a gentleman or gentlewoman constituted mostly the plot of these novels. Fashionable places, like the spa town of Bath, were the venues where search for a new identity by mingling with members of high society or through marriages arranged with them became a serious concern among those who were trying to climb the social ladder. (Gilmour, 1986, s.4). The Victorian novelists not only provided his readers the social and economic forces which began to rise as a result of the Industrial Revolution and put the wealthy English merchant class into conflict with the landed gentry, but also accomplished the social and cultural doctrines which could not be questioned and must be obeyed without any uncertainty like virtue, morality and marriage (Gilmour, 1986, s.6). Even the table manners, clothing and decoration techniques had already been presented for the female readers through the epistolary technique in which the novelists had the freedom to create different characters being in communication directly with the reader.

It may initially appear that Becky, being just the opposite of Amelia, was a stereotype of a woman who challenged the established social norms, tried to form her identity and become a gentlewoman through several deceitful ways and deeply penalized by society. Her heart-breaking experience all through her life could be considered as an admonition for the young ladies who were in search of their identities free from the restrictions. It cannot be denied that she made poor choices, but the deeper problem was that she was never given any choices by the society. An honest appraisal of her options puts her immorality into perspective. Surely heroes should not lie, cheat, and manipulate, but Becky is stained by the Industrial society, dirtied by the filth in which she lives.

As A. E. Dyson notes, *Vanity Fair* is a backward, perverse society: "Almost every sin in *Vanity Fair* can be traced beyond personal weakness, to the fundamental laws of money and class; to fawn upon the rich and kick the poor is a Christian law of the land" (82). It could be argued that this sick society was created by the innate moral weakness of people. However, people are sickened by the society, and that the picture of human nature in *Vanity Fair* is not as bleak as it might seem.

On the other hand, a female perspective toward the same issue is presented by Elisabeth Gaskell. 1840s which were the times when Gaskell wrote one of her most prominent works, were the years of change. In the name of the social revolution and industrial progress the old order underwent a transformation, the most visible signs of which were the Chartist Riots of 1848 and the growth of great cities (Gilmour, 1986, s.33). The suburbs began to devour the countryside. The small towns and villages, which form the pattern of provincial England, maintained independence against the social change and preferred to be clung to the old order. Men and women living in the country side had little faith and less interest in the Industrial Revolution. Within these circumstances, with the invitation of Charles Dickens, Elisabeth Gaskell began to write a series of articles, which was to be published three years later as a book with the title of *Cranford* to *Household Words* (Gilmour, 1986, s. 39).

*Cranford* represents the whole microcosm of the small country town and life, and examines the manners and life style of a certain group of people living in the same society. With this novel, Mrs. Gaskell introduces the world of women living in Cranford, their points of views and social panorama. As Felicia Bonaparte clearly states “nowhere in all of Gaskell’s fiction is the idea that women are embodied as fully as in *Cranford*. Generally, Gaskell does not physically isolate what she sees as the male and female worlds. Most of her settings mix the two. But, in *Cranford*, she creates a place where that is entirely female” (Bonaparte, 2010, s.155). To make contrasts more vivid, Mrs. Gaskell presents Drumble, which is a large manufacturing town, concerned with business and money. Both Cranford and Drumble are defined as exclusively male domains in which money is the central figure. But, it is not strange to observe that men and women have different attitudes to the image of money, financial issues and love. The simple formula is that women need love; men have to give it. Since the possession of love belongs to male, so is the possession of money. That is why the Cranford ladies know nothing of money and business. The most earnest and serious business for these ladies was the domestic issues which are the symbols of non-intellect and require wit. Whenever a lady dares to deal with money, she fails in Cranford. So is the heroine, Miss Mathy, in the novel, who invests her money by herself without taking any advice from a male and inevitably fails as the bank she chooses for this investment goes bankrupt. With this decision, Miss Mathy embodies the female free spirit who wants to achieve her own identity free from male domination. She is courageous enough to accept the negative consequences of her free will, even the bankruptcy. Though Matty is the symbol of “patience, humility, and sweetness” (Gaskell, 1954, s.158) which were certainly the social duties and responsibilities imposed on women in such an era, interestingly enough, she is the one who has different aim that is to have her freedom and form her identity in life. She expresses her ideals with her words as: “I was never ambitious, but I thought I could manage a house (my father used to call me as his right hand), and I was always so fond of children” (Gaskell, 1954, s.128).

In the Victorian novels, it is a technique to create an anti-hero to compare and contrast the hero or heroine’s basic characteristics. So is Deborah, Mathy’s sister, who represents male characteristics and dreams of getting with an archdeacon so that she could write his charges. Even her clothing is described in male terms. She prefers to wear “a cravat” (Gaskell, 1954, s.13) “bonnet like jockey cap” (Gaskell, 1954, s.15), and also a hat that looks like a “helmet” (Gaskell, 1954, s.21). So, she can be resembled to woman warrior, an Amazon who fights against the men in a male dominated society. She has military manners that make her look like “a dragon” (Gaskell, 1954, s. 143). To confirm her masculinity, Deborah prefers to read Dr. Johnson to Dickens as “Dr. Johnson embodies intelligence, wit, order and reason, which are dominant in men’s world where as Dickens embodies imagination, spontaneity, and feeling which are more prone to be seen in a woman’s world” (Bonaparte, 2010, s.157).

Being a more dominant and ambitious character, Deborah tyrannizes over Mathy and acts as if she were her mentor, a male person who is responsible from her. But, slowly, Mathy manages to free herself, in her actions. Her acts of independence are small and insignificant. She summons the courage to pick out the silk for a new gown she is to make, and the narrator says “this is the first time in her life she has ever chosen anything of consequence for herself” (Gaskell, 1954, s.145). Interestingly enough, though Matty, who is more independent from many aspects, is seen more subservient to her sister Deborah. She is not only as tied as her sister to the norms of the age and she is prejudiced neither towards people nor society, but she also shows her empathy to Lady Glenmire who marries to Mr. Hoggins, a surgeon whom nobody approves and everybody considers him vulgar. Miss Matty

is the first person to congratulate them without criticizing and presenting prejudiced attitudes. In fact, her behaviour compared to her previous actions is really courageous as she goes against the socially accepted norms. In the name of Matty Mrs. Gaskell, as opposed to many critics, tries to show the humanitarian values of a young lady. Her work gives more credit to heart rather than to head. Her major aim is neither to satirize nor criticize but to show the human values. Through her characters and situations, she conveys her ideas and leaves the decision to the reader.

In conclusion, it can certainly be deduced that *Cranford* is a novel written by a woman who not only questions and but also resists to both the male literary circle and male domination in society. Yet, Gaskell is not as challenging and radical as George Eliot who can be called as a reformer and nonconformist in this sense. In George Eliot's *The Middlemarch*, Dorothea is a real radical character compared to Beth, Amelia, Deborah and Matty. Lucy Stebbings suggests that Mrs. Gaskell is a true Victorian. She shares the general approval of self-sacrifices and feels pity for the girl who goes wrong. She holds ideas of responsibility of her generation and she has also ethical preoccupations which would conform to the morals of the era. This may be one of the reasons why she ends her novel in a way all the female characters need male partners in the society of *Cranford*. The second reason may be that male and females complete each other and should not live apart but together preserving their own identities. Last but not least, *Cranford* is a book written by one of the most eminent Victorian woman novelists who really portrays the female characters searching for their own identities and also trying to fight like Amazons in a male dominated society to break the chains of their own minds.

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