

Gaskell's Questioning Of The Victorian Class System In *North And South*¹

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Abstract

In this article, the Victorian class system will be analysed with reference to Elisabeth Gaskell's *North and South*. It is a well known fact that in the Victorian age, the class boundaries are very strict. Hence, the examples of social mobility is very rare and nearly impossible. Furthermore, in this age, the gap between the working-class and the middle-class is very wide and this results in protests on the side of the workers. Hence, many workers come together and build trade unions in order to protest the unequal distribution of wealth in the society (see Victorian England and Class and Class Consciousness). As mentioned above, the Victorian society is a class-conscious society and in this article, Elisabeth Gaskell's reaction as a Victorian towards the Victorian class system (to biased attitudes in her society, which she very successfully reflects) in her novel, namely *North and South* will be analysed in detail.

Key Words:

Victorian class system, Elisabeth Gaskell, *North and South*, trade unions, workers' rights, the English working-class, the English middle-class.

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Gaskell'in Kuzey ve Gneydeki Victoryan Sınıf Sistemini Sorgulaması

Özet

İngiltere'deki katı sosyal sınıf sistemi ve bilinci her zaman arařtırmacıların ilgi odağı olmuřtur. Viktoryan İngiltere'sinde de iřçi sınıfı ile burjuvazi sınıfı arasında çok büyük bir uçurum vardı. Bu nedenle, insanların sınıf deęiřtirme hakkı yok denecek kadar azdı. Ayrıca, gelir daęılımındaki eřiřsizlik ve adaletsizlik gene bu dönemde iřçi sendikalarının kurularak, iřçilerin dengesiz gelir daęılımını protesto etmelerine sebep olmuřtur (bakınız Victorian England ve Class and Class Consciousnes). Yukarıda bahsi geçen katı Viktoryan sosyal sınıf sistemi ve katı Viktoryan sosyal sınıf bilinci Elisabeth Gaskell'ın North and South adlı romanında ayrıntılı bir biçimde ustalıkla kaleme alınmıřtır. Bu nedenle, bu çalıřmada, Elisabeth Gaskell'ın North and South adlı romanından örneklemelele Viktoryan toplumundaki sınıf sistemi ve sınıf bilinci konusu ele alınarak, Elisabeth Gaskell'ın Viktoryan sınıf sistemine olan tutumu incelenecektir.

Anahtar Sözcükler:

Victoryan sosyal sınıf sistemi, Elisabeth Gaskell, North and South, iřçi sendikaları, iřçi hakları, İngiliz iřçi sınıfı, İngiliz burjuvazisi.

In this study, the social and cultural aspects of the Victorian society will be analysed through Gaskell's critical eye in her novel, *North and South*. Moreover, her suggestions for change or her concept of an ideal society will be provided as a conclusion. In the Victorian era, there is a great gap between the working-class and the middle-class, that is, between people with nothing to eat and drink on the one side and, the ones to enjoy plenty of drink and food on the other. To protest this unequal distribution of wealth in the society, workers begin to go on strikes in industrial cities such as the one that Thornton, the protagonist and the millowner in *North and South*, faces in the novel in Milton city as he cuts down the wages of his workers because of the pressure of competition coming from America. Moreover, he does not explain to his workers the reasons that laid behind this cut, the problem gets worsened. So, although Thornton refuses to give an explanation to the workers, he explains to Margaret, the woman he loves, his reasons for doing so: "Do you give your servants reasons for your expenditure, or your economy in the use of your own money? We, the owners of capital, have a right to choose what we will do with it" (Gaskell, 468). Yet, eventhough Margaret is also a capital owner, she offers communication and dialogue as a solution: "Mr Thornton", says Margaret, "go down this instant, if you are not a coward. 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" (Gaskell, 465). She also tries to explain the situation of the capital holders and farmers to the workers during the strike, and tries to build empathy between the two classes;

Suppose they could not, or would not do the last; they could not give up their farms all in a minute, however much they might wish to do so; but they would have no hay, nor corn to sell that year; and where would the money come from to pay the labourers' wages the next? (Gaskell, s.156)

The main reason of the conflicts between the capital holders and workers can be the desire for making more money. The capital holders or the bosses want to give low wages to the workers to increase their profit, while the workers want to get satisfactory or high wages without considering the financial crisis and without giving any thought to whether the employers could afford high wages at times of financial crises. Nicholas Higgins' words to Margaret in the novel reveals this conflict:

“Why, yo' see, there is five or six masters who have set themselves again' paying the wages they've been paying these two years past, and flourishing upon, and getting richer upon. And now they come to us, and say we are to take less. And we won't. We'll just clem them to death first; and see who will work for 'em then. They'll have killed the goose that laid 'em the golden eggs, I reckon”. (Gaskell, s.157)

During the strike there are not only conflicts between the capitalholders and workers but also between the capitalholders themselves. For instance Slickson tends to yield to the workers' wishes at first as he is overstocked.

And there are other problems like the ones below and therefore Mr. Thornton lives difficult times:

He was trying to understand where he stood; what damage the strike had done him. A good deal of his capital was locked up in new and expensive machinery; and he had also bought cotton largely, with a view to some great orders which he had in hand. The strike had thrown him terribly behindhand, as to the completion of these orders. Even with his own accustomed and skilled workpeople, he would have had some difficulty in fulfilling his engagements; as it was, the incompetence of the Irish hands, who had to be trained to their work, at a time requiring unusual activity, was a daily annoyance. (Gaskell, s.320)

In other words, Gaskell shows the two sides of the coin; the conditions of the working-class people and capital holders. In order to do so, she points out the huge difference between the houses of the working class and the capital holders. In *North and South*, the comfortable and luxurious home of Thornton, the millowner and the houses of the Boucher family and Higgins family are juxtaposed. For instance, the Boucher family consists of six children and yet they share their house with another family, that is “two families in one house” (Gaskell, s.340). Also, Richard D. Altick in his book, *Victorian People and Ideas* expresses that “[l]arge families, even two or three families, occupied a single room” (43).

Besides, the Higgins family has also poor housing conditions and inevitably it disturbs Betty's health. This fact is also revealed out in "Chadwick's Report on Sanitary Conditions" and interesting results are announced; "that the annual loss of life from filth and bad ventilation are greater than the loss from death or wounds in any wars in which the country has been engaged in modern times" ("Chadwick's Report on Sanitary Conditions").

Apart from bad housing conditions, workers' nutrition is deficient as well in the Victorian age. In industrial places like Manchester, workers and their families are said to be living mostly on bad tea, oatmeal and potatoes ("Standards of Living of the Working Classes during the Industrial Revolution"). Sometimes things go worse and tea begins to take the place of dinner when a proper hot meal could not be afforded, since the caffeine and sugar in the hot tea give the impression that one has eaten something. Meanwhile, "malnutrition" becomes a big problem among the working class as the primary sources of nutrition are bread, potatoes and strong tea.

Looking at from another perspective, it can also be argued that tea is drunk in a different cultural context by the working class than the middle-class. It is a luxury commodity for the middle-class, whereas it is a daily necessity for the working class relying upon the fact that it gives energy and it is cheaper than alcohol and therefore a substitute for it ("Working class and tea").

Not only their food and houses are different from each other but also their leisure activities are also different. Thus in many middle-class households,

particularly in the earlier part of Victorian's reign, cards, dancing and the theatre are forbidden as an influence of seventeenth century Puritanism. If pleasure is sinful, that is mainly because it comes between a man and his work since "work lays at the centre of middle-class life" due to the fact that without a work a man cannot rise and without a work he could not hold his position. The effects of this middle-class values can also be seen in Thornton's behaviours; "I believe that this suffering, ...of the people of Milton, is but the natural punishment of dishonestly-enjoyed pleasure, at some former period of their lives. I do not look on self-indulgent people as worthy of my hatred; I simply look upon them with contempt for their poorness of character" (Gaskell, s.98) And to those prohibitions, Victorians add a new one; "temperance" ("Temperance"), which means drinking no alcoholic drinks.

On the other hand, going to pubs and drinking as a leisure activity is very common among the workers to have a break and rest from the daily work. This habit of workers is criticized by the middle-class people and they tend to call the workers as "drunkards" without considering their own role in increasing the social burdens upon the shoulders of the workers. To exemplify this, in *North and South* workers begin to drink more at times of strike. And then, they become notorious for being rude and drunkards. For example, with her rural background, Margaret is at first shocked at the manners of the urban working-class. As she goes out on the streets of Milton on her errands, she falls in with the factory workers, who "came rushing along, with bold, fearless faces, and loud laughs and jests" (Gaskell, s.110). The narrator says, "the tones of their unrestrained voices, and their carelessness of all common rules of street politeness, frightened Margaret a

little at first" (Gaskell, s.110). For the first time, she is exposed to casual comments about her appearance, and naturally her first response is indignation at being treated rudely and vulgarly. Yet her friendship with Nicholas Higgins, a workman and his daughter Bessy helps her understand the manners of the working-people and Margaret understands that workers do not have any evil intention when they comment about her appearance but they are only out-spoken people. Meanwhile, Margaret has adopted "factory slang" and therefore Mrs. Hale accuses Margaret of vulgarity. Yet, Margaret's answer reveals how thoroughly she has come to understand the language of the people she visits: "And if I live in a factory town, I must speak factory language when I want it. Why, mamma, I could astonish you with a great many words you never heard in your life" (Gaskell,). This demonstrates that even the way of a person's speaking and the words s/he uses are a sign of class to which s/he belongs to. In contrast to the working class people, the middle-class people are reserved, kind and moderate and therefore they do not express their love or hatred, likes and dislikes openly.

Another indicator of one's class is dining and it is assumed that creatures of the inferior races eat and drink; only man dines. Moreover, dining is perceived as the privilege of civilisation: The rank which people occupy in the grand scale may be measured by their way of taking their meals, as well as by their way of treating their women. Mrs Beeton, whose *Book of Household Management* was published in 1861, suggests that "[d]ining is the privilege of civilisation ... The nation which knows how to dine has learnt the leading lesson of progress" ("The Victorian Dining Room").

These sentences reflect the prevalent attitude in the Victorian society and only towards the end of the novel and after going through a transformation, Thornton begins to eat with his workers in *North and South*. In doing so, he tries to soften the class-boundaries between the workers and himself. On the other hand, there are scenes of dining and parties in *North and South* to which Margaret attends and to which Bessy, a working class girl, remains only a spectator due to the prevalent class-discriminations.

In other words, the upper-class does not entirely give up pleasing themselves even when the influence of puritan morality is at its height. In the novel, Margaret goes to dining and parties and she wears beautiful dresses and when she thinks about the conditions of the poor, she feels guilty of being enjoying a party and feels shame at wearing silk clothes and so on. She says to Bessy, “[y]ou’ll make me feel wicked and guilty in going to this dinner” (Gaskell, s.149). On the other hand, Bessy tries to relieve Margaret’s anxiety by referring to divine-order and accepting the class-distinctions as a divine-will; “Some’s pre-elected to sumptuous feasts, and purple and fine linen,- may be yo’re on’em. Others toil and moil all their lives long” (Gaskell, s.149) . However, Margaret rejects this idea and says “[i]t won’t be division enough, in that awful day, that some of us have been beggars here, and some of us have been rich,-we shall not be judged by that poor accident, but by our faithful following of Christ’ (Gaskell, s.149). She makes a pious comment about the social hierarchy, and it should be noticed that looking at life from a religious point of view or at least pretending to do so is an upper-class quality. Yet she leads a comfortable life and knows the manners of the upper-class well. It is a life of comfort, for instance when Aunt Shaw goes out, a servant accompanies her to “take care of shawls and air-cushions”

(Gaskell, s.368). In this scene, the upper-class luxury and the working-class poverty is juxtaposed very strikingly; on the one side, there is Mrs. Shaw, who pays visits with her maid in a coach (since the sign of being a member of the upper-class is having at least one servant and coach is a sign of upper-class) and on the other side, there is the Higgins family who even lacks personal and environmental hygiene in working-class ghettos. Therefore, it can be claimed that “being fond of luxurious commodities” is an aspect of the Victorian upper-class. During the financial crisis after the strike, another aspect of Victorian upper-class culture can be deduced, that is “the importance of keeping up appearances”, for instance when Thornton is nearly bankrupt he does not avoid spending too much money for his sister’s, Fanny’s wedding. In *North and South* it is clearly pointed out; “Thornton had made too grand a wedding of it [his sister’s wedding], considering he had lost a deal by the strike, and had had to pay so much for the failure of his contracts” (Gaskell, s.404). From this passage it can be inferred that how the wedding ceremony is carried out is a sign of the class and one should not avoid spending money for these occasions, regardless of how much one is in debt, as “keeping up appearances” is crucial to preserve one’s place in the social-strata.

On the other hand, after going through the strike, Thornton begins to gain an insight into workers’ lives and builds a room for workers to have their dinner and to improve their health and hence has the opportunity of cultivating some “intercourse” with the hands/workers beyond paying wages to them. Humanized by Margaret, he begins to work at improving his relationship with his workers. In the beginning of the novel, his workpeople call him

what the Bible names a 'hard man'(Gaskell, s.467-468). According to the workers, Thornton's, the employer's failings are "pride, severity and want of feeling" but Margaret's influence converts Thornton to philanthropy. Moreover, as it is mentioned before, he begins to eat with his workers together, which is a sign of sincerity and friendship. It is also noticeable that he does not go to the dining-room without an invitation in order to "leave [workers] free" (Gaskell, s.364) and only when his workers invite him to eat together, he joins to them, "...but I saw that the men would be hurt if... so I went in, and I never made a better dinner in my life. I told them how much I'd enjoyed it" (364). He walks in the footsteps of Robert Owen; in 1771, Owen built schools for child workers and tried to raise their living conditions by reducing working hours and he wanted fair treatment for the workers ("Utopian Socialism"). Like Owen, Thornton begins to think the welfare of his workers and therefore he "builds a dining-room for the hands" (Gaskell, s.362) as he can not be indifferent to the sufferings of the workers:

So, as I [Thornton] happened to be passing near his [Higgins'] house one day, I just went there about some trifling payment to be made; and I saw such a miserable black frizzle of a dinner-a greasy cinder of meat, as first set me a-thinking... So I cooly took the part assigned to me,...I buy in the provisions wholesale, and provide a fitting matron or cook. (Gaskell, s.363)

Later on, in the conversation between Thornton and Mr. Bell, the Oxford man, it is pointed out that "nothing like the act of eating for equalizing men... philosopher and the idiot, publican and pharisee, all eat after the same fashion-given an equally good digestion" (Gaskell, s.362). Furthermore, he

helps Higgins by reemploying him and helps workers' children in providing money for their education, he "puts one or two children... to school" (Gaskell, s.363) . It is evident that as time goes by, Thornton begins to understand workers more clearly. At the same time, Margaret also begins to understand millowners better and meanwhile Margaret and Thornton become nearer and nearer and they decide to marry.

At the end, Thornton's and Margaret's union in the shape of marriage indicates that there are no longer the two polarized classes but one united classless Britain. In *North and South*, Gaskell brings together many people from different classes since Gaskell believes that the clash of ideas and classes are necessary to complete each other by seeing the missing points in the other side. In other words, different voices of different classes should be brought together to achieve progress. This is illustrated through the discussion between Thornton and Mr. Bell who are from different walks of life. Mr. Hale and Margaret suggest to Mr. Bell that "it would do good to [Oxford men] to associate a little more with the Milton manufacturers" (Gaskell, s.334) and after that Mr. Bell, the Oxford man, begins to criticize manufacturers by saying to Mr. Thornton "I wonder when you Milton men intend to live. All your lives seem to be spent in gathering together the materials for life" (Gaskell, s.335) and they begin to discuss their concept of living and the cultural differences related to their class come to the surface due to the fact that for Thornton, now a middle-class man, to work and to get satisfaction from these works is living, however for Mr.Bell, an Oxford man, enjoyment from arts and environment means living. Finally through Mr. Thornton, Gaskell gives the message:

I have arrived at the conviction that no mere institutions, however wise, and however much thought may have been required to organize and arrange them, can attach class to class as they should be attached, unless the working out of such institutions bring the individuals of the different classes into actual personal contact. Such intercourse is the breath of life. A working man can hardly be made to feel and know how much his employer may have laboured in his study at plans for the benefit of his workpeople. A complete plan emerges like a piece of machinery, apparently fitted for every emergency. But the hands accept it as they do machinery, without understanding the intense mental labour and forethought required to bring it to such perfection. But I would take an idea, the working out of which would necessitate personal intercourse... becoming acquainted with each other's characters and persons, and even tricks of tempers and modes of speech. We should understand each other better, and I'll venture to say we should like each other more. (Gaskell, s.435)

Yet, Gaskell is realistic about the relationship between workers and capital holders and again through Thornton she gives the message , "My utmost expectation only goes so far as this-that they may render strikes not the bitter, venomous sources of hatred they have hitherto been. A more hopeful man might imagine that a closer and more genial intercourse between classes might do away with strikes. But I am not a hopeful man" (Gaskell, s.435). Gaskell explains that naturally there will be conflicts between those classes

but these problems should be solved without violence and by dialogue and interaction. Apart from Thornton, Gaskell gives her ideas through Margaret as well and makes her a mediator between these two classes to achieve a reconciliation.

In *North and South* (1854), Elisabeth Gaskell demonstrates that in the Victorian society there are strict rules to define class boundaries. However in her novel, people from different classes could still try to communicate with each other and even take decisions together, because for her, it is the only way to achieve harmony between different classes. That is, although class struggle cannot be extinguished totally, it can be lessened or “softened” for the benefit of each class. And this softening of the class boundaries paves the way for more “cooperation and communication between the members of different classes” and in this way Gaskell’s ideal society would be achieved. Therefore, she suggests “communication” as the only way to abolish conflicts and boundaries between the classes.

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