

# ELIZABETH GASKELL'S HEROINE OF ACTION IN *NORTH AND SOUTH* AND BENJAMIN DISRAELI'S HEROINE OF ROMANCE IN *SYBIL*: A COMPARATIVE FEMINIST READING OF THE VICTORIAN INDUSTRIAL NOVELS

Dr Megha D. Ramteke

Asst. Professor, Department of English,

DMW PWS Arts and Commerce College, Nagpur (MS), India

**Abstract:** Elizabeth Gaskell (1810-1865) and Benjamin Disraeli (1804-1881) are well known Victorian Novelists. *North and South* (1848) and *Sybil* (1845), written by Gaskell and Disraeli respectively, are Victorian industrial novels. Elizabeth Gaskell had always been criticised as a submissive, conventional and emotional woman writer as compared to her contemporary writers. This paper attempts at bringing forth the nonconformist and feminist approach in her writing through a comparative study of the female character in Gaskell's *North and South* and the female character in Benjamin's *Sybil*. In contrast to Disraeli's views, Gaskell eradicates the demarcation of public and private life through the character of Margaret who comes to see herself as involved in the public sphere and abandons the position of observer for the position of participant.

**Key words:** Victorian era, Industrial Novels, Feminist approach, Public and Private Sphere, Margaret, Sybil

Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* (1848) and Disraeli Benjamin's *Sybil* (1845) are well known Industrial Novels of the Victorian Era. Taking the charge of her own life Margaret Hale in *North and South* discards the role of an idle lady and undergoes the process of defining her proper work demystifying the conventional feminine work of courtship and marriage. As contrast to Margaret, Disraeli's *Sybil* adheres to the Victorian conventional role of an inactive object of beauty. In Disraeli's novels, "When female characters enter the plot in an industrial novel, they play conventional roles, serving mostly as romantic interests for the male protagonists" (Colby 9).

Disraeli's *Sybil* is named after its protagonist female character Sybil but perfunctorily enough, like most of the male writers who worked within the genre, Disraeli puts a male Character at the centre of the plot in this novel in sharp contrast to Gaskell's industrial novels whether *North and South* or *Mary Barton*. The novel focuses on a young aristocrat, Charles Egremont, who, "brought up in the enjoyment of every comfort and every luxury that refinement could devise and wealth furnish" develops a social conscience. "Popular at school, idolized at home, and secured with a family seat in Parliament," Egremont seems destined for a life of ease, until an unhappy love affair sends him abroad and he returns a "much wiser man" prepared "to observe, to inquire, and to reflect" (Disraeli 40). Sybil Gerard, the daughter of a factory worker of noble ancestry, serves as a difficult prize for Egremont to pursue and win in the course of the novel as well as a means of his introduction to the struggles of the working class.

Gaskell's novel *North and South* moves around the life of Margaret Hale who takes the central stage in the plot. A clergyman's daughter, Margaret Hale moves with her father from agricultural South to industrial Lancashire, where her former comfortable life is replaced by the rigors of urban life, "It is in such an atmosphere that Margaret grows in perception and power, willingly accepts the task of meditating between the agricultural South and Industrial North". The Industrial working conditions, labour problem, poverty etc are scrutinized from the perspective of a middle class woman. "Through her negotiations, the warring parties become reconciled and working conditions improve" thus "*North and South* affirms women's right to participate in public life" (Colby 41).

Sybil is portrayed as an idealized woman of the Victorian age and paranormally personified as an 'angel', "You are an angel from heaven," exclaimed the mother, "and you may well stay beautiful" keeping her away from the daily business of the world, industrial strife and class conflict (Disraeli 105). From the very

beginning of the novel *Sybil* is personified as a spiritual creature living in a rarefied atmosphere and thus isolated from the realms of politics and economics. She is refrained from crossing the threshold of public life confirming the Victorian ideology of passive, dependent and idle creature. Egremont's first glimpse of *Sybil* reveals an otherworldliness that sets her apart from the rest of humanity:

The divine melody ceased; the elder strange rose; the words were on the lips of Egremont, that would have asked some explanation of this sweet and holy mystery, when, in the vacant and star-lit arch on which his glance was fixed, he beheld a female form ... and so strange that Egremont might for a moment have been pardoned for believing her a seraph, who had lighted on this sphere, or the fair phantom of some saint haunting the sacred ruins of her desecrated fame (Disraeli 77).

Contradictory to Disraeli's notion of idealized young woman like *Sybil*, Gaskell, from the outset, is interested in representing her heroine as contrasting with conventional Victorian young women. The opening chapter, 'Haste to the Wedding', brings forth the contradictory nature of Margaret and her cousin, Edith, establishing Margaret as deviating from Victorian norms of feminine behaviour in several important ways. Lying "curled up" in the drawing-room, "looking very lovely in her white muslin and blue ribbons," Edith is remarkable only for her decorative value (Gaskell, 261). Throughout the novel, Margaret is played off against Edith, who embodies the Victorian norms for femininity. In contrast, Margaret seeks a realm of action that will challenge her and make use of her talents. Describing to her father her experience at Thornton's party, Margaret admits she "felt like a hypocrite tonight, sitting there in my white silk gown, with my idle hands before me, when I remembered all the good, thorough, house-work they had done today" (Gaskell, 221).

Idealized and ethereal, *Sybil* cannot form her own realistic perception of the current socio-political scene and therefore is unable to define her proper role in the current circumstances. Instead she dwells upon a nostalgic perspective of the past, glorying in "a race of forefathers who belonged to the oppressed and not to oppressors," and retreats to a dream world of her own making, envisioning a glorious future in which, through divine intervention, she and her father will regain their former landed status (Disraeli 291). So preoccupied is *Sybil* with this topic that, during a conversation with Egremont about the conditions of the working class, she remarks that the degradation of her faith and of her race are the only two topics that occupy her thoughts. Yet she does nothing at all to effect actual social change, believing that "nothing short of the descent of angels can save the people of this kingdom". In contrast to the male view in the novel, expressed by Stephen Morley as "God will help those who help themselves," *Sybil* holds that "those only can help themselves whom God helps" (Disraeli 201).

Gaskell strongly implies to bring about a change through the agency of women by allowing her female protagonist to 'act'; by doing she defines herself and has an effect on the world around. The novel traces the maturation of Margaret Hale, whose comfortable life of privilege and freedom is replaced by the rigors of urban life in straitened circumstances. Margaret develops her own perception and tries to find solution to labor problems, in Marry Hotz's words,

Through her characterization of Margaret Hale, Gaskell seeks to reconstitute the working-class connection between life and death to produce meaningful social reform. In particular Margaret intervenes in the strike scene to argue for a more comprehensive, public role for middle-class women in Victorian society and to stand in the place of working-class bodies-those bodies, both dead and alive, which have become such problems to Gaskell's middle-class reader. According to Gaskell, this kind of heroine transforms the economy and bridges the gap between England's two nations (166).

Mr. Thornton also accepts Margaret's assessment of the public situation and moves towards a possible solution by offering work to Higgins, thereby initiating a system in which managers and workers will form personal relationships.

Unacquainted with the dynamics of actual political processes, *Sybil* is shocked to learn that the working class is deeply divided by internal factions, rivalries, intrigues. Although she is the daughter of a chief spokesperson of the people, *Sybil* is naïve in her political opinions and reveals only a tenuous grasp of what is taking place all around her. Gradually, *Sybil*'s conviction that "to be one of the people was to be miserable and innocent; one of the privileged, a luxurious tyrant" is replaced by the realization that "the world was a more complicated system than she had preconceived" (Disraeli 337).

Margaret, conscientiously aware of current socio-economic and industrial issue, wades through the way of conflict towards the equilibrium of society. She follows her own instincts and establishes her own principles of 'connection' and 'equality of friendship' to find the solutions. In this effort she forms a close bond with an individual working class family. She understands that to be effective in the new environment, she must learn to accommodate herself to the working-class mores. The friendship of Nicholas Higgins and his daughter Bessy Higgins supports her as she gradually moves towards her chosen work. This friendship with a working-class woman teaches Margaret that "God has made us so that we must be mutually dependent" (Gaskell, 169). Margaret has empathic understanding necessary to bridge the gap between the working class and the industrialists:

When Margaret, new to the industrial city of Milton-Northern, voices her intention of visiting Higgins's Home, Higgins is annoyed. To him, the proposal carries shades of authority's patronizing condescension, implicitly denying his rights to independence and equality. For Margaret on the other hand, her interest is the outward expression of sympathy and fellow-feeling. It is paradoxically the attempt to put into practice her own belief in the principle of 'connection', in the 'equality of friendship' that should unite the classes, Margaret's impulses is vindicated when Higgins comes to appreciate all she does for his child, Bessy (Wainwright 150).

Disraeli portrays Sybil as a victim of circumstance. Sybil's greatest test comes when she learns that her father is in danger of being imprisoned and she decides to try to reach him to his rescue; but unlike Margaret, Sybil fails to successfully take charge of the circumstances. Instead in this moment of crisis, Disraeli underlines her feminine ineptitude, describing her as "this child of innocence and divine thoughts, born in cottage and bred in cloister, went forth, on a great enterprise of duty and devotion, into the busiest and a wildest haunts of the greatest of modern cities" (Disraeli 359). Here she is in sharp contrast to Margaret's capable, decisive and self-reliant image who takes matters into her own hands. Throughout the scene Disraeli constantly emphasizes Sybil's weakness, mentioning her "sense of her utter helplessness," her "feminine reserve," her "feeling of being overpowered". How she feels, not what she does, is Disraeli's focus. And when she does act, it is most often to implore for help. In the coffee house, the first words she speaks are "Is there not one among you who will assist me?" (Disraeli 361). When human help is not forthcoming, she seeks divine assistance, praying, "Holy Virgin, aid me!" finally encountering a kindly Irishman, she exclaims, "I beseech you by everything we hold sacred to aid me". Later, she continues, "Guide me, I beseech you, honestly and truly guide me!" (Disraeli 368).

Margaret is endowed with ability and strength to overpower the circumstances. She takes a leading role in planning involved in the move to Milton. Within the patriarchal family, Margaret has been sheltered and protected from difficult decisions; the rearrangement of the family power structure is necessary before Margaret can begin to see her vocation in life. It becomes Margaret's responsibility to arrange the transition to Milton in such a way as to cause the least inconvenience to her mother; her father also agrees to her plans and decisions. When the day of the move arrives, it is Margaret, "calm and collected," with "her large grave eyes observing everything, "who supervises the men who had come to help." She reasons to herself, "If she gave way, who was to act?" (Gaskell, 89). When decisions had to be made concerning lodgings, it is again Margaret who makes them, telling her father, "I have planned it all" and exclaiming, "I am overpowered by the discovery of my own genius for management" (Gaskell, 97). Upon arriving at the hotel where the Hales are staying temporarily, John Thornton, the wealthy manufacturer, is rather taken aback when he meets Margaret for the first time, "Mr. Thornton was in habits of authority himself, but she seemed to assume some kind of rule over him at once" (Gaskell, 99). Here Gaskell presents Margaret as an image of competence, strength, and intellectual authority.

Sybil is again forced to fall back to the role of a victim rather than a savior; despite her good intentions she cannot rescue her father and in the end it is she who needs to be rescued. "Pale, agitated, exhausted," arriving too late to save her father, Sybil only finds herself helpless, "She looked up to her father, a glance as it were of devotion and despair; her lips move, but they refused their office, and expressed no words" (Disraeli 379). Inarticulate and ineffectual Sybil instead turns out to be an additional burden for her father as she faints and has to be carried off. Coming to the senses, Sybil again looks for a rescuer, Egremont, the hero and man of action; she writes a letter to him, begging "Save me!" (Disraeli 384). Shrinking with all the delicacy of a woman, from the impending examination in open court before the magistrate, "Sybil is finally

rescued by the intervention of the man who loves her and is again carried to her destination” (Disraeli 386). Throughout the novel Disraeli repeatedly shows Egremont coming to Sybil’s rescue.

Just opposite to Sybil, Gaskell puts Maragret into the role of a savior and rescuer. This can be witnessed in her attempt to rescue her brother Frederick; who, on board the Russell, had tolerated the tyranny of the commanding officer, Captain Reid, until his “imperiousness in trifles” (Gaskell, 152) led to the senseless death of a sailor. At that point, mutiny broke out, and, as a result, Frederick was branded a traitor. Margaret mentions the possibility of clearing Frederick, asking, “If he came and stood his trial, what would be the punishment?” Surely, he might bring evidence of his great provocation (Gaskell, 154). It is Margaret, who rouses Frederick to action and comes to his rescue. Margaret’s assessment of Frederick’s chances proves to be correct, for Lennox agrees that acquittal is possible with credible witnesses. And when it becomes too dangerous for Frederick to stay any longer in England, Margaret, at considerable risk, accompanies him to the station.

In another incident of labor uproar, when the men are on the brink of violence, Margaret again steps forward to save Mr. Thorton. She steps between him and violence and throws her arms around Thornton to shelter him. When he tells her, “Go away... this is no place for you,” she counters, “It is. You did not see what I saw” (Gaskell, 234). But Gaskell does not present Margaret immune to the complexities and dangers of entering the public sphere. The mob pelt pebble at her knocking her down with an injury on head; she suffers the humiliation of being misunderstood for her effort to defend Thornton, but, in retrospect, she expresses scorn for conventional standards for femininity, “I would do it again, let who will say what they like of me. If I saved one blow, one cruel, angry action that might otherwise have been committed, I did a woman’s work” (Gaskell, 247).

It is noteworthy that Disraeli distinctly segregates public life as Masculine and private life, as feminine. Feminine attributes are given more emphasis that makes Sybil a subordinate to be instructed, assisted, and won. In contrast, Egremont’s work is to discover his place in the political order and to act within that order and his work is defined by his masculinity. As he gets closer to his vocation, Egremont “could not resist the conviction that ... His sympathies had become livelier and more extended; that a masculine impulse had been given to his mind” (Disraeli 154). His masculinity imparts him unconditional privilege to ponder over social conditions and capability to bring about a change in the socio-economic system. Unlike Sybil, ‘a dreamer of dreams’, Egremont is a man of action, taking his place in an important national debate in the House of Commons. This discussion of the National Petition is so weighty that “not a member was absent from his place; men were bought indeed from distant capitals to participate in the struggle and to decide it” (Disraeli 330). While feminine character of Sybil yields her mere dependency, inaction, intellectual confinement and subordination. Disraeli’s language conspicuously implies that “Politics is the work of men; romance, the work of women” (Colby 11).

In contrast to Disraeli’s views Gaskell eradicates this demarcation of public and private life through Margaret who comes to see herself as involved in the public sphere abandons the position of observer for the position of participant. For Margaret, this means compromise and even pain, but at the same times an enlargement of identity. It is Margaret who undertakes her roles of public mediator to settle a standoff between the owner of the mill and its hands. She takes up the issue with John Thornton, forcing him to examine and justify his own actions. Margaret strongly advocates her judgment confirming equality of the owners and workers; she establishes her view that the workers should be treated fairly and respectfully. When the strike breaks out she urges Thornton to treat the workers as human beings, “Thornton’s tendency to view the issue from a business point of view, regarding the workforce as a purely economic unit, is corrected by Margaret, who brings the values of private life into the discussion” (Colby 15). As a result of Margaret’s intervention, a personal truce between two former antagonists’ leads to change, after a later visit to Higgins, Thornton is made aware of the lack of food and schooling that is common among his workers and decides to educate some children and to create a system in the factory whereby men are fed adequately and cheaply. Again when caught in a financial crisis, Margaret extends a helping hand to Thornton and persuades him to accept help from her, a woman, by doing so Margaret teaches him new social possibilities; Gaskell here again, hints at inversion of conventional notions of gender by showing a woman instructing a man:

In this novel, Gaskell implies that the marriage between Margaret and John Thornton will be a partnership in which both will work together, in the private and the public sphere, and that this work

will be fraught with difficulties. Nevertheless Gaskell affirms that it is possible to create better social and private arrangements, and that the two spheres are tied together ... indeed married (Colby 22).

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