

ELIZABETH GASKELL'S *RUTH* AND THOMAS HARDY'S *TESS OF D'URBERVILLES*: A COMPARATIVE STUDY TYPIFYING THE LIFE OF A FALLEN WOMAN

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Abstract: The present paper explores Elizabeth Gaskell's *Ruth* (1853) with new feminist dimensions through its comparison with Thomas Hardy's *Tess of D'Urbervilles* (1891). Both the novels centre on a common theme i.e. the life of fallen women in Victorian England. Elizabeth Gaskell's *Ruth* though written around forty years before Hardy's *Tess of D'Urbervilles* challenges the Victorian domestic ideology and exposes the double standard of the Victorian society. Gaskell proposes an alternative social system paving way for the redemption of a fallen woman. Unlike Gaskell, Hardy bears a pessimistic view towards the life of a fallen woman creating no space for her redemption in the unjust social setup bringing about her inevitable downfall through social exclusion.

Keywords- Fallen Woman, Victorian ideology, Redemption, Chastity, Ruth, Tess

Elizabeth Gaskell's *Ruth* (1853) and Thomas Hardy's *Tess of D'Urbervilles* (1891) both share a common theme, the life of a fallen woman. Although it is written nearly forty years before Hardy's novel, Gaskell's *Ruth* boldly articulates that "fallen woman could be redeemed and returned to normal Victorian society" (Michie 87). Gaskell defies the Victorian concept of femininity as culturally excluded other and redefines feminine position in society. By redeeming and accepting Ruth in the societal domestic sphere Gaskell dilutes the delineation of feminine 'purity' and 'impurity', 'woman' and 'lady', 'whore' and 'Madonna'. Through fictional characterization of Ruth, Gaskell presents solution to the social problem of fallen women by their return to 'home'. But unlike Gaskell, Hardy pessimistically projects his heroine to be doomed to a fatal end away from home.

Gaskell's *Ruth* is a social novel that envisages Victorian views on sin and illegitimacy. It moves around the protagonist, Ruth, who is an unwed mother. Gaskell hits upon the social hypocrisy of the Victorian Age that exempts a man from chastity for being virtuous but when applied to a woman the two terms 'virtue' and 'Physical Chastity' become interchangeable. Unlike femininity in Victorian age, Masculinity is not divided between two halves that is 'purity' and 'impurity'. Gaskell thwarts the idea of 'fallenness' that is based on physical chastity and patent only for women. The novel, through the character of Ruth, redefines the concept of 'virtue' as a quality of soul and not of physical existence.

When a woman falls from her purity there is no return for her [...] as well may one attempt to wash the stain from the sullied snow. Men sin and are forgiven; but the memory of a woman's guilt cannot be removed on earth. Her nature is so exquisitely refined that the slightest flaw becomes a huge defect. Like perfume, it admits of no deterioration, it ceases to exist when it ceases to be sweet. Her soul is an exquisitely precious, a priceless gift, and even more than man's a perilous possession (Sally x).

Hardy's *Tess of D'Urbervilles* questions society's sexual mores by compassionately portraying a heroine who is seduced by the son of her employer and who thus is not considered a pure and chaste woman by the rest of society. Hardy seems to be expressing his dissatisfaction, weariness, and an overwhelming sense of injustice at the cruelty of universal fate of disappointment and disillusionment. He projects pessimistic

views that the hopes and desires of human beings are cruelly thwarted by circumstances and destiny. Tess's baby symbolizes Tess's bad circumstances which were out of Tess's control. It symbolizes innocence in a sense since this baby was innocent having done nothing wrong, but it was punished by society for coming from such an evil act. Having been raped, Tess was also innocent of the crime, but she was still punished and pushed aside by society. The whole novel turns out to be a tragedy with no hope for salvation. It seems that the whole novel, from the very beginning, is propelling Tess towards her tragic execution at the end. It's like an avalanche of tragedy that all lands on Tess, even though she's not the one who started the slide.

Gaskell points out the double standard of a society which condones sexual adventures for men but condemns women for a single lapse. It is notable that Ruth is a victim of circumstances, an orphan, who has no one to turn to for guidance and companionship. Gaskell also sheds light on the lurid conditions of the working women, the apprentices. They had to work for about eighteen hours a day on scanty diet and rest; their life is devoid of any pleasure or amusement:

Two o'clock in the morning chimed forth the old bells of St Saviour's. And yet more than a dozen girls still sat in the room into which Ruth entered, stitching away as if for very life, not daring to gape, or show any outward manifestation of sleepiness [...] for they knew that, stay up as late as they might, the work-hours of the next day must begin at eight, and their young limbs were very weary (Gaskell, *Ruth* 3).

Ruth is one of such apprentices in captivity of unkind Mrs. Mason; when she gets a break of half an hour she tries to seek the freedom of a bird in the open sky, "Ruth Hilton sprang to the large old window, and pressed against it as a bird presses against the bars of its cage. She put back the blind, and gazed into the quiet moonlight night" (Gaskell, *Ruth* 4). Her eyes are full of tears; her heart is flooded with nostalgic feeling for her lost sweet home with loving mother and father. "Oh, Jenny!" said Ruth, sitting up in bed, and pushing back the masses of hair that were heating her forehead, "I thought I saw mamma by the side of the bed, coming, as she used to do, to see if I were asleep and comfortable; and when I tried to take hold of her, she went away and left me alone—I don't know where; so strange!" (Gaskell, *Ruth* 5). All the apprentices have friends whom they can meet on Sundays but poor Ruth has no friend and no home in that desolate town.

Into this emotional vacuum comes Henry Bellingham into her life, who is a licentious heir to a fortune. He is simply bewitched by Ruth's loveliness, and grace, fused with the simplicity and innocence. Circumstances throw Henry and Ruth together and the two become close friends. He enticed her with the happiness to visit her home "her mamma's room, her old acquaintances and native places" (Gaskell, *Ruth* 17). Only sixteen, Ruth is too young and naïve to see the evil in Bellingham's eyes. But old Thomas immediately recognized the selfish love of his and he tries to warn Ruth against him; but alas! She is too innocent to comprehend his words, "My dear, remember the devil goeth about as a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour; remember that, Ruth" (Gaskell, *Ruth* 20).

Unfortunately Ruth gets late and comes across Mrs. Mason; who finds her "standing with a lover, far away from home, at such a time in the evening, and she boiled over with intemperate displeasure" (Gaskell, *Ruth* 21). She disposes her of her work and slams all doors to get shelter. When Ruth is stupefied, sick, faint near to sink down with the sudden fall and profuse sorrow, Mr. Bellingham expresses his selfish love to her, love only for her outer beauty; "her beauty was all that Mr Bellingham cared for, and it was supreme. It was all he recognised of her, and he was proud of it" and entreats homeless Ruth to go with him to London (Gaskell, *Ruth* 22). But Ruth feels that it was wrong and she expresses her desire to go to old Thomas and Marry, "Oh, sir! I want you to take me to Milham Grange," said she, holding back; "Old Thomas would give me a home" (Gaskell, *Ruth* 23). But after getting into the carriage he moves on to London with faint Ruth. Ignorant of the social meaning of what Ruth does, she is 'a beautiful ignoramus', not responsible for her actions because she is unaware of their meaning. Ruth in her ignorance "exemplifies the conspiracy of silence within which Victorian girls were generally raised; the 'state of repressed consciousness' identified by the critic Martha Vicinus that rendered it effectively impossible for women to act as responsible agents with regard to sexual behaviour" (qtd in Matus 55). Ruth confirms her own ignorance, "I was very young; I did not know how such a life against God's pure and holy will – at least not as I know it now" (Gaskell, *Ruth* 246).

An innocent girl is being punished for unselfishly loving Henry Bellingham who deceives her without any consideration for her and sets off to London with his mother, leaving disgraced Ruth behind and settling the matter handsomely as he says, "Dismiss her, as you wish it; but let it be done handsomely, and let me hear no more about it" (Gaskell, *Ruth* 34). Here, Ruth, bewildered by the situation attempts to end her life; but fortunately she is saved by Thurston Benson. Gaskell does not allow a disgraceful end to her 'fallen' heroine but shapes a new destiny full of dignity for her.

Unlike orphan and homeless Ruth, Tess grows under the guardianship of her parents and a large family with younger brothers and sisters. But it is unfortunate that Tess's own mother impels her to the wrong side of life; it is she who compels her to go to the D'Urbervilles' house at Trantridge away from home against her wish, "I would rather stay here with father and you" (Hardy 77). She plans to send her daughter to claim kinship with the remaining d'Urbervilles, and thus make her eligible to marry a gentleman. Though she is aware of the danger of Alec D'Urbervilles yet she does not warn Tess against it "I thought if I spoke of his fond feelings and what they might lead to, you would be hontish wi' him and lose your chance" She murmured (Hardy 76). Furthermore, she chides Tess for not being careful and insists on her marrying Alec; she does not understand her feelings, "who would have expected it to end like this! Why didn't ye think of doing some good for your family instead o' thinking only of yourself? [...] Her poor foolish mother little knew her present feeling towards this man" (Hardy 177). Even Tess's father does not support her in her crisis; he suspects his daughter when Angel departs her back to her parents' place, "I shall put an end to myself, title and all—I can bear it no longer! [...] D'ye think he really have married her?—or is it like the first" (Hardy 124). The perception that her own parents doubted her makes her go away from home.

Mr. Benson and his sister Faith give Ruth home, love and respect. By depicting an impure woman taken into the home, Gaskell refused conventional Victorian notion of a fallen woman as an outcast. Gaskell did not view emigration as a solution to the problem of prostitution, instead insisting that fallen women could be redeemed by being taken into the domestic sphere. She portrays a fallen woman taken into the sanctity of the domestic sphere, thereby representing in her novel the practical solution that was not available to fallen women of Victorian age. Gaskell asserts her view through Mr. Benson, who considers Ruth as 'Mary Magdalen' and stands against the whole world to save her:

I take my stand with Christ against the world [...] I state my firm belief, that it is God's will that we should not dare to trample any of His creatures down to the hopeless dust; that it is God's will that the women who have fallen should be numbered among those who have broken hearts to be bound up, not cast aside as lost beyond recall. If this be God's will, as a thing of God it will stand; and He will open a way (Gaskell, *Ruth* 80).

Ruth's early work as a needlewoman, her seduction by a 'gentleman' and her subsequent 'fall' are all details that associate her with stereotypical Victorian accounts of how women became prostitutes. It would have been assumed that a story which had such a beginning could have only one end. As Ruth's seducer Bellingham says, "There was but one thing that could have happened" (Gaskell, *Ruth* 115). Or a Jemima's dressmaker remarks, "One knows they can but go from bad to worse, poor creatures!" (Gaskell, *Ruth* 145). But Gaskell refutes unfair assumptions about fallen women and creates a new destiny of such a woman. She applies all devices, the power of education, employment, firmness, self-esteem, independence, humanity, and motherly love to uplift fate of a fallen woman.

Rather than emphasizing the strength of intellect and conscience, Tess's physicality is referred to so frequently in the novel that it's hard not to think of her attractiveness as her defining characteristic. Some characters in the novel aren't able to see past her good looks. The scene in which she first meets Alec D'Urbervilles is the first instance of this:

She had an attribute which amounted to a disadvantage just now; and it was this that caused Alec D'Urberville's eyes to rivet themselves upon her. It was a luxuriance of aspect, a fullness of growth, which made her appear more of a woman than she really was. She had inherited the feature from her mother without the quality it denoted. It had troubled her mind occasionally, till her companions had said that it was a fault which time would cure (Hardy 23).

When Alec runs into Tess again, he can't stop talking about her mouth, "Surely there never was such a maddening mouth since Eve's!" (Hardy 178). Why does Hardy mention this? Because it's important to point out that Alec's obsession with Tess is purely physical, and his physical attraction to her has to do with her beauty. But Angel is infatuated to Tess too as in the passage in which Angel is staring at Tess (unbeknownst to her) and studying her face:

How very lovable her face was to him. Yet there was nothing ethereal about it; all was real vitality, real warmth, and real incarnation. And it was in her mouth that this culminated. Eyes almost as deep and speaking he had seen before, and cheeks perhaps as fair; brows as arched, a chin and throat almost as shapely; her mouth he had seen nothing to equal on the face of the earth. To a young man with the least fire in him that little upward life in the middle of her red top lip was distracting, infatuating, and maddening (Hardy 83).

It is surprising that so called righteous man Angel Clare can buy into the idea that a wife is her husband's property , "since you will probably have to leave at Christmas, it is in every way desirable and convenient that I should carry you off then as my property" (Hardy 112). Tess herself views her own physical beauty with pride, only to think that Angel is proud to have a pretty wife. At other times, she is self-conscious and embarrassed about her good looks. When she travels alone after Angel has left her, she goes so far as to disguise herself so that she'll be able to avoid the unwanted remarks and leers of men on the road. She snips off her eyebrows and ties a bandage around her chin. She somehow sees her own physical attractiveness as a sin – it's something she cannot help, but her physicality tempts men, and causes them to accuse her of deliberately tempting them, as Alec does: "You temptress, Tess; you dear witch of Babylon!" (Hardy 178).

On the other hand Gaskell emphasizes intellectual power in a woman; Ruth developed her intellectual powers which gave significance to her existence. With the qualities of refined taste, excellent sense and judgement Ruth sets to work and make herself competent and employable to take on the responsibility of her own existence. Her intellectual power, education and knowledge under the directions of Mr. Benson helped find an employment as a governess; she began to earn her living that gives her self-esteem and independence. Even Jemina, Bradshaw's daughter acknowledges, "I meant that you were fitted for something better. Why, Ruth, you are better educated than I am!" (Gaskell, *Ruth* 275). Ruth not only obtains knowledge and wisdom but also teaches all her knowledge to her son as Mr. Benson says, "I doubt if the wisest and most thoughtful schoolmaster could teach half as much directly, as his mother does unconsciously and indirectly every hour that he is with her" (Gaskell, *Ruth* 299).

Tess's intellectual power is neglected throughout the novel and her life is thrown into the clutches of 'fate' which is always dismal. Tess does well in school, passes all her exams, and is on her way to being considered for a career as a school-teacher. Her education enables her to express herself in "her own native phrases-assisted a little by her sixth standard training-feelings which might almost have been called those of the age—the ache of modernism" (Hardy 152). Yet, like all other cottagers in Blackmoor vale, Tess "was steeped in fancies and prefigurative superstitions" (Gaskell, *Ruth* 69). Despite her better education she is still very superstitious, omens worry her; 'the fate' seems to her to decide that she is not to be a teacher; Tess shares Hardy's strong sense of pessimistic fatalism.

Here it is noteworthy that the problem of prostitution and fallen women is deeply associated with poverty, economic dependency and subordination to men who want to take possession of women as their property, "The masculine position involves being associated with an indiscriminate desire to own property, a desire both Gaskell and Marx characterize as negative by linking it with prostitution" (Michie 118). Therefore, Gaskell emphasized on economic emancipation of women, whereas Hardy effaces the conducive and empowering effect of employment in the development of the self in Tess. After being disposed of her work as a governess at Mr. Bradshaw's home, Ruth seeks every kind of employment, "She was so willing to serve and work, and every one despised her services [...] many and many a time Ruth turned over in her mind every possible chance of obtaining employment for her leisure hours, and nowhere could she find it" (Gaskell, *Ruth* 261). After working as a governess, a needlewoman eventually finds an employment for herself in the form of a sick-nurse as she has "the gift of a very delicate touch, which is such a comfort in many cases" (Gaskell, *Ruth* 272). She performed her task with utmost perfection that gradually earned her recognition and respect. "Such a one as her has never been a great sinner; nor does she do her work as a penance, but for the love of God, and of the blessed Jesus. She will be in the light of God's countenance

when you and I will be standing afar off" (Gaskell, *Ruth* 305). She makes her son proud of her who proudly tells everybody that Ruth is his mother.

Ruth proudly refuses to accept any money from Mr. Bellingham after he deserts her. She requests Miss Benson to return the blank note of fifty pounds which is given by his mother to get rid of Ruth, "If you please, Miss Benson, I should like to return this money [...] I have a strong feeling against taking it [...] this money pains my heart. He has left off loving me, and has gone away" (Gaskell, *Ruth* 96). Ruth firmly guards her self-esteem and feeling of true love that cannot yield to temptation of materialistic gains. Her power to love honestly makes Bellingham undeserved to the power of giving and casts him out of her life.

Ruth shows the strength of character and firmness when she thrashes Bellingham who once more attempts to entrap Ruth. But grown out of her innocence and ignorance, Ruth has unbroken self-determinacy, she can understand her conscience; she can separate truth from false and puts up a strong protest against evil. She refuses to marry her seducer. She does not cow down to his will as she says firmly,

To save Leonard from the shame and agony of knowing my disgrace, I would lie down and die. Oh! Perhaps it would be best for him—for me, if I might; my death would be a stingsless grief—but to go back into sin would be the real cruelty to him [...] Whatever may be my doom—God is just—I leave myself in His hands. I will save Leonard from evil. Evil would it be for him if I lived with you. I will let him die first! (Gaskell, *Ruth* 215).

Hardy deprives his heroine from the quality of self-reliance, independence, strength and firmness of character. Tess's fate is decided, for all her efforts, mostly by others. Though she initiates her own behaviour and actions, she is ultimately judged and condemned by external forces. She shares Hardy's sense of morbidity incurred by misfortune. Tess's letter which would explain her situation to Clare and perhaps save her from her marriage and her ultimate fate, goes unnoticed; "Obsessed with bad luck, he insists on its use to explain the loss of the letter" (Jekel 166). Tess suffers from indecision, when Tess gets a chance to reveal her truth she backtracks and loses strength, "At the last moment her courage had failed her; she feared his blame for not telling him sooner; and her instinct of self-preservation was stronger than her candour" (Hardy 104). This again makes her victim to injustice by another man.

Ruth turns down Bellingham's proposal to marry and chooses her own freedom. She proves that woman is not always powerless and does not always need to be dependent in a male-female relationship. Ruth exemplifies Simone de Beauvoir's belief as expressed in *The Second Sex* that "women are as capable of choice as men, and thus can choose to elevate themselves, moving beyond the 'immanence' to which they were previously resigned and reaching 'transcendence', a position in which one takes responsibility for oneself and the world, where one chooses one's freedom" (Social Institutions and Gender Index OECD).

Tess is deprived of the power to follow her conscience and self-esteem; she is instilled with dependency on men and timidly gives way to their instructions. When Alec d'Urbervilles leaves Tess back to her home, he tries to kiss her again at that time Tess meekly says, "If you wish," she answered indifferently, "See how you've mastered me!" (Hardy 46). When converted Alec blames Tess for tempting him with her charms and asked her to swear not to do so again, Tess timidly accepts his accusation by following what he says, "Tess, half frightened, gave way to his importunity; placed her hand upon the stone and swore" (Hardy 170). Even Angel does injustice to Tess; though he himself had a moral slip and asks Tess for forgiveness not revealing it before, he refuses to judge her at parallel for the lesser sin which was not her intentional will, but victimization at the age of sixteen,

I did not mention it because I was afraid of endangering my chance of you, darling, the great prize of my life—my Fellowship I call you. My brother's Fellowship was won at his college, mine at Talbothays Dairy. Well, I would not risk it [...] the sinner that I was! But I must, now I see you sitting there so solemnly. I wonder if you will forgive me (Hardy 124).

Tess forgives Angel but he does not; here we witness a double morality. He says, "I repeat, the woman I have been loving is not you" (Hardy 127). Despite her innocence and injustice at the hands of Angel, Tess pleaded guilty of self-preservation and not revealing the truth of her past life to Angel. She considers herself disrespectful, unworthy and completely devoted herself to him by self-sacrifices. She considers herself

responsible for everything; she even thinks of ending life to help him get rid of her. She entreats him to accept her as a servant all through life.

It's too late when she comes to realize that Angel has actually done injustice to her and she writes, "O why have you treated me so monstrously, Angel! I do not deserve it [...] why have you so wronged me? You are cruel, cruel indeed! I will try to forget you. It is all injustice I have received at your hands!" (Hardy 195). She is again projected as helpless and vulnerable creature as Alec again wins her in the name of her brother and sisters' good future. He persuades her that Angel will never come back and claims himself as her master. Angel returns with changed mind but alas! It's again too late. "She is victimized by Alec, persuaded and then rejected by Angel, claimed again by Alec, and reclaimed by Angel. Her only ally, her temperament, becomes her destruction when compassion and tenderness, warmth and sexuality move her to yield to first one man and then to another" (Jekel 167).

Gaskell presents Ruth's child not as a 'sin' but as a blessing 'a messenger of God' who will help Ruth wade through the struggle of life. Ruth is full of power to proclaim her motherly love against the whole world of false morality, on the news of child she exclaimed, "Oh, my God, I thank Thee! Oh! I will be so good!" (Gaskell, *Ruth* 88). That shows her strength to fight the injustice and Gaskell also allows her son's baptism. Mr. Benson appeals to his sister Faith to consider Ruth's child as God's blessing, "Teach her (and God will teach her, if man does not come between) to reverence her child; and this reverence will shut out sin,—will be purification" (Gaskell, *Ruth* 89).

But Tess's child dies early without baptism because he is illegitimate secondly he was not baptized by a parson. Tess named him Sorrow while unsuccessfully trying to baptize him, "So passed away Sorrow the Undesired—that intrusive creature, that bastard gift of shameless Nature, who respects not the social law" (Hardy 56). Thus her darling baby was buried in "that shabby corner of God's allotment where He lets the nettles grow, and where all unbaptized infants, notorious drunkards, suicides, and others of the conjecturally are laid" in the night (Hardy 57).

Ruth vows to turn her son into a pure and noble being and keep away from the evil like Bellingham; through her dream of her son being grown into "the repetition of his father" Ruth asserts her judgment that it is her seducer, her sinner who deserves God's punishment, "She saw her son dragged down by the clinging girl into some pit of horrors into which she dared not look, but from whence his father's voice was heard, crying aloud, that in his day and generation he had not remembered the words of God, and that now he was tormented in this flame" (Hardy 122).

In Gaskell's descriptions, Ruth is associated with saintliness, purity, suffering, and maternal love; she is thereby characterized as a Madonna. "In Ruth, Gaskell refuses the split between purity and impurity not simply at the level of action, by showing what happens to Ruth, but also at the level of figuration, in the imagery she associates with her. In depicting her heroin, Gaskell refuses the cultural construction of femininity that separates 'whore', from 'madonas'" (Michie 106). Here Ruth is being cast as a sort of Christ figure, sacrificing herself to save all those sick, including Bellingham himself. Rather than dying as fallen woman or even redeeming herself through death, she had already redeemed herself in her innate goodness and self sacrifice. With her words, as "Sally, do you think God has put us into the world just to be selfish, and do nothing but see after our own souls? Or to help one another with heart and hand, as Christ did to all who wanted help?" Ruth attains martyrdom (Gaskell, *Ruth* 29).

Unlike Gaskell, Hardy confirms that "once victim, always victim- that's the law" (Hardy 290). In spite of her hardships Tess weaves continuous threads of optimism and sense of life but Hardy quashes all her attempts. When Tess gives way to Alec and goes to live with him, Angel comes back with love but too late. Tess again cries over her fate; she admits that she hates Alec now, for he lied to her about Angel. After a heated argument Tess stabs Alec in the heart, killing him. This leads to Tess's capture and execution. "Indeed Tess is victimized-sacrificed to Alec's lust and Angel's ideal" (Jekel 66). Tess realizes Angel's objection with living with her, "How can we live together while that man lives?" as he considers Alec as her husband in nature (Hardy 129). She kills Alec for Angel's love and ultimately is put to death with a stigma of sin. Indeed, Tess is the victim of Hardy's strong sense of pessimistic fatalism that does not allow her redemption and return to respectable life despite her innocence and optimism.

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