

The “Fallen Woman” in Selected Nineteenth-Century British Fiction

Abstract:

This study aims at investigating the image of the fallen woman in Victorian literature. It tackles selected works by male and female Victorian authors with view at showing how the depiction of fallen women enhances the feminist premise of their works. Each work deals with a particular anifestation of the fallen women to highlight her struggle. Ultimately, the study aims to prove that the fallen women, though socially repulsed, proved to be a woman who strongly seeks the freedom out of the shackles of a patriarchal society.

The image of the fallen woman permeates Victorian literature. As such, it reveals a lot about the nature of Victorian literature in terms of its principles, values and its view of women. Evidently, the figure of the fallen woman carries feminist innuendoes. Not only does it provide a critique of the Victorian man-made society and shows the plight of the fallen woman and criticize the label, but it also gives writers the freedom of writing. In this regard, Angela Leighton's feminist reading of the figure of the fallen woman is confirmed in the Victorian novel. Leighton pinpoints that:

"the vivid emblem of a social and sexual secrecy which is still clamorous with self-discovery. The figure of the fallen woman is also, however, a sign for women of the power of writing. Her wandering, outcast state seductively expresses the [writer's] restlessness and desire. To summon her is not only to assert a political purpose which breaks the moral law, but also to claim the power of writing as necessarily free of control, of rule (125).

Victorian writers demonstrate the debilitating situation of the fallen woman on their identities as it gave them no space or time to realize their dreams. In nineteenth-century Victorian society, the image of the fallen woman was highly incompatible with her search for self-actualization. The gender roles that characterized the patriarchal mentality limited the options available to those women and deprived them from achieving their ambitions. This situation was depicted in the literature of that period. This view can be substantiated with view at some Victoria novels.

It should be noted that the religious institution played an important role in fostering the Victorian rules which relegated the fallen woman into a miserable situation. The religious domain in nineteenth-century England gave the patriarchal hegemony a divine backing substantiating its claims and proving its prevalence.

Hence, the literature of the Victorian period exhibited a critique of the religious institution which contributed to the oppression of women. Both men and women writers of that period showed the fallen woman as part of women who were oppressed by the religious instructions and sometimes try to rebel against it as well as women who viewed religion as a source of support that may contribute to their search for self-realization.

Exploring the religious institution which “severely restricted, even denied, (women) a voice in the dialogues that shaped theological doctrines” (Jenkins 16) appears in the works of many writers. Examples on these works include Elizabeth Gaskell's *Ruth*, George Elliot's *Adam Bede*, Mary Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret*, and Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*. These authors highlight examples on fallen women who suffered from the conventionality and double standards of the Victorian society.

Gaskell's *Ruth* is a prime example on this idea. Through employing the figure of the fallen woman represented in *Ruth*, Gaskell freely criticizes religion for its role in fostering the gender roles perpetuated by the patriarchal society through establishing a penal system that targets women as its victims rather than men. Joana Mink observes that the nineteenth century witnessed a strong tendency to punish women who were regarded fallen. *Ruth* is Gaskell's commentary on this issue. The novel highlights the hardships through which the heroine goes and the callousness of the patriarchal system which condones men for their sins and imposes its punishment only on women.

The major critique on the patriarchal religion is targeted towards the double standards it employs in examining moral and ethical issues. It is Ruth only who faces the negative attitude and punishment of society. Bellingham, on the other hand, is not even questioned. Ironically, the punishment is imposed only on Ruth, though the “crime” that she committed necessarily entails the existence of a partner. What adds to the severity of this double standard is the fact that Ruth was a naive girl who had her sexual relationship with Bellingham not recognizing its consequence. She says, “I was very young; I did not know how such a life was against God's pure and holy will - at least not as I know it now” (Gaskell, *Ruth* 238).

Additionally, within the patriarchal religious parameters, women had to bear more responsibility when it comes to issues of religious morality and conduct. That is why Ruth is immediately fired by her boss when she is seen walking with

Bellingham. This shows the great emphasis on female piety and the instant condemnation of women when transgressing the religious barriers. Ironically, Ruth is more religious than the majority of those who pretend to be so. Her ambition was to bring up the child in a religious manner and do well for the rest of her life.

This opens up avenues for the critique of the religious principle of mercy. Ruth ultimately realizes her sin and intends to lead a pious life; still the society does not forgive. Ruth gets no sign of mercy or understanding from society. She was not only seduced and deserted by the same man, but she is also rejected by society and has to face its harsh condemnation and punishment. In brief, the image of Ruth as a fallen woman gave Gaskell the freedom to enunciate her belief that “(the female) sex is badly enough used and legislated against” (qtd. in Beer 35).

Like Gaskell, George Eliot uses the figure of the fallen woman as major tool for a larger social criticism. *Adam Bede* is a prime example on fiction that highlights women writers' critique of the image of the fallen woman. The novel is viewed as a fitting example on expounding the issue of the identity of the fallen woman in the Victorian society and how the condemnation of that woman hinders her search for self-actualization. In this regard, Hetty Sorrel sets a model for the destiny of a woman who does not abide by the patriarchal prescriptions regarding motherhood.

Hetty represents the type of Eliot's female characters whose oppressive life “leads her to renunciation in an unrealistic and almost pleasurable way” (Beer 180).” Hetty buries her son; perhaps a sign of rejection for an imposed role. Ultimately, in contrast to Dinah who is “rewarded” with consent and approval for her ultimate surrender to the man-made world, Hetty is rebuked and punished for rejecting her maternal duties. Patricia Beer comments on the brutality of the patriarchal judgment regarding Hetty and declares that “to hang Hetty as a murderess seems as inappropriate as executing a cat for killing its kitten” (205).

Eliot's criticism of the crushing punishment of the fallen woman comes through depicting other female characters who lead a better life just because, unlike the fallen woman, they conform to the social expectations. For example, Dinah Morris is an intelligent and wise lady who has actualized a certain level of autonomy through which she participated in one of the most important institutions supporting patriarchy; namely the religious institution. She has a voice in the public sphere through which she preaches; something considered unordinary for women taking the limitations imposed on women regarding expression of religiosity. Not only has Dinah achieved

a profession, but her profession is far away from those allowed for women. She is a Methodist preacher who assists and advises others. Until this point, Dinah sets an example of a woman who not only rejects the patriarchal image of Woman, but turns the table on it and instead of being preached upon, she becomes a preacher. She uses one of the tools used to suppress women for her own emancipatory goals.

However, although Dinah is fully aware that marriage would make an end for her career as a Methodist preacher and ultimately hinder the process of her self-attainment, she ultimately embraces the domestic role assigned for women and gets married to Bede. It is really significant that Dinah's final consent to marry Bede comes as a result of her conviction that it is God's will. This is an indirect attack by the author on the side of Eliot on the institution of religion showing how it may manipulate people into following the traditional system. Ultimately, the institution through which Dinah used to substantiate her identity came to eradicate the very essence of this identity.

In addition, it is the Methodist church that mainly puts and ends to her career as the church bans preaching by women. Adam ratifies this decision by declaring that preaching is not a beneficial career for women. Ultimately, Dinah is confined to domesticity and her career eventually comes to an end. Thus, within marriage, Dinah starts a new form of identity. But for this time, it is a totally different identity that is dictated by the patriarchal ideology. Dinah moves from the position of preacher who had a voice to help others to the position of a woman who is dependent upon her man and looks forward to fulfilling her role as a submissive wife. In other words, by marrying Adam, Dinah completely compromises her identity and gives up her search for freedom.

In a similar fashion, Braddon, in *Lady Audley's Secret*, employs the image of the fallen woman to comment on the atrocities of their situation. What is more, through the figure of the fallen woman, Braddon freely comments on the debilitating situation of women as imprisoned either by fathers or husbands. For example, in the novel, Clara is repressed by a callous father and not allowed to express her feminine desires. She sums up the stifling situation she lives in as she declares that she is living in an "atmosphere of suppression" (Braddon, *Audley* 222). Similarly, Alicia Audley attends to her domestic duties and should obey her father. Phoebe also loses her independence in marriage to a husband who clearly shows his hegemonic nature as he

states, "When you're my wife, you won't have over-much time for gentility" (Braddon, *Audley* 66).

Lady Audley's situation proves a double jeopardy. She is the victim of both, a drunken father and a husband who deserts for purely materialistic purposes. However, unlike the other female characters, Lady Audley does not succumb to the dictated role of the wife. She repudiates her miserable situation and embarks on her journey for independence from the patriarchal oppression. Ultimately, as a disobedient (fallen) woman, she faces condemnation and rejection by the man-made society.

Lady Audley is diagnosed as a mad woman. Just like other women who reject the domestic sphere and the socially-constructed image of women, Lady Audley is relegated to the position of a madwoman as she revolts against the restrictions imposed on her identity. The patriarchal message is clear; within the masculine society atmosphere, a woman has to be obedient to the masculine ideology and fulfill the societal expectations of the docile wife; otherwise, she will face rejection and expulsion from the socially-prescribed model of normality.

Through the character of Lady Audley, Braddon subverts the traditional image of woman, which labels them either angels on the one hand or fallen women or madwomen on the other. Thus, Braddon critiques the image of the angel in the house' that is a motif in Victorian novels. Lady Audley repudiates the angel's image and adopt the fallen woman role. Braddon thus shows how madness is a label that is given to a woman who rejects the social norms. Through this critique, Braddon's novel stands as a trenchant attack on the Victorian ideals of femininity, which forces women to become fallen and punishes them for becoming so.

The figure of the fallen women gave the freedom of critique not only to female writers, but to male writers as well. For example, in *Jude The Obscure*, Hardy uses the figure of Sue (labeled as fallen woman) to promulgates a wholesale rejection of the religious patriarchal constraints that restrict women's freedom. He launches a trenchant attack on the Victorian religious conventionality that goes against women's search for freedom, independence and happiness. Hardy's views on religion are articulated through Sue. Sue is portrayed as a woman who aspires to break away form of religious dictates and questions the basic orthodox religious principles regarding morality and marriage.

Right from the outset, Sue is described as "a woman clipped and pruned by severe discipline" (Hardy, *Jude* 136). Sue exhibits a rejection of this discipline. Her

attitude and behavior rejects all conventional Victorian morality and ethics. She emerges as a woman who weighs matters by reason, subverting the idea that women are governed by their emotions. In her dissenting conversations, Sue puts into question rigid religious and conventional ideas regarding marriage and morality.

Sue does not keep her liberal ideology in a theoretical frame; rather, her behavior substantiates her stand regarding religion. Sue rejects all forms of religious prayer as a manifestation of hypocrisy. Her repudiation of the religious institution is best represented in her negative view of Christminster describing it as characterized by "timid obsequiousness to tradition" (Hardy, *Jude* 329). Most importantly, the fact that she leaves her lawful husband to live with someone to whom she is not married is a blunt rejection of religious dictates.

Sue shows her extreme disregard for the confinements of marriage sanctioned by religion. For her, such institution, with its religious foundations, is the antithesis of freedom. She lambasts the extreme conventionality of society which relegates marriage into a mere obligation that has to be fulfilled. She views marriage as a "vulgar institution" that issues 'sordid contract' in which the woman's affection should be given to the man "appointed by the bishop's license to receive it" (Hardy, *Jude* 256). Sue mainly criticized the obligatory nature of marriage as she cannot accept the view of marriage as an institution where one "*must and shall* be a person's lover" (Hardy, *Jude* 267). (Italics mine).

Like most women in nineteenth-century society and literature, Sue is trapped in the conflict between satisfying her emancipatory impulse and conforming to social norms that are substantiated by religion. She ultimately chooses the latter. Still, Sue's return to Phillotson is not a manifestation of defeat of her revolutionary nature; rather it comes as a final choice; a representation of a fear of some supernatural power that she may not be aware of. Her retreat into the religious domain is a protective strategy. She regards her marriage to someone whom she does not love as a sort of punishment and a source for redemption and shelter from further tragedies that may come if she keeps on her transgression. Here, Sue never contradicts herself and never abandons her repudiation of conventionality. She has always been a believer; however, like Hardy, she has been critical of the religious institution that embraces conventionality and inhibits women's freedom.

To conclude, the above argument aims at showing shows that depicting fallen women like Sue and others mentioned above empowered female (and male) writers to

launch trenchant attack against this oppressive label and the way society deals with such women. On a broader term, this gave writers the opportunity to widen their criticism to touch upon other feminist concern, most importantly the critique of the religious institution in its contribution to the oppression of women.

In the Victorian period, women had to face the oppressiveness of the religious system which provided unquestionable authority to the patriarchal system under which they suffer. For the male society, men's dominance over women was religiously ordained, and women had no choice but to show complete submissiveness and acceptance to the repressive system. Religion constitutes the mechanism by which male hegemony authenticates its power over women and instills its repressive agenda.

Within this context, women who expressed their rejection of the religious dictates, such as the case with Sue, face the thrilling power of patriarchy. Ruth's story also emblemizes the double standard that is at the core of the male religion. On the other hand, some other women could find a way out of this labyrinth, gain an informal voice within the religious institution and use it to serve their purpose.

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