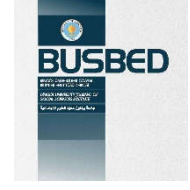


Article Type : Research Article
Date Received : 18.05.2022
Date Accepted : 12.10.2022



<https://doi.org/10.29029/busbed.1118437>

FAILED MARRIAGES AND SPINSTERHOOD AS SYMBOLIC FEMINIST CONCEPTS IN THE VICTORIAN NOVEL

Veysel Isci¹,

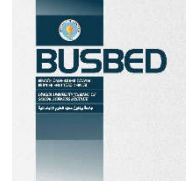
ABSTRACT


In nineteenth-century Britain, a woman's place was regarded to be in the domestic area, devoted to housework and family life. However, thanks to certain political, economic and social changes, women progressively began to engage in pursuits that were previously exclusive to the men. Writing a novel was one of these pursuits for some women in the Victorian era. Although under the pseudonym of a man, women writers like Mary Ann Evans published significant works during this era. In many of their works, these women writers challenged the role that women were supposed to take in Victorian society. Using various literary strategies, they opposed to conventional representations of the woman in Victorian novel. In this context, the present study examines two canonical works by George Eliot and Elizabeth Gaskell to illustrate how these women writers portray marriage and spinsterhood as symbolic feminist concepts. The findings of the study suggest that by illustrating devastating results of undesired marriages and offering a utopian world of happiness for spinsters, Eliot and Gaskell, respectively, take up feminist stances against oppressing power of patriarchal society in England in the Victorian era.

Keywords: Victorian novel, Marriage, Spinsterhood, Feminism, Women writers

¹ Dr., Trabzon University, School of Foreign Languages, veyselisci@trabzon.edu.tr, <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5187-5120>

Makalenin Türü : Araştırma Makalesi
Geliş Tarihi : 18.05.2022
Kabul Tarihi : 12.10.2022



 <https://doi.org/10.29029/busbed.1118437>


VİKTORYA DÖNEMİ ROMANLARINDA FEMİNİST SEMBOLLER OLARAK BAŞARISIZ EVLİLİKLER VE EVDE KALMIŞLIK

Veysel İşçi¹,

ÖZ

On dokuzuncu yüzyıl Britanya'sında, kadınların doğal yeri kendilerini ev işlerine ve aile hayatına adayabilecekleri tek yer olan ev olarak görülmekteydi. Ancak bazı siyasi, ekonomik ve sosyal değişimler sayesinde, kadınlar daha önce sadece erkeklere mahsus olan bazı alanlara da ilgi duymaya başladı. Viktorya döneminde yaşayan bazı kadınlar için yazarlık bu alanlardan biriydi. Her ne kadar erkek takma adlarını kullansalar da Mary Ann Evans gibi bazı kadın yazarlar bu dönemde önemli eserler kaleme aldı. Bu eserlerin pek çoğunda ise, kadın yazarlar Viktorya toplumunda kadınlara biçilen rolü sorgulamıştır. Farklı edebi stratejiler kullanarak, Viktorya romanında sıklıkla karşılaşılan geleneksel kadın temsillerine karşı çıkmışlardır. Bu bağlamda, bu çalışma George Eliot ve Elizabeth Gaskell gibi iki önemli kadın yazarın en çok bilinen eserlerini inceleyerek, söz konusu yazarların başarısız evlilikleri ve evde kalmışlık durumunu nasıl birer sembolik feminist kavram olarak kullandıklarını göstermeyi amaçlamaktadır. Çalışmanın sonuçları, Eliot ve Gaskell'in istenmeyen evliliklerin yıkıcı sonuçlarını ve evde kalmışlık durumunun getirdiği gerçekdışı mutluluk evreni gibi temaları kullanarak, Viktorya dönemi İngiliz toplumunda hâkim olan erkek egemen güce karşı nasıl bir feminist tutum takındıklarını göstermektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Viktorya romanı, Evlilik, Evde kalmışlık, Feminizm, Kadın yazarlar

¹ Dr. Öğr. Üyesi. Trabzon Üniversitesi, Yabancı Diller YO, veyselisci@trabzon.edu.tr,  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5187-5120>

1. INTRODUCTION

In the mid-nineteenth century English society, the traditional role of the women was identified as a typical homemaker and conservative nest builder to her husband and her family. Therefore, the duty of the female gender was to keep her propriety as modelled after the Virgin Mary so that she could enhance her chance to find a possibly wealthy suitor and that she would devote her self-existence to the profit and comfort of him as a husband. Undoubtedly, the influence of the Catholic and Anglican churches widespread within the country was great on this 'Proper Lady' role. According to the Catholic and Protestant doctrines, God had fully indicated woman's function when he created her for the benefit and ease of man (Poovey, 1984, p. 3). Moreover, the principles of raising children, rising the whole generation and preserving the ark of the lord depended – in no small degree – on the woman (Poovey, 1984, p. 29). As a result of these religious references, the woman was regarded as “the etherealized Angel of the House in the Victorian era” (Poovey, 1984, p. 30). Thus, as prescribed to the feminine gender by the dominant socio-economic order, the woman was supposed to find supreme self-fulfilment in complete self denial since the only appropriate sphere where she could reign was the home.

In order to fulfil this divine duty, the women should marry – a goal which is “appointed by society for them, [as] the prospect they are brought up to, and the object which it is intended should be sought by all of them” (Mill, 1991, p. 502). With marriage, women were assumed to have accomplished happiness and well-being for both themselves and their husbands. Therefore, marriage was seen as the only 'occupation' that a woman could do. It was also considered by young daughters of middle-class families to be the only way to climb upwards in social mobility. In a society where all the members were super-conscious about their class and thus social mobility for middle and lower class members was really hard, marriage was the key for women to change her social status. In a similar fashion, representations of marriage in the Victorian literature coincide with the dominant social view on women. Thus, it is not surprising to encounter many narratives that highlight the importance of marriage to young ladies in the works of domestic fiction and sentimental novel genres in the Victorian literature.

Spinsterhood, on the other hand, was regarded as a fearsome nightmare by maiden ladies and so this fear resulted in unwilling marriages on many occasions during the Victorian era. Seen in the dominant social order as a great failure for most women, the spinsterhood is found as a detestable status one should avoid. As opposed to an ideal that is based on “a religiously grounded understanding of morality and usefulness” (Berend, 2000, p. 935), the non-elective spinsterhood is viewed as an individual misfortune by most members of the nineteenth-century English society. Thus, young women were eager to get married in their early twenties even though they did not feel any love for possible suitors nor find them charming. Similarly, in many major works of the Victorian novel, consequences of spinsterhood are often depicted as loneliness, unhappiness, boredom, and even madness. In these novels, the spinster woman is mostly depicted as ugly, relatively old, restless, and even depressed.

Nevertheless, with the advent of the Age of Enlightenment, the Industrial Revolution, and many other groundbreaking social events that broke out in Britain, the 'proper role' for women began to change. Gaining popularity as a result of their literary success, women writers – such as Jane Austen, Charlotte Bronte, Mary Wollstonecraft, and Mary Shelley – started to question the domestic role of the women in the Victorian society. In their respective publications – novels and essays in particular – they challenged the conversational woman figure by portraying alternative women characters who were contrasting with the Victorian Angels of the House. In these works, marriage and spinsterhood are identified in a different manner which is conflicting with former definitions including propriety, morality, and conventional meanings.

In these contexts, the main aim of this essay is to illustrate how the notions of marriage and spinsterhood are characterized to contrast the old and reassuring social order by two women writers who published significant works in the domestic fiction genre in the second half of the nineteenth century. Therefore, first George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871-2) is studied to indicate how fatal marriages or individual reformations are represented as an antithetic response to the feminine propriety imposed by the society. Second, Elizabeth Gaskell's *Cranford* (1851-3) is analyzed to show how a community of spinsters is proposed as a pleasing alternative to marriage with an implicit feminine ideology.

2. FAILED MARRIAGES IN GEORGE ELIOT'S *MIDDLEMARCH*

Religion does not solely justify the established role of the woman. There are several other reasons why the women see the institution of marriage as an ultimate goal in their life. First, the woman is regarded by men to be inferior in muscular strength and thus she is believed to need a state of bondage to some man so as to overcome her physical weakness (Mill, 1991, p. 475). Second, owing to the limited access to the work place as a result of the socio-economic order in the era, marriage is virtually the only respectable 'occupation' for women apart from some other leisure time activities “such as playing piano, singing, dancing, fine needlework, and painting” (Poovey, 1984, p. 29). Through these free time hobbies, she could display her personal charms and desires in the Victorian era. Moreover, it is a common belief in the mid-Victorian England that “a happy marriage is to a

woman what success in any of the careers of life is to a man" (Fryckstedt, 1987, p. 13). Therefore, women's contribution to the domestic and national economy is considered to be only through offsetting the frustrations and strains a man suffers in his work place and recharging him for the next day's labour force. Third, Eger suggests that for a woman in the Victorian era "the best way to acquire knowledge is from conversation with a father, a brother or a friend, in the way of family intercourse and easy conversation which is a significant part of Anglican morality" (2010, p. 171). In this respect, women's familiar notions of bad and good are believed to be of didactic blessings descending from a superior man as her instructor (Mill, 1991, p. 568). Fourth, the fear of the notion of spinsterhood is quite prevalent among maiden girls in the Victorian society. Being a by-product of the society, the spinster is regarded as the lamentable model who is "only fit to live alone, and no human beings ought to be compelled to associate their lives with them" (Mill, 1991, p. 516). Therefore, it is not surprising to run into numerous female protagonists in the mid-century Victorian novels who yearn for getting married to some man.

For instance, it is clearly seen in *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) by Jane Austen that the Bennett sisters – Jane in particular – are desperate to get married to a man of high social status. In order to receive an inheritance and support her sisters, Elizabeth is also supposed to marry with Mr. William Collins, a clergyman and distant cousin of Mr. Bennet, as her father's family property is entailed and can solely be passed to a man heir. Similarly, another significant female character in the book and Elizabeth's best friend, Charlotte Lucas is introduced to the reader as a woman about twenty-seven, who is on the verge of being a spinster. Regarding that Mr Collins is her last chance as she is not getting any younger and she desires her own establishment, Charlotte marries him upon an urgent decision. In fact, Charlotte's approach towards marriage is super-practical and she gives advice on marriage at the beginning of the book when Jane is finding it hard to hook up with Mr. Bingley since she is quiet and shy. Charlotte says "it is sometimes a disadvantage to be so very guarded. If a woman conceals her affection with the same skill from the object of it, she may lose the opportunity of fixing him [...] In nine cases out of ten a woman had better show more affection than she feels" (Austen, 2006, p. 36). Therefore, like a typical female character in the Victorian novel, she accepts Mr. Collins' proposal even though he is rejected by Elizabeth the day before. In sum, as in many works of domestic fiction genre in the Victorian novel, marriage becomes the most important motivation that drives the plot in *Pride and Prejudice*.

Likewise, Dorothea in *Middlemarch* is also one of the female characters that seek marriage as an ultimate goal. But her representation in the novel is not similar to those of other female protagonists in the Victorian era. George Eliot hates "silly women novelists" of the Victorian era owing to their stereotypical fantasy portrayals of the conventional romance fiction (Fryckstedt, 1987, p. 31). Therefore, she prefers to write under a male pseudonym in order to avoid constraints imposed by the traditional expectations from women's writing. Eliot's female protagonist Dorothea is an exceptional woman when compared to the portrayals of female characters in the Victorian novel. She is intelligent, religious, and beautiful. Her religious desires make her reject the proposal of a baronet, Sir James Chettam, and other possible suitors. As an orphan maiden, she longs for a father-husband character, believing that the duty of obedience, which is not painful or irksome as imposed by the religion, is best accomplished by getting married to a man of sense and integrity. Dorothea's model of propriety is not taken "from other women or from books but from a man whose vocation incarnates absolute virtue" (Poovey, 1984, p. 217).

Being an idealist and scholarly clergyman, Mr. Casaubon is the best suitor in terms of Dorothea's standards. He is not only a religious personality but also a middle-aged man who can fill the emotional gap in Dorothea's heart that stems from losing her father at an early age. Mr. Casaubon himself thinks that Dorothea, with her submissive and worshipful character, would be a great assistant to accomplishing his life-long vocation, a book titled *The Key to All Mythologies*. As a result, with a Hebraist approach, they both unite their lives upon "a faith which involves the blending of a complete personal love in one current with a larger duty through an obedient submission of the soul to the Highest" (Eagleton, 1978, p. 122).

In fact, submission, endurance, and resignation personified by the female character Dorothea, have been in great conformity with the womanly ideal figure established by Victorian moralities. Thus, she also fits into conventional portrayals of young women seeking happiness in marriage in domestic fiction genre. However, Dorothea's philanthropic character is shattered when she meets Mr. Casaubon's artist cousin Will Ladislaw when she is on honeymoon with her husband in Rome. Ladislaw starts to feel sympathy with Dorothea, and she shows goodwill to him, as well. After they flirt secretly for a while, Dorothea falls in love with the young artist. The romantic love that the young couple feel for each other liberates Dorothea's soul in such a way that she feels "forced to abandon the lure of the imagination for the duties of a virtuous wife" (Eger, 2010, p. 152). Poovey suggests that "sentimentalism or romantic love similarly promises women emotional fulfilment and the legitimization of their autonomy, their intensity of feeling, and even their power" (1984, p. 243). Therefore, sentimentalism along with an individual reformation returns Dorothea to her independent, pre-marriage self.

Consequently, after Mr. Casaubon dies of a heart attack, Dorothea marries Will Ladislaw by flouting conventions even though she has to waive her inherited wealth.

By such an ending, which seems to be antithetic to the general characteristics of the Victorian novel, Eliot hopes to illustrate her rebellious nature and feminist world-view against the Victorian social order. For, Eliot suggests that an unwise marriage between two people that are not instinctively compatible never provides the free spirit and individual emancipation that the Victorian women necessitate. Since she aims to contribute to promoting the goal of social and religious reformation within the female society, who according to Poovey, is “an audience desperately in need of reform” (1984, p. 209), Eliot – like some of her contemporaries - perfects a form of irony in marriage by writing through the lenses of the ideology of propriety. With an attempt to challenge and attack the institution of marriage and patriarchal family, which is regarded as a unit of religious and social discipline, Eliot exemplifies liberal reformism for the female readership (Eagleton, 1978, p. 119). Through Dorothea’s self-contradictory romantic achievement, she unifies principles of love and female desire as opposed to morality and propriety imposed on female gender by the Victorian society.

Similarly, the romantic love presented by Eliot does not bear any similarities to the conventional love plots widely included in the domestic novels of many Victorian women writers who “often simply embraced the social role that women as a group had generally internalized” (Poovey, 1984, p. 38). These traditional novels, also known as novel of manners, do not conform to the Eliot’s feminist ideologies which encapsulate an agreeable form for women’s passions and an enhancement for the social order she disobeys. Therefore, in her much acclaimed novel, Eliot portrays another failed marriage to demonstrate that even though marriage is based upon a mutual consent between the couple, it actually does not yield an ideal form for the female gender if it lacks woman’s passions.

In this context, Rosamond Vincy’s complicated marriage with Dr. Tertius Lydgate in *Middlemarch* is not surprising, too. Rosamond is a stunningly beautiful woman who is obsessed with social gentilities, social upward mobility, and living well. The only reason she marries Dr. Lydgate is because he is wealthy and has titled relatives. Although Rosamond is from a middle-class background, she always dreams of leaving Middlemarch and leading an affluent aristocratic lifestyle in a town. In this respect, Dr. Lydgate constitutes a perfect match for her girlhood delusions including a charming prince. Nevertheless, Dr. Lydgate first considers their relationship as solely self-affection and falls out of love with Rosamond upon exploring that the local community regards them *de facto* engaged. But, he finally gives up his resolution and they soon get married. This unromantic marriage, which is based upon Rosamond’s fantasies, does not bring any source of happiness to Rosamond and literally ruins Lydgate owing to the unrealistic ideals of each other. Therefore, coping with the debt left on him as a result of his efforts to please Rosamond, Dr. Lydgate never finds happiness and dies at an early age, making Rosamond and four children widowed and orphaned, respectively.

By treating this irreconcilable marriage between Dr. Lydgate and Rosamond as a fatal error, Eliot aims to illustrate her disdain for the trope of perfect fairy-tale endings, which are quite popular in the Victorian novel. Unlike many other novelists of the era who portray the marriage as a magical wand of Cinderella, Eliot vividly depicts the realities of marriage in an unorthodox way so as to indicate unfavourable consequences of failed marriages. By doing so, in contrast to common belief in the era, she hopes to argue that modelled marriages like the one between Jane Bennett and Mr. Bingley in Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* or the ones between Rosamond and Dr. Lydgate, and Dorothea and Mr. Casaubon in her own book do not actually win out nor contribute to the spiritual emancipation of the female gender in Victorian society.

3. THE NOTION OF SPINSTERHOOD IN ELIZABETH GASKELL’S *CRANFORD*

Lucy Hosker argues that in a society which is “founded on the principles of obedience and submission to male authority and so requires women to respect a certain model of behaviour”, the spinster has no role to play since she is not regarded as someone doing her mission successfully (2013, p. 55). Deprived of the conjugal and filial love that they would enjoy if they were married and had children, the spinster symbolizes failure, despair and misery, and sets a bad example for women in Victorian-era English society. She is often portrayed as an aunt, an assistant to the mother for household and childcare, or an old grandma who lives in isolation in the many works of Victorian literature in the nineteenth century.

However, in one of her major novels, Elizabeth Gaskell creates a fictional small town called Cranford, which “is in possession of the Amazons, all the holders of houses, above a certain rent, are women” (Gaskell, 1966, p. 44). The majority of these women, who have her own eccentric individuality, are middle-aged spinsters or widows without children from a middle or upper middle-class background. The women characters in the novel are class-conscious and they put a distance between themselves and the women of poor background. For instance, Mrs. Jamieson overlooks a farmer’s daughter named Mrs. Fitz-Adam, who is also aware of her social status as an ordinary county girl. They often use the word *genteel* so as to refer to Victorian manners such as propriety and

elegance. However, in this fictional town, no one is superior or inferior in relation to the other human beings. Therefore, strict class boundaries, mostly seen in many other Victorian novels, may disappear in the long term if the women are given chances of social mobility.

On the other hand, in this distinctive women-dominant town, apart from a surgeon and a rector of the church, men appear temporarily and then somehow disappear. Actually, “what could they do if they were here?” asks Mary Smith, the narrator and one of main characters in the novel (Gaskell, 1966, p. 44). The spinster community of Cranford has a “distaste of mankind” (Gaskell, 1966, p. 55) and they have persuaded themselves that “to be a man was to be vulgar” (Gaskell, 1966, p. 50). Therefore, although some men such as Captain Brown, Mr. Fitz Adam and Mr. Holbrook are looked upon kindly by the women in Cranford, they suddenly die of some reason. Unconventionally, in a period in which “husbands are becoming more expensive, or reverse the formula women are becoming less valuable” (Poovey, 1984, p. 12), the women in the town are so ignorant of the men’s existence that they even do not know “what to do with a gentleman visitor” (Gaskell, 1966, p. 74) when Miss Matty’s cousin arrives in the town for a visit. In addition, as observed in the narratives of the crook, Signor Brunoni, men are attributed to all manners of evil and wrong-doing in this neighbourhood patronized by the ladies.

Similarly, marriage, the prescribed duty and divine vocation for the Victorian woman, is deliberately escaped and scornfully detested by the Cranford women, as well. For instance, Miss Pole and Miss Matty declare that they are thankful that they have never been married (Gaskell, 1966, p. 154). They further claim that marriage results in “great natural credulity in a woman” and therefore it makes her weak and vulnerable (Gaskell, 1966, p. 153). Moreover, they do not see the institution of marriage as a necessity in contrast to the common belief. Instead, by having a strong companionship among each other, the spinsters in Cranford enjoy individual pleasures at fashionable house parties and solemn festivities without being bothered by a husband or a child. They do not yearn for the companion of a man for daily pleasures and domestic fun. By “pursuing autonomy and rejecting wifely dependence” (Berend, 2000, p. 936), they enjoy life by solely seizing the day.

Likewise, in economical terms, the townspeople in Cranford depend on the solidarity among the women, too. For instance, when Miss Matty Jenkyns, probably the main character of the novel, is reduced to penury due to the bankruptcy, she fortunately finds many women around her who are ready to help. In addition, Betty Barker, a fascinating entrepreneurial character, sets another good example for the economical solidarity in the town. Being once a maid, Betty saves up all of her salary and buys a milliner shop. Designing patterns for clothes and selling them directly to aristocratic ladies with the help of other women in Cranford, Betty financially becomes a very successful woman. Thus, as they have a compassionate relation among townswomen, the women do not necessitate any kind of manly bondage for their economical needs. Unlike many other representations of the female character that has to depend on a man for her economical demands in the Victorian novel, the women in Cranford are independent and self-sufficient in economical terms. Therefore, as Lee Virginia Chambers-Schiller suggests in her work on nineteenth-century spinsters, elective spinsterhood is portrayed as a “dramatic new form of female independence, rooted in the individualistic ethic of the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution” (1987, p. 108).

Nonetheless, according to the women community in Cranford, the only ways that marriage can be beneficial in the town are through some other pleasures it provides. For instance, Miss Pole, another significant character in the novel, argues that she might need a man “to have someone to lean upon in difficult times” (Gaskell, 1966, p. 175). Similarly, according to the honourable Mrs. Jamieson, a widow with aristocratic roots, having a man close by may also be useful thanks to the opportunity it enables to have a baby (Gaskell, 1966, p. 213). However, the novel illustrates that the former pleasure is replaced by the consolation best given by the devoted friendship within the town. On the other hand, the latter agony cannot be eliminated without marriage since, according to the Victorian morality, “the loss of chastity means loss of everything that is clear and valuable to a woman, the peace of her own mind, the love of her friends, the esteem of the world, the enjoyment of present pleasure and all hopes of future happiness” (Poovey, 1984, p. 23). Thus, having a child without any legal familial bondage is unthinkable for even the matriarchal community in Cranford. Consequently, as Miss Matty confesses, the ladies of Cranford have a strange yearning in their hearts whenever they “see a mother with her baby in her arms” (Gaskell, 1966, p. 200).

By portraying the companionable relationship among the women as a volunteer preference to marriage, Elizabeth Gaskell represents the spinsters with a capacity to simultaneously deny and reject the social conventions of the age in which she lived. In fact, Gaskell conforms to the customs of the era by depicting the fairy-tale desires and delicacy of the female gender as in the examples of Mrs. Jameison and Lady Glenmire, her widowed sister-in-law. However, she also distorts the traditional family unit in an unorthodox manner by portraying the spinster as a radically excluded figure whose social isolation gives woman independence in her own world. Gaskell rejects manly power and man’s superiority to woman through presenting a self-dependent spinster community who does not need a marital attachment for the pursuit of her physical and mental well-being.

Moreover, she liberally reintegrates the spinster and the widow into society and therefore illustrates the possibility of pursuing the happiness and joy of life without having to engage to some man as a result of social oppression. In Gaskell's fictional town, the women can enjoy daily pleasures such as card games in accordance with the domestic decorum and get involved in the social network dominated by middle-aged spinsters. Considering the era the book is published in, some might think that this town seems to be abnormal and even utopian. However, Gaskell is aware of the fact that normality means conformity and conformity means lack of personal thought. Thus, by creating an unusual community in which the women act totally free and independent, she hopes to illustrate that the female gender does not have to depend on a man for daily pleasures and economical needs. Instead, she clearly demonstrates that women reject marriage as they consider it as an act conflicting with female autonomy, achievement, and self-development.

4. CONCLUSION

In the early Victorian-era English literature, the main purpose of the domestic novel is usually believed to describe love which ends up with marriage. However, while portraying love, duty is always underlined to be the correct act for women. Since the majority of the novelists in the century believe that social and natural causes combine to make it improper that women should be collectively rebellious to the power of men, they portray the woman figure as the decent maiden waiting for her charming prince who – as her eternal lord and sovereign – will meet her domestic desires with his manly power and affectionate caressing.

However, this proper lady character is seriously challenged and attacked as outmoded and destructive by certain eminent women writers including George Eliot and Elizabeth Gaskell. From examining Eliot's and Gaskell's domestic fictional novels in the light of feminist concerns, it can be argued that they both aim at changing the status of women in the nineteenth-century Victorian society by seeking to spurn conventional marital institution and family. With a rebellious attempt to redefine women's proper role, they oppose to the institution of marriage in a period in which the notion of marriage is still a sacred and ecclesiastical duty.

In her novel *Middlemarch*, George Eliot illustrates some negative consequences of falling in love with the wrong man and getting married to him. She also gives much detail on the results of restricting women to the domestic sphere in her book. She presents her personal values concerning the female gender in such a way that they seem natural correctives to the restrictions of decorum that young ladies are expected to behave and act. In addition, by depicting love as a romantic revolt that liberates woman's spirit in a reformatory way, Eliot deviates from the common representations of love in the fairy tales existent in the works of her contemporaries.

Similarly, in *Cranford*, another significant novel in the Victorian-era English literature, Elizabeth Gaskell sets up a women-populated fictional town in which she presents a self-independent spinster world with humour and gentle satirical touches. By portraying a pleasing and attractive spinster and widow society, she hopes to compensate the presence of conjugal and familial fears of woman. Through representations of this joyous spinster community, Gaskell aims to suggest that women are self-sufficient and does not necessitate a marital bondage to pursue their proper role in the society. Moreover, by dismantling the underlying structures of marriage and then recomposing them, she ultimately aims to remind the Victorian reader of fatal consequences of unwilling marriages. With a socially feminist concern, she instead offers a woman-dominated sphere where happiness and joy reigns among the residents of a fictional town.

In sum, both Eliot and Gaskell employ successful literary strategies that challenge institution of marriage, which is regarded to be the basis on which the whole social order is built in the Victorian era. These strategies, adopted consciously or unconsciously by both women writers, also have significant consequences that pioneer other feminist literary movements of the next centuries in English literature. By setting good literary models for the novelists in the upcoming centuries, they represent early examples of women writers who aim to portray the struggles that the female gender suffered in the Victorian society. Through representing happy models of spinsters, once portrayed as social outcasts and even ogres in Victorian domestic fiction, and highlighting adverse outcomes of failed marriages that are mostly degenerative for women, both Eliot and Gaskell open up new pathways that challenge canonized portrayals of the female gender in Victorian-era English literature. Therefore, they are now acclaimed as foremothers of feminism by some contemporary feminists.

REFERENCES

- Austen, J. (2006). *Pride and Prejudice*. Cambridge University Press.
- Berend, Z. (2000). "The Best or None!" Spinsterhood in Nineteenth-Century New England. *Journal of Social History*, 33(4), 935-957.
- Chambers-Schiller, L. V. (1987). *Liberty a Better Husband: Single Women in America: The Generations of 1780-1840*. Yale University Press.
- Eagleton, T. (1978). *Criticism and Ideology: A Study in Marxist Literary Theory*. Verso.
- Eger, E. (2010). *Bluestockings: Women of Reason from Enlightenment to Romanticism*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Elliot, G. (1994). *Middlemarch*. Penguin Books.
- Fryckstedt, M. C. (1987). Defining the Domestic Genre: English Women Novelists of the 1850s. *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, 6(1), 9-25.
- Gaskell, E. C. (1966). *Cranford*. University of London Press.
- Hosker, L. (2013). The Spinster in the Works of Neera and Matilde Serao: Other or Mother? In *Women and Gender in Post-Unification Italy* (p. 50-71). Peter Lang.
- Mill, J. S. (1991). *On Liberty and Other Essays*. Oxford University Press.
- Poovey, M. (1984). *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer: Ideology as Style in the Works of Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley, and Jane Austen*. University of Chicago Press.