

STRUGGLE OF A FALLEN WOMAN: A STUDY OF ELIZABETH GASKELL'S RUTH

Pamposh Ganjoo

Scholar , Department of English, University of Jammu, Jammu.

Abstract

The paper as the title suggests seeks to attempt a critique on the struggle of a fallen woman. How this notion of fallen woman emerged? For this we need to go back to the political history of England particularly the era when notion of fallen woman reached its zenith that is of eighteenth and nineteenth century England. Literature as such provides us ample instances of fallen woman no matter whether it is play or novel. The notion connected with fallen woman again speaks about her subjection where man had an opportunity to be on driver's seat. But every fallen woman has not the same story. If we take the circumstantial evidence into consideration the objective of this paper lies in an attempt to justify the struggle of a fallen woman through all possible means.

Key words: Struggle, Attempt, Fallen woman, Nation, England.

Who is a fallen woman? The answer to this question lies in several adjectives. Obviously a woman who has no respectable position in society or a woman who elopes with her paramour without the consent of her parents and brings disgrace to her family or a woman who is lured by rake, seduced and then abandoned or a woman who commits adultery and produces illegitimate children or a woman who is not legally united with a man but keeps relationship (physical) with him.

Debate on the chastity of woman had been prevalent right from ancient times. If ever a woman crossed norms repercussions were equally severe. First and foremost was that she was ostracized from her own clan and had to face humiliation from every corner. "Emigration Death or Prostitution were the three courses opened to a seduced and abandoned girl..." (Lane vi). What further complicated the situation was the rehabilitation of a fallen woman like who will support her at the time of crisis.

If we go according to the political history of England the cases of fallen woman emerged from elite class and it reached its peak in eighteenth century. English Novel as such deserves to be mentioned, there we have instances of elopement, abduction, seduction adultery and illegitimate children. Prostitution is one of the themes even in contemporary fiction especially it is seen with reference to African women novelists. Novels like *Something to Talk about on the Way to the Funeral*, *For whom the Things did not Change* and *The Cutting of a Drink* are outstanding

examples. Adultery dominates American Novels particularly *The Age of Innocence*, *The Awakening* and *The Scarlet Letter*. When we go back to eighteenth century England we have novels like Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders* and Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*. Daniel Defoe's Moll is a notorious thief and a fallen woman. She gets indulged in the game of seduction because she wants to be there. Eliza Williams in Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* is a fallen woman because of the circumstances. It is weakness on the part of Eliza that she succumbs to her seducer. When we go to Victorian England we have novels like Charles Dickens' *David Copperfield*, *Bleak House*, *Oliver Twist*, Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* and Elizabeth Gaskell's *Ruth* can be taken as examples. Each of these novels presents a different story in terms of fallen woman.

The cases of seduction were reported from women who belonged to lower classes. "Stories were told of seduced servant girls in particular who were desperate enough to risk their lives in attempting to rid themselves of an unwanted child rather than face losing their jobs or their reputation" (Jones 164). What actually paved the woman to lose her chastity? Reasons are several. But by and large the trouble lies in secondary status assigned to woman which in a way prompted man to take undue advantage. Even contemporary novelist Dorris Lessing speaks in details about secondary status of woman in her novels. This has been one of the highlight with Feminists as well. Simone de Beauvoir in her well known book *The Second Sex* analysed the repercussions of otherness which was imposed upon women. Who can forget the words of Mary Wollstonecraft when she pointed out that woman "... was created to be toy of man, his rattle and it must jingle in his ears when dismissing reason he chose to be amused" which means that women had nothing to do with rationality. When we talk about the secondary status of woman, there education also played a dominant role. "Lady Mary Wortley Montagu a noted blue stocking in the middle years of eighteenth century had expressed annoyance at the limitation of what women were taught: 'We are educated in the grossest ignorance and no art omitted to stifle our natural reason, our knowledge must rest concealed and be as useless to the world as gold in mine'" (Jones 89). So far as economic independence of women is concerned that too remained on back seat. If woman's skills were praiseworthy the only profession for which she could aspire was to be governess in some royal family. What was specific about eighteenth century was the emergence of Conduct books. When it comes to etiquette the role which Conduct books played cannot be denied "Exhortations such as Fordyce's *Sermons to Young Women* had become a subject that would be talked about. Conduct books such as Lady Sarah Pennington's *An Unfortunate Mother's Advice to her Absent Daughters*, Mrs. Chapeones *Letters on the improvement of Mind* and Dr. Gregory's *A Fathers Legacy to his Daughter* had been superseded by such manuals such as Thomos Gisborne's *An Enquiry into the Duties of the Female Sex ...*" (Beer 25). Conduct books had a word of advice for women in terms of everything. Consequently women as such remained on back foot. This speaks of the sad plight of women and in Victorian England (well known for Industrial Revolution) there was repetition of the same story. So far as "Fallen woman" is concerned she was "a linguistic coding as important as Angel/House in the interlocking of class and gender" (Ingham 25) which itself indicates that there were two sides of the coin.

When we move towards Elizabeth Gaskell she on the whole was influenced by Industrial Revolution of England where we do get an image of working class woman, a woman who was eager to work with her counterpart and ready to shoulder all responsibilities. If we talk about rights and individual existence of women there Elizabeth Gaskell gave a mixed response. As a woman she followed the conventions of society but "... she seemed to think that woman suffered from certain intrinsic deficiencies that were beyond the power of education to remedy." This sounds little paradoxical. Other part of the story was that "She was backward in publicly intervening in the general issues that affected womankind" (Beer 36, 37). Her novels like *Mary Barton*, *North and South*, *Ruth*, *Sylvia's Lovers*, *Cranford* and *Wives and Daughters* present women characters having different problems. Elizabeth Gaskell as such keeps eye on her heroines. What is specific about her heroines is that circumstances always put them to test. How they cope up in adversity this remains one of the theme with Elizabeth Gaskell. If we keep *North and South* and *Cranford* aside seducers do figure in rest of the novels of Elizabeth Gaskell. *Ruth* too is an odd one because it deals with unwed mother and her illegitimate son and what Christianity says about sin committed unintentionally. Gaskell through *Ruth* has raised certain questions to the readers. For instance "...how far a sin done in ignorance is a sin, how far other men are justified in punishing a sinner, how long it is before a sin is purged, how far the sins of parents are to be visited upon children and how one kind of sin weighs in comparison with others..." (Craik 50). Sin done in ignorance comes into force when we take Ruth's individual self into consideration. Narrator describes Ruth as "...innocent and snow pure" (Gaskell 43). Ruth is angelic. She is the child of nature. She has all those qualities which can win the heart of a person. At times she wins the favour of all those for whom she works. It is her innocence which leads her to the arms of her lover. She has another admirer other than her lover. This can be taken as one part. The other part is that Ruth becomes a fallen woman. Ruth earns prestige only in the eyes of those who come to her rescue. Ruth's fallen status paves the way for two extremes – one from where she gets warm response and the other which opposed her. In between comes her struggle. She struggles till the last moment and dies a heroic death.

But who is to be blamed for Ruth's fallen status? The explanation of this lies in Ruth's innocence. It is her innocence which results in exploitation. Moreover inherent qualities are not the only thing required for the growth of personality. It is grooming which can polish what is inherent and can broaden our mental horizon. Grooming in a way makes us aware of what is ethical and what is unethical. But this is what Ruth unfortunately lacks. As per the crux of Ruth, Ruth Hilton is a sixteen year old orphan girl apprenticed to a dress maker. It is very rare that she gets an opportunity to move out. She remains blind to the happenings of outside world. The only adventure for Ruth is Shire-Hall (where men and women have access to each other) a venue for ballroom. This is where Ruth comes in contact with Henry Bellingham, a wealthy gentleman, who knows how to exploit women. How to cut cake and eat it too this Henry Bellingham can do skillfully. He is the one who needs instant gratification. To call him a true lover remains out of question. It is Ruth who ultimately pays the price in the bargain. From here onwards we see Ruth meeting Henry Bellingham. No one can forget the harsh remarks of Mrs.Mason (Ruth's employer) when Ruth is seen with Henry Bellingham. It is very hard for Ruth to bear her remarks when she points out: "Don't attempt to show your face at my house again after this conduct. I saw you and your spark too. I'll have no slurs on the character of my apprentices"

(Gaskell 54). Ruth accompanies Henry Bellingham to the picturesque beauty of Wales in London. She has not the least notion that some men have tendency to harm. It is beyond for Ruth to think that she and Bellingham are not legally united with each other. When it comes to seduction Gaskell speaks in details. "The first is that unlike many Victorians she distinguishes carefully between different types of fallen women, between those who have been seduced and those who have been turned to prostitution as a way of life. She takes motives and circumstances into account of all those who have intercourse with men to whom they are not married under the general title of fornicators" (Beer 134). In case of Ruth circumstances pave the way for seduction. Bellingham does the physical harm. What proves to be more traumatic for Ruth is when Bellingham along with his mother lets her go with fifty pounds as if she was a servant. From here it is all together a different journey for Ruth because she is an unwed mother (which is unacceptable according to the norms of Victorian society) and there is no one to take care of her.

Gaskell is particular about the aftermath of seduction. The seduction of Ruth has raised certain questions. For instance will fifty pounds bring everything to Ruth? Who will support Ruth? What will be the fate of her illegitimate son? Is it wrong to help a destitute and fallen woman? Can we say love (which is a form of emotion) needs to be equated with money? As regards the first question, the answer will be no. Requirements ought to be fulfilled through money but money cannot be taken as a replacement of emotional comfort. Ruth as an individual has every right to struggle because whatsoever has happened to her for that she is least to be blamed and we need to quote the words of Thurston Benson (the clergyman in whose house Ruth seeks shelter) that "She must strengthen her child to look to God rather than to man's opinion. It will be discipline the penance she has incurred. She must teach it to be self dependent" (Gaskell 120). Ruth earns her living (she takes up the profession of governess in the house of Bradshaws, intimate acquaintances of Bensons) not for her own self but for her son as well. Bensons (Thurston and his sister Faith) helped Ruth when she was in trouble. This good will gesture on their part is fully justified through religious and moral grounds. When it comes to equation between money and love what comes into force is the relation between Ruth and Bellingham. Ruth loved Bellingham with sincerity. But Bellingham is a liar. What comes first for him is money. Had he been sincere in his love for Ruth he would have defended her character in front of his mother. He would have entered in wedlock with Ruth through proper ceremony. His desertion of Ruth is simply a "...monstrously act, monstrously carried out" (Gaskell 100). This monstrously act on the part of Bellingham becomes a turning point in Ruth's life. It makes her grow. It teaches her whom to respect, what to approve, what to oppose and appearances are deceptive. Even when Bellingham makes a comeback (as Mr. Donne the member of Parliament) with an offer of marriage Ruth is able to teach him a lesson. The message which is send across is that marriage is a sacramental union it ought to be solemnized with the right person. Bellingham no doubt has a statement to plead that "...people who are no saints have made very good husbands before now" (Gaskell 300). But it is simply a trick on his part. Bellingham cannot be at the level of saint. To call him a good human being would be a big mistake. Had Ruth consented to his offer even then also his character would have remained under dark clouds.

By and large it is manmade society which creates troubles for Ruth where it is clear that "Fallen women must not get married" (Beer 247). The trouble lies in laws made by society and man as

such is controlled by society. Things turn chaotic only when Ruth tries to create her place in society. This is where Bensons are left with no option but to invent a lie that Ruth is a widow so as to secure the future of her son. What is the actual story of Ruth? There every one turns a deaf ear. No one is ready to stand with Ruth except Bensons. Ruth has a past and her past becomes a public affair. Why? Here of course lies her penance (as per religion). Individually (as mentioned earlier also) Ruth is a pious soul. But when self of an individual (if it is stained no matter whatsoever the ways and means might have been) comes in contact with society there we need to face the truth. Ruth is an unwed mother. There is nothing but deep hatred and bitterness which Ruth feels for Bellingham. But Bellingham (biologically) is Leonard's (Ruth's son) father which is not to be denied. This in a way compels Ruth to go back to him, to nurse him when he is sick. Bellingham survives. Ruth dies while nursing him. Bellingham is the real culprit but he is not punished at all. It is Ruth who has to face every trial just because she is a woman. The root cause of the trouble lies in double standard where men were not at all questioned. This incident is authentic enough to highlight the subjection of a woman.

To conclude we can say that sinners as well as noble souls exist in this mortal world. Sinners can purify themselves, if they are given an opportunity and wish to do so. Ruth as such is not a sinner. She deserves to be applauded and her son deserves an equal right to live his life. But the tragedy is that Ruth is not given a chance to open her heart.

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