



# An interpretation of Victorian fallenness in the novels of Elizabeth Gaskell and George Eliot

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## Abstract

From the advent of the era with the fall of the Eve in Bible began the fall of the women too in the society. Society has always viewed the fallen women with a critical eye. Fallen women have always been stigmatized and labeled. The fallen women have also been a topic of concern for various Victorian novelists. It depends upon the writer how he views a particular practice or a cult in the society. Where on one hand some novelists have criticized these fallen women some have showed them as a badge of shameful and a blot upon society's morality, some have sympathized with them and hence even made efforts for their upliftment.

**Keywords:** Hypocrisy, Fallen woman, Industrialization, Class Consciousness

Victorian fallenness or let's say the fallen women were considered to be an inescapable as well as unavoidable element of the Victorian society. The Victorian society with which the following research paper deals with was believed to be a society based upon the negative epithets of hypocrisy, faithlessness, commercialism, earnestness, and hypocrisy. Where on one hand the society aimed at the progression and industrialization at the cost of humanism as well as intellectualism, while on the other hand the same society

failed to look at the deeper but the neglected side effects which the industrialization and intellectualism were promoting. If one intends to look upon the societal structure of the 19th century Victorian society and the dominating principles which were ruling the society, one finds that firstly it was the patriarchy, and secondly it was the hypocrisy. The Victorian society was one such society which was both male dominated as well as male oriented. The society was made by the men, for the men as well as made of the men, thereby neglecting the women's position and role in the society. If at any point of time society gave significance to women the perspective too ranged to male centric thereby neglecting the existence of women in the society. Since the society was dominated by class that is the upper, middle and the lower class, the women's life and functions' too were based upon those divisions. One needs to keep in mind that where on one hand the upper, middle and the working class women fell into the parameters of morality which were created by the men in the society. Still apart from these there was a very important yet the most neglected must criticize as well as believed to be the degraded section of women which was neglected by the society. This section was known as the fallen women in the Victorian sense and a prostitute in the current sense. The greatest hypocrisy of the society was that this section was greatest and still believed to be the most pathetic section whose mere reference would be sufficient to break all the moral laws and ethics of the society.

If one peeps at the literary scenario of the 19th century Victorian society one finds that fallenness or the fallen women were on one hand a topic of taboo while on the other hand they were also an object of curiosity for numerous writers. The ideology of the angel of the house was the dominating ideology of the 19th century Victorian society the angels were believed to be the forerunners of morality, they were beloved to be symbolic of purity, chastity and above all as the term fallen women by creating a contrast between the word fallen and women "the notion of 'fall' implied that she [the 'fallen woman'] had been respectable but had dropped out of respectable society. While Patricia Ingham generalizes that "prostitutes are typically presented as lower class, and 'fallen women' become declassified. If one goes by the above stated definition of fallen women and prostitute, one finds that the society viewed both the fallen women and prostitute with the same critical eye. In fact, it would not be wrong to say that the both the terms prostitute and fallen women were used interchangeable for any such women who deviated from the norms of the society or any such

women who crossed the threshold of the society in fact “literally every woman who yields to her passions and loses her virtue is a prostitute” (Silvis) under the Victorians parameters of morality.

If one states that Victorian society had very strict norms or parameters of femininity, it would not be wrong at all. The society held its own laws and code of conduct and the violation of these codes of morality were not only deemed to be offensive, instead their violation was the violation of morality and violation of humanity too. If one goes by the parameters which were created by society for women, they ranged from being, belonging, and made for the men simply. Whether it was her love, her affectionate solicitude for his comfort and enjoyment, her devotedness, her unvarying care, her maternal fondness, her conjugal attractions, everything was solely for the men and if any such women who deviated from these parameters they became an object of both criticism and a threatening object for others in the society.

Victorian age was an era of industrialization, an age of progress, an age of intellectualism, but it was the same progression, idealism and intellectualism of the one at the sake of the other which created discrepancies among the society. These discrepancies were responsible for giving birth, while at the same time distinguishing the haves from the haves-not. The progression was at the cost of exploitation, the immorality rose from the grave of morality. Prostitution or the fallenness was the product of the same prudishness, same double standards which were penetrating in the society, those same strict gender roles which turned a man into a machine and women into an angel. One also needs to focus upon the fact that not every woman was rich, not every woman was privileged and above all not every woman was fortunate to stay within the thresholds of the society. Sometimes it was the need sometimes it was a revolt against the existing and traditional gender roles sometimes it was the poverty which enforced these women to cross their threshold and hence turned them into a fallen woman. It was not necessary that fallen women needed to sell her body in order to be entitled as a fallen; instead her crossing the threshold was sufficient to break the norms of morality and hence make her a fallen woman in the eyes of the society. Before one studies the works of the two writers that are Gaskell and Eliot in a critical light, it is very necessary to look upon the existing factors which were prevailing in the society and which gave birth to prostitution or fallenness. It would not be wrong to say that industrialization, which on one hand became the root cause for Victorian progression; Victorian prosperity was also responsible for giving birth to fallenness and prostitution. It was the industrialization

which turned the man into a machine; it was not the man who was ruling the machine, instead the machine who was ruling the men in the society. Society has always run upon the binaries be it positive/negative, black/ white, strong/weak, moral/immoral. So was happening in the Victorian society as well. Industrialization not only opened the doors for employment, but with the advent of industrialization, there was also a clash of the gender roles. This was for the first time that women came in contact with the men with those men from whom they have been protected, but it did not take long for the people to understand that industrialization was simply draining every single of blood from their body, be it men or the women. Employment opportunities' was only a guise under which women too were exploited mercilessly. If one goes by the report as stated in Manchester Guardian:

July 24th, a girl in Oldham died, carried around fifty times by a strap; no bone unbroken. July 27th, a girl in Manchester seized by the blower (the first machine that receives the raw cotton), and died of injuries received. August 3rd, a bobbins turner died in Dukinfield, caught in a strap, every rib was broken (Engels 122).

There were numerous accidents which took place where the conditions of women became more pathetic because of working in the factory. It was the inhuman exploitation of these women during the factory work which not only reversed the existing gender roles, but at the same time it was these mills and factories where prostitution became threatened the most. The conditions of these men and women in the factories was not worse than that of cattle's who were left free to breed, and it was these mills and factories which became one of the most pathetic place for the women to exist. People started hating the place to such an extent as one father says that, "He would rather let his daughter beg than go into a factory; that they are perfect gates of hell; that most of the prostitutes of the town had their employment in the mills to thank for their present situation" (Engels 113) It was not the guardian of one or two girls in fact every person who sent his poor daughter to work in the factory stated that "three-fourths of the young factory employees, from fourteen to twenty years of age, were unchaste" (Engels 113).

Apart from being exposed to the outside male world, another important factor which gave birth to prostitution was the lack of property rights. It would not be wrong to say during the 19th century Victorian society, women did not have any legal rights of their own. Neither the married women had any claim in the

property of her husband, nor did they have any right in the property of their parents. If one goes through some basic rights which were made available for these women one finds that according to the Right to Property Act the condition of women was like that of a chained beast which could not do anything, she was like a slave who could neither leave her real master that was her husband nor change her master and marry someone she loves because firstly she had no such rights and if any women attempted such an act she was ostracized from the society by labeling as fallen women or a prostitute. Firstly, according to the law, women whether married or single even if she possesses a property. Another very important reason which drove these women towards prostitution as unemployment. Being a part of strict gender based society with strict gender norms; there were very few professions which were made available for these women. If one looks forth at the lost of those employment opportunities they ranged from becoming a “matron of a charity, sextons of a church, and a few parochial offices were open to them” (Smith 2) but these were options only in name because their hard eared money did not go to their hands. Unfortunately there was a very big difference between opting for a profession and earning a money because firstly it was believed that those who will receive a pay for work they were declared to be immoral women while on the other hand if the women were paid in some professions still they could not retain that money the money simply went into their hands. Therefore, the only other option which these women were prostitution or becoming fallen women because the profession not only provided them money, but it also provided them freedom to live accordingly which no other profession provided them. The next major factor which promoted these women to fall was the inadequate remuneration for their works. There were menial works which were available for these women in factories where dressmakers, milliners but once again these work were a work in the guise of human exploitation which provided these women with minimal pay for a day. After analyzing the above stated factors which gave birth to prostitution, how such incidences occur in the fictional world of Gaskell and Eliot will be analyzed henceforth. The first novel which will be taken into consideration is Adam Bede by George Eliot. Though the story of Adam Bede revolves around the life of four characters, Adam Bede the carpenter, Dinah Morris a Methodist preacher, Hetty Sorrel the beautiful niece of farmer Poyser and Arthur Donnithorne Dinah Morris’s suitor. It is Hetty Sorrel who becomes the center of concern. Since she is deemed to be a fallen woman in the novel. If one looks at the persona of Hetty she is someone who is an

epitome of femininity she is someone who possesses “delicate dark rings of hair”, “great dark eyes”, “sweet baby-like roundness of face”(Eliot 127) in fact Eliot herself criticizes her persona for her ambitious sexuality with unyielding austerity” (Auerbach 168). Hetty has been portrayed as someone who is not a victim of society she is neither a victim of poverty, she is neither heartbroken in love instead she is ambitious. She is a social climber who uses her beauty as a tool to trap the men in the society. During the Victorian era, the display of both a woman’s beauty and her sexuality was considered taboo. While Hetty who has been seduced by Aruthr Donnithorne her lover and seducer who belonged to an aristocratic society was something which was done by her will. She is a social climber she refused to accept her class, her lover Adam even her illegitimate child. She aspired to be a “grand lady”, dressed in “brocaded silk” a peacock “feathers in her hair”(Eliot 127) in fact she aspired for something beyond her reach. Hetty’s fallenness could neither be justified nor does she become an object of pity in the eyes of the readers. Since it was not only her beauty, it's her character, her worldly desires, her ambitious nature, her social climber attitude which was responsible for her downfall which rather than arousing a feeling of pity and sorrow arouses a contempt for her in the minds of the readers. She even fails to show any sympathy towards her child because that child was not the product of her love but because the by-product of her ambition.

Another such female character who falls into the category of fallen women is Ruth by Elizabeth Gaskell. The novel *Ruth* very clearly portrays, the double standards of the society where a woman who is not a victim, yet she becomes a victim in the eyes of the society because she innocently and naively crosses the threshold of her house. She is unaware of the norms of the cruel world falls a prey into the hand of a rich aristocratic man Mr. Bellingham. Ruth was an epitome of beauty as well as femininity. She was amongst the “most diligent” (Gaskell 10) of all the girls who were working and were to be taken for a ball. It was Ruth’s alluring beauty towards which Bellingham was stuck “noble head bent down to the occupation” (Gaskell 17) instead of the “flippant, bright, artificial girl by his side” (Gaskell 17) . The condition of Ruth was extremely different to that of Hetty Sorrel. It was the poor circumstances and the dire need to support herself as well her family which enforced a young girl like Ruth to earn her daily bread and butter by working as a seamstress.

Another factor which became responsible for Ruth’s seduction was her exposure to the male world, to which she was totally naive. She was just an innocent girl of sixteen years who was totally unaware of the cruel

patriarchal society and the harsh laws of patriarchy. Too innocent to understand and distinguish between the real and the imaginary world, Ruth becomes an easy prey to Mr. Bellingham, a rich aristocratic lad who was also her seducer. If one looks forth at the circumstances through which Ruth went, they were more or less uncontrollable. Ruth was a victim, she was neither a seductress nor does she wanted to be a social climber unlike Betty. She fell or let's say she became a fallen woman because she was destined not by the law of nature, instead she was destined by the double standards of society which enforced her to become a fallen woman and hence an object of critic to be ostracized by the society.

Another such work which brings to light the condition of the fallen women in the society is "Lizzie Leigh" by Gaskell. The story of Lizzie Leigh revolves around the life and the harsh circumstances as bored by Lizzie Leigh, the fallen women as well as the protagonist of the story. The story once again unlike the above-mentioned novels gives prominence to the conditions of the fallen in the society and the circumstances which were responsible for the pitiable condition. The condition and the problems which were faced by Hetty, Ruth and Lizzie were one and the same. The only fact being that it differentiated one from the other is that Hetty was the seductress Ruth was seduced and so was Lizzie, but the criticism meted out to all of these fallen women was nearly the same. The moment Lizzie's father got to know of their daughter's sexual transgression, "he had forbidden his weeping, heart-broken wife to go and try to find her poor, sinning child, and declared that henceforth they would have no daughter; that she should be as one dead, and her name no more be named at the market or at mealtime, in blessing or in prayer"(Gaskell 5).

In fact, James did not hesitate to consider his daughter as dead because he bounded by the conventions of the society. He knew very well that the only option left with girls like Lily would be wandering on the street, and hence opting for prostitution in order to feed the lad. The story very clearly depicts the helplessness which was encountered by the women in the society since women neither possessed any rights, any status, or an identity. In a nutshell, it would be quite doubtful to call the Victorian women as human being. If by any chance they were beings, they were nothing more than muted beings. Once these women crossed her threshold she was labeled as a fallen woman, and once fallen she was always a fallen. The fallen woman was not only shunned by the society because she was degrading the society, but the women's family too broke all sorts of relations from her from the fear of getting ostracized. It was Lizzie's mother and her would be sister-



in-law who were concerned about Lizzie, and they were ready to accept Lizzie and hence support her in all her circumstances, but not the male members of the family. Earlier it was Lizzie's father who was a typical "stern, reserved, and scrupulously uptight" (Gaskell 6) and so was her brother. Being ostracized from the society, being neglected by the members of the family, the only option which was left for the survival of the fallen women was to opt for prostitution. One thing which needed to be noticed here is that not to some but to a greater extent it was the society's double standard which was responsible for giving birth to these prostitutes in the society. The prostitutes or the fallen women were not born but instead created by the harsh biased laws of the society.

In a nutshell, one can conclude that fallenness or prostitution was not a natural order or a criminal offence which was penetrating in the Victorian society. It was the harsh and the unfavourable laws, the unjustifiable treatment against women, lack of employment opportunities, and lack of not only the property but even the basic of right of freedom which was deprived of these women. All these aspects not only encouraged but even forced these women, thereby leaving no space in the society but only to fall. To fall from the laws of morality, to fall from the laws of society.

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