

The Factory and Domesticity in Mary Barton

Cijo Joy
Assistant Professor (ad-hoc), Department of English
Shyama Prasad Mukherji College (for Women)
University of Delhi

Abstract

This paper examines the idea of domesticity in the novel *Mary Barton* by Elizabeth Gaskell. The paper looks specifically at the representation of the working class home and situates it in a society undergoing rapid industrialization and social upheaval. While the novel sympathetically portrays the hardships of the working class families, it also simultaneously expresses unease about any radical solution to the problems faced by working class families. Instead the home is posited as a possible bulwark against the harsh life of working class families. Within this domestic sphere, women's domesticity and femininity play a key role in maintaining the bourgeois political and social order. Thus working class families are also brought under the hegemonic category of bourgeois domesticity. The paper finally points towards the tenuous resolution generated by the contradictions between domestic ideology and industrial capitalism.

Keywords: Domesticity, Industrialization, Ideology, Bourgeoisie and Femininity

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Cijo Joy

Assistant Professor (ad-hoc), Department of English
 Shyama Prasad Mukherji College (for Women)
 University of Delhi

Mary Barton by Elizabeth Gaskell brings into focus a new social space formed due to the emergence of the Industrial Revolution that is the working class home. The novel depicts the social life of the working classes in Manchester. The novel thus brings to the fore a space quite radically different from the space of the home as viewed in Jane Austen. Elizabeth Gaskell provides a view not just of the slums of Manchester but also of Liverpool and the dock workers. In addition to these spaces, various dialects too add to the novels attempt at depicting the life of the industrial workers. The material set up of the working class home is in contrast to the affluence of the bourgeois household. The working class home is constantly stripped of things that underpin domesticity like fire and utensils. The working class home is dependent on the fluctuations of an unstable economy. However the values which govern this new space are seeped through with the dominant bourgeois ideology of domesticity.

Elizabeth Gaskell is responding to the first phase of the Industrial Revolution. She attempts to present the life of the proletariat, for whom, as she says in her preface, “I had always felt a deep sympathy (6).” In the Preface she states her inability to judge whether the complaints by the working classes were well founded or not, however, she observes their suffering being turned to revenge instead of a ‘resignation to god’s will’. She also states that she has attempted to ‘write truthfully’. However, it is important to observe Elizabeth Gaskell’s own bourgeois ideology mediated by ideas of religion, feminine sexuality and domesticity as translating her vision of the industrial slums. *Mary Barton* works towards articulating working class problems while simultaneously discrediting militant impulses within them.

Elizabeth Gaskell was writing at a time of enormous political and social upheaval. The cries of Electoral Reforms, Chartism were in the air during England of the eighteen thirties and forties. This period of unrest and market fluctuations causes Elizabeth Gaskell to shift her focus on the turmoil being caused in the working class homes. Elizabeth Gaskell’s central focus becomes the inability of these families to maintain a home dominated by bourgeois values. The feeding of opium to children, because of a lack of food, the desperation of fathers and mothers arising out of grinding poverty is seen by Elizabeth Gaskell as a snapping of the closest bonds of nature.

The dangerous effects of the vagaries of industrialization are highlighted in the Chapter entitled ‘Poverty and Death’, which gives an account of the Davenport home. The leisure time which is made available to the Carson family on account of the fire in the mill is contrasted with the home of Ben Davenport where ‘leisure was a curse.’ The home of the Davenports was a mere cellar. Berry Street, where Davenport lives is unpaved and has a gutter flowing outside.

Women throw garbage right into the stagnating gutter. Excrement on the streets completes the picture of a working class neighbourhood.

The home itself is too small to stand upright, the window panes are broken and the place is filled with the smell of the gutter. The brick floor, where the children sit, oozes with moisture from the streets. The fire place, a sign of a comfortable, secure household is empty. The home, which is supposed to provide refuge and protection from the streets, is swamped by the exterior.

This portrayal is in sharp contrast to the shops John Barton encounters on his way to find a druggist. The well lighted, well filled shops force John Barton to think about the contrasts between these spaces. The home of the affluent Mr. Carson too is completely different. The home is “a good house...well furnished...with many articles of beauty. (67)” The ‘roaring fire’ of Mr. Carson’s is opposed to the empty fireplace of Ben Davenport. The Victorian home according to John Tosh, “offered refuge from work in all its negativity. It offered bodily repose and human rhythms. (320)” This same model is inherently impossible in a working class setting.

The purpose of these spatial contrasts is related to Elizabeth Gaskell’s Christian world view. The solution to the woes of the working class, according to Mrs. Gaskell, lie in an act of sympathy and understanding between the capitalists and the working class. Job Legh, the worker who is critical of the Trade Unions, becomes Mrs. Gaskell’s mouthpiece on the relations between worker and master. According to Job, what upset John Barton was, “those who wore finer clothes, and eat better food...cared not ...whether he lived or died. (384)”

For Mrs. Gaskell, political action leads only to revenge and violence, where master and worker equally suffer. The suffering of Mr. Carson and John Barton are viewed as the suffering of two old men, two old fathers. As Mrs. Gaskell says, “Rich and poor, masters and men, were then brothers in the deep suffering of the heart. (366)” Thus a structural and ideological conflict is viewed in idealist terms.

However Mrs. Gaskell’s sharpest attack on Trade Unionism is reserved for its capacity to demolish the sanctity of the home. It is because of John Barton’s activities in the union and his part in the assassination that he is forced to flee from his home. When Mary approaches her home to meet her father after his self imposed exile, the place is devoid of any emotional attachment. As Mrs. Gaskell states, “...she approached the house that from habit she still called home but which possessed the holiness of home no longer. (353)” Again the image of the fireplace is invoked to reiterate the destruction of the home. The fireplace where her father sat had only a few ‘dull, grey ashes, negligently left’. The house too did not have any provisions left. The home which is supposed to inspire a sense of security now inspires dread and a feeling of abandonment.

The domestic however is also symbolized by the innocence and management of the woman. The sexuality of Mary is threatened by the advances of Harry Carson. Thus Elizabeth Gaskell presents the ‘dangers’ to the idea of domesticity in a social environment incapable of sustaining it. Esther and Mary are women who carry a new power over their body. This power allows them to marry across class and improve their condition. However Mary’s encounters

with Harry Carson on the streets, away from the protection of the home, are seen as a threat to her 'purity' and thus her home. The threat Mary faces is that she might become a prostitute. Her love of finery makes Mary attractive to a socially superior man, who might discard her. Marriage outside class ranks is not allowed in the novel. Women's identities are articulated in terms of a certain gendering which also takes into account class.

Mary's infatuation with Harry Carson is attributed by Mary to the absence of a motherly figure who could teach her the lessons of femininity, propriety and status. In the courtroom Mary explains, "...mother died before I was thirteen, before I could know right from wrong about some things...a mother is a pitiful loss to a girl, sir; and so I used to fancy I could like to be a lady, and rich, and never know want any more. (325)" Thus a figure of surveillance and discipline is called for by Mary.

Margaret too, on hearing of Mary and Harry Carson's relationship, especially Mary's active participation in it, is ashamed of Mary. Mary's feminine virtue can only be proven by her devotion to Jem. Mary does change and regrets her departure from feminine virtues. She abases herself for her unwomanly behavior and seeks to restore her self-esteem. Thus Mary's trip to Liverpool is an act of expiation. The stability of the working class family and home is conceptualized along the bourgeois lines of a monogamous marriage with the woman as the 'angel of the house'.

Mary's ability to adopt this bourgeois ideology is in sharp contrast to her aunt Esther who is unable to climb out and falls into the world of prostitution. Esther follows through with what Mary ultimately rejects. Esther's transgression of her class status and female propriety is unsuccessful in the novel. Esther's exercise of her agency in running away causes the death of her sister, the representative of the idea domestic woman. Esther is classified by John Barton as a woman who was "...so puffed up that there was no holding her in. Her spirit was always up... (9)"

The result of being 'noisy' and 'riotous' is turning into a 'street walker'. The misery of the prostitute is seen as the loss of that 'paradise'. The figure of the prostitute as Lynda Nead notes was very unsettling to the Victorian conscience, because they represented a public form of sexuality (347). Esther's transgression is seen as 'leper-sin'. Her body then comes to symbolize moral degeneracy and disease. Esther refuses to even kiss Mary for fear of 'infecting' her. Esther is also separated from Christian charity. As Esther wonders in the prison, "And yet I won't pray for her; sinner that I am! Can my prayers be heard? No! They'll only do harm. (125)"

Esther however is rendered homeless as well. The only place Esther can call as a temporary home is the prison where she was imprisoned. As Esther replies to Jem, "And do you think one sunk so low as I am has a home? Decent, good people have homes. We have none. (164)" On being asked by Mary about her address, all Esther can come up with is a fictitious one.

The doorstep is the only limit to which Esther is allowed, even when she goes to visit Mary, she has to change into a respectable dress to enter into the home. The shelter for Esther at Peter Street is not a home but a place where instead of family one has to share space with

strangers. Sexual freedom is thus punished and leads to ‘wild wanderings at night’ and drinking but not a home or shelter. Esther thus transforms into a moral lesson meant to be learnt by Mary.

John Barton identifies the factory as being responsible for Esther’s condition. Thus he resolves not to turn Mary into a factory girl. However, according to Ellen Ross women played a valuable part in supporting the families. As she notes, “Rarely based on affection, working class marital partnerships were a defence against the uncertain labour market and the multiple stresses of large families and cramped quarters. (325).”

Thus despite this trajectory towards the home and the interior space, the social world exerts its own pressures. Mary is forced to travel to Liverpool to search for Will. Mary comes into contact with dock workers whom she thinks of as ‘another race of men.’ Even motherhood is displaced from its stable position in the home and pushed outwards. “Motherhood and marriage”, as Shirley Foster notes, “represent the apotheoses of womanly fulfillment” for Mrs. Gaskell (136). Jem’s mother thus is required to visit Liverpool as a witness. This mobility associated with Mary, is something of an excess which the novel attempts to push back to the Victorian cult of domesticity. This domesticity is achieved by shifting the narrative in the end, to Canada.

Mary, Jem immigrate to Canada and establish a family there. The family resembles a bourgeois family with a garden and an orchard. In contrast to the stability occupied by Jem and Mary, John and Esther lie buried. The novel sees this as the end for the ‘two wanderers.’ However this solution still leaves more questions than answers. The contradictions of the industrial society have been merely displaced onto another terrain. The prevention of the contact of the street and the home seems impossible in Manchester. The proper family can only become a reality in Canada.

Thus Mary Barton depicts a picture of working class squalor which is predicated on capitalist relations of production. The home of the industrial worker is in shambles, however the impetus to a radical solution is disavowed. Similarly the ideology of the bourgeois domestic family is made an intrinsic part of the working class home. John Barton and George Wilson do show glimpses of communal responsibility by taking care of Ben Davenport. However their efforts are not really sustained and thus no other concrete alternative emerge. The home and the industrial society are meant to be protected by the ideology of bourgeois domesticity and Christian understanding and transgression is met with death.

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