

“Passivity” and “Passion” in *Ruth*

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Elizabeth Gaskell (1810-1853) is a Victorian female writer. As a conservative woman who embodies a typical angelic image of a domestic woman, feminist critics have branded her as an “obsolete writer”. Is that really the case? It may be understood by considering the character of her work from various perspectives. Most of her works are in the realism genre, based on their dealings with Victorian social problems. Among them, *Ruth* (1853) is a work that has been much criticized. And has been a controversial novel because it deals with an illegitimate child and her unmarried mother. The theme of rehabilitating a fallen woman at home was against the gender norm when it was published. Previous studies have referred to the Victorian treatments of Magdalenism and the representation of the fallen woman. Such critics have seen that the main character, Ruth is “passive”. Kimura says that excessive purity and passive attitude emphasized in this novel is one of the factors that cause her fall (Kimura 69).

However the fact is, when focusing on the characters around her, we see that the passive attitude of Ruth works as a media to mirror the nature of other characters, reflecting their inner self. Characters around her internalize deeply rooted social norms, but the observation of their communication with Ruth, who hides her identity and lives a life as Mrs. Denbigh, lead them to self-awareness. However, it could be said that she has a burning passion under her disguise. Her passion is rekindled by the seducer Mr. Bellingham. This study focuses on her character. Firstly, I consider the diversity of gender consciousness in the Victorian era by considering her gaze toward passivity. Secondly, I examine layered characters in *Ruth*. Then, I will clarify what Ruth, as a fallen woman, struggled with.

What Makes Ruth Passive and How it is Perceived by the Surroundings?

Examining how the narrator mentions Ruth’s behavior reveals, her benign nature and innocence. Her life as a fallen woman, which was caused by her pureness and ignorance, leads to regret throughout her life. In addition, living as Mrs. Denbigh, she is more aware of herself as a fallen woman which causes her to constantly feel guilty.

Sally, produced the formidable pair of scissor that always hung at her side, and

began to cut in a merciless manner. She expected some remonstrance or some opposition, and had a torrent of words ready to flow forth at the least sign of rebellion; but Ruth was still and silent, with meekly-bowed head, under the strange hands that were shearing her beautiful hair into the clipped shortness of a boy's. (*Ruth*, 121)

Sally, knew from the beginning that Ruth had a secret. She cut Ruth's hair to provoke her, but Ruth remains composed. Marina Cano Lopez says that "Radical passivity" different from mere incompetence to the obedience of Ruth who has no resistance to be able to cut her hair. There is the possibility of feministic self-expression that evokes a new logical recognition of the opponent by not resisting at all is there. (Marina, 33-44) Her feeling of guilt against her past activities has generated passive attitude of self- sacrifice, obedience, and humility. It coincides with the ideal woman the people around her.

2. Prejudice Toward Women and Gender Norm from Mr. Bradshaw.

Mr. Bradshaw is the city's best businessman and the person who embodies the hypocrisy of the Victorian middle class. His behaviors represent how men and women conform-with the social codes at that time.

'It would be a most fortunate connexion for you.in every way. I should have you under my own eye, and could still assist you in the formation of your character, and I should be at hard to strengthen and confirm your principles. . . . (*Ruth*, 183)

When he is trying to marry his daughter Jemima and his partner Mr. Farquhar, Bradshaw urges Jemima, an active and self-motivated personality, to "fix" her personality for marriage. Bradshaw believes that marriage is done for the financial benefit of men, and obliges limit Jemima to get married to Farquhar. This kind of father-daughter relationship was common in patriarchal societies. He acts according to the code which sets a standard of ethical conduct for Victorian women. Education women received in those days indicates how they should behave:

English women are proverbially silent: yet there is no reason why they should be so; nor why, because they are exemplary at home, they should be insipid in society. It is their boast that their education is superior, it is then the more to their discredit, when it fails in what is surely an important result. . . . Again, to be agreeable, a woman must avoid egotism. It is no matter how superior she is, she will never be liked, if she talks chiefly of herself. (Sandford Mrs John 14, underline is mine)

Victoria women are supposed to be silent. It was common that men of the upper classes have education to be knowledgeable to work in society, and that women are educated to be pure and quiet, and "insipid". Even if she was educated and aimed to be a "smart

woman," she was required to have an equal conversation with a man and to receive an education for the pleasure of her husband, to become a wife suitable for a wise husband. This is proved by the idea of John Ruskin's "Sesame and Lilies".

... but that it would often be wiser in men to learn things in a womanly sort of way, for present use, and to seek for the discipline and training of their mental powers in such branches of study as will be afterwards fittest for social service; but, speaking broadly, a man ought to know any language or science he learns, thoroughly—while a woman ought to know the same language, or science, only so far as may enable her to sympathise in her husband's pleasures, and in those of his best friend. (Ruskin,129)

Inglis Katherine says, "If good depends on its separation from evil for its continued existence, then the innocent must be kept apart from the tainted. A "fallen and depraved" woman is not fit to associate with his "pure children". His logic leads ineluctably to condemnation of her child, that "her of shame" whose association with his "innocent" children could have "contaminated" them." (Inglis, p.16). He is also strongly obsessed with gender norms that emphasize responsibility. He believed that women were pure and had virginity, and that women who deviated from that image were evil no matter what.

'Very fine muslin, indeed,' said Miss Benson, feeling it, and holding it up against the light, with the air of a connoisseur; yet all the time she was glancing at Ruth's grave face. The latter kept silence, and showed no wish to inspect her present further. (131) Ruth is terribly confused because Mr. Bradshaw sends her a white dress. It is well known that white is a representation of pure blood and purity. He does not know her color preference having just met. However, this reveals his own favorable image of Ruth. In this way, women in the Victorian era have been forced by men to conform with "the way women are" not only externally but also internally. Ruth is distrustful of him, but cannot give his opinion. (Do not let others around)

2. New Woman and Men and Their Conflict: Jemima and Mr. Farquhar.

2-1 : Jemima, confused between her gender view and social ideal female figure

Not all women characters are subordinate and passive, nor not all men have gender bias in *Ruth*. When we look at some of the character's gaze toward Ruth, we could see their worries and new gender awareness. First, Jemima, who challenges contemporary norms and becomes an unconventional new woman. Second, Farquhar, a man who fights his reason in favor of feelings.

Jemima is 2 years younger than Ruth and has a very active personality and tends to express her opinions clearly. So she is far from a Victorian ideal woman. She is in love

with Mr. Farquhar, but she is greatly upset when she finds that Mr. Farquhar is in love with Ruth.

Ruth was beautiful, gentle, good, and conscious. The hot color flushed up into Jemima's sallow face as she became aware that, even while she acknowledged these excellencies on Mrs Denbigh's part, she hated her. The recollection of her marble face wearied her even to sickness; the tones of her low voice were irritating from their very softness. Her goodness, undoubted as it was, was more distasteful than many faults which had more savour of human struggle in them. (202)

Jemima is jealous for Ruth, but praises Ruth's character and yet even with her jealousy does not deny it. Her jealousy is also directed at herself. What changed between them was not Ruth, but Jemima's attitude towards Ruth changed. Jemima does not want to bend her gender awareness. But Farquhar was admitted to Ruth eventually, who embodies the angel in the house. In order for Jemima to be recognized, she has to pretend to conform to the contemporary image of a woman. Hence, there are complex emotions caused by irresponsibility, inferiority, and disappointment.

... She knew that Mrs. Denbigh's former name had been Hilton. She had heard her speak casually, but charily, of having lived in Fordham. She knew she had been in Wales but short time before she made her appearance in Eccleston. There was no doubt of the identity. Into the middle of Jemima's pain and horror at the afternoon's discovery, there came a sense of the power which the knowledge of this secret gave her over Ruth ... (268)

When Jemima learns that Ruth was a fallen woman, she feels the pain and fear of the heart as you can see from the underlined. However, Jemima no longer avoids her or disgusted. Jemima find that Ruth was not a perfect person. And she have a family consciousness towards Fallen woman. The narrator notes that Ruth has fallen socially and Jemima has fallen mentally. However, Jemima has the urge and temptation to manipulate Ruth for a moment, but continues to respect Ruth. Despite these conflicting feelings, Jemima does not live like Ruth, but continues to have her gender awareness. It is important not to be subordinate to men nor to be silent, but to allow them to recognize her independence.

2-2 : Mr. Farquhar Fluctuate between Reason and Emotion.

'love' was too noble a word to call such cold calculating feeling as his must be, who went about with a pattern idea in his mind, trying to find a wife to match (182). Mr. Farquhar is a calculating person and choses a woman is helpful to him when choosing his wife. He is a person who embodies "reason", a property which has been essential for mas-

culinity for a long time. Ruth is also an ideal woman for him and he wants to make Ruth his wife. However, there is Jemima in one corner of his heart.

As for Mr. Farquhar, he was almost weary of himself; no reasoning, even no principle, seemed to have influence over him, for he saw that Jemima was not at all what he approved of in woman. He saw her uncurbed and passionate, affecting to despise the rules of life he held most sacred, and indifferent to, if not positively disliking him; and yet he loved her dearly. (189)

A wife that seems enviable to him in society is a beautiful and obedient woman like Ruth, and in his calculations, he knows that he should make her his wife. However, he unknowingly remembers Jemima, which cannot resist by the power of will. As you could see from his action, no matter how intelligently men behave, they first react to the situations with their hearts and senses. From the old days to the present, there is often a line between men being rational and women being emotional, but when considering Farquhar's feelings, one can see a male figure with both reason and emotions.

2-3: New Couple image in Jemima and Farquhar

The patriarchal system is dominant with Victorian couples. Men are the mainstays of the family, and women are required to be quietly supportive at home. In addition, work and society are clearly separated as men's realm and family as women's. Even at home, it was considered a taboo that women discuss men's realm. However, Jemima and Farquhar who will be married later, overturn this "common sense of married couple". The following quote describes Jemima's will.

You talk in that high strain about principle because it sounds will, and is respectable—and even these things are better than your cold way of looking out for a wife, just as you would do for a carpet, to add to your comforts, and settle you respectably. But I won't be that wife. You shall see something of me which shall make you not acquiesce so quietly in the arrangements of firm. (185, underline is mine)

Jemima does not like to be a conventional type of wife and refers to carpets as a metaphor for a comfort of life and refuses to be confined in the home.

She imposes very strict regulations on Mr. Farquhar's compliances; and asserts her individuality different from his more than ever, but with a secret joyful understanding with him in her heart, even while they disagree with each other—for similarity of opinion is not always -I think not often- needed for fulness and perfection of love. (308)

this is pretended as an ideal couple image of married couple by the narrator indicating how women should interact with men. It is shown against the norm that women have

been molded to be silent, and instead, it is suggested that they will exchange opinions evenly, even if they have different ideas. Koshikawa credits Gaskell voice the Victorian ideal of marriage. She said “Jemima is kind, but lets you expect that you become the stouthearted wife who does not depend on the father and the husband.” (Koshikawa, 133) The way of the couple of Jemima and Farquhar is unconventional and liberal and does not get snagged on conventional paternal authority-like homage, Jemaima works out with her husband a way to value and respect her own gender identity.

Conclusion

Gaskell mentions the situation where Victorian women were placed as follows;

... The daily life into which they are absorbed before they are well aware, forms chains which only one in a hundred has moral strength enough to despise, and to break when the right time comes— when an inward necessity for independent individual action arises, which is superior to all outward conventionalities.

Therefore, it is well to know what were the chains of daily domestic habit which were the natural leading-strings of our forefathers before they learnt to go alone. (6)

The characteristics of Ruth judging from what is embodied in “angle in the house” are made into an eidolon at the time. The passiveness has a negative impression but Victorian women extended and add derivatives to “passiveness”, and it has been idealized. The gender awareness that society makes it and gave becomes the shackles, to tie New woman such as Jemima, However, there are some people who do not necessarily have the fixed idea of the relationship between way of the man and woman such as Mr. Bradshaw. Gaskell advocated seeking discussion rather than seeking consensus between men and women at home through the image of the Farquhar. I insist on what can find various sense of values to be seen in the gender model that is strict by examining eyes and feelings to Ruth of assistant characters of Ruth in this article.

Further tasks is how Ruth feel when met Mr. Bermingham and bring up Leonard. I consider that Ruth tends to be perceived as passive. However, she is a shaking person between her mother and a woman. Next paper, I focus on the passion that comes from Ruth’s desires and how it was suppressed by inconsistent social norms.

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