

Elizabeth Gaskell'ın *Cranford* Adlı Romanında Viktoryan Sınıf Bilinci

The Victorian Class- Consciousness As Reflected In Elizabeth Gaskell's *Cranford**

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ÖZET

Bu çalışmada, Elizabeth Gaskell'in *Cranford adlı* romanından örneklemelerle Viktoryan toplumundaki sınıf bilinci ve kültürü konusu ele alınarak, Elizabeth Gaskell'in Viktoryan sınıf sistemine olan tutumu incelenecektir. Viktoryan İngilteresi katı sınıf farklılıkları ve toplumsal sınıflar arasındaki aşılması zor sınırlarla bilinir. Bu bağlamda, Viktoryan İngilteresi'nde bireyler için sınıfsal hareketlilik ya da sınıf atlamak çok zor, hatta neredeyse imkânsızdır. Özellikle, aristokrat kökenli İngilizler, ticaretle uğraşan burjuvazi sınıfına yukardan bakmaktadır ama diğer taraftan, kendilerinin eski itibarlarını kaybetmelerine ve burjuvazinin günbegün artan mali gücüne de seyirci kalmaktan başka bir şey de gelmez ellerinden. Bu sosyal koşullar çerçevesinde, her iki sosyal sınıf arasında sorunlar ve çelişkiler olması tabii ki kaçınılmazdır, çünkü aristokratlar burjuvazi sınıfını ötekileştirmekte ve onları aşağılamaktadır. Diğer bir deyişle, biz ve ötekiler tutumu olarak da tanımlayabileceğimiz bir tavır takınarak burjuvazi sınıfını dışlamaktadırlar. Aristokrat kökenli İngilizler'e göre burjuvaziler kabadır, eğitimsizdir ve finansal güçleri olsa dahi saygı görmeyi hak etmezler. Viktoryan İngiltere'sinde burjuvaziler, aristokratlara göre, kadınlar da erkeklere göre ikinci sınıf vatandaş olarak görülmektedir. Bir bireyin hangi sınıfa ait olduğu neredeyse tüm hayatının akışını belirlemektedir. Bu nedenle, sosyal sınıflar arasında geçişkenlik yok denecek kadar azdır. Viktoryan İngilteresi'ndeki sosyal sınıf bilinci ve benzeri sosyal konular Elizabeth Gaskell tarafından *Cranford* adlı romanda, ondokuzuncu yüzyıl İngiltere'sinden örneklemelerle, eleştirel bir gözle irdelenmektedir.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Viktoryan sosyal sınıf bilinci, Elizabeth Gaskell, *Cranford*, ötekileştirme, Viktoryan İngilteresi, biz ve ötekiler tutumu.

Çalışmanın türü: Araştırma

ABSTRACT

In this article, the Victorian class-consciousness and culture will be analysed with reference to Elizabeth Gaskell's *Cranford*. Victorians are famous for their class-consciousness and conservatism, which make it more difficult for the individuals to change their social class. In other words, social mobility is very difficult and very rare in Victorian England. The aristocracy and the gentility look down upon the bourgeoisie on the assumption that they are uneducated and uncultivated. In the eye of the gentility, the bourgeoisie does not deserve to be shown respect, regardless of their increasing financial power. On the other hand, powerwise, it is an undeniable socio-historical fact that the bourgeoisie is on the rise, whereas the aristocracy is on the decline in the Victorian era (Schultz, 1992: 241, 251; Reader, 1974: 45; McDowall: 1989, 139). Ignoring all these socio-political developments, the English gentility insists on excluding the Merchant class people from their own circles and applying the othering process to the bourgeoisie. Thus, they do not have a welcoming and inclusive attitude towards the bourgeoisie and look down upon them. As an extension of the us and them attitude, not only merchants, but also women are perceived as second class citizens (*The Second Sex*) in Victorian Britain. Parallel to these, Victorian class-consciousness and strict social norms and manners are depicted realistically in Elizabeth Gaskell's *Cranford*. Furthermore, Elizabeth Gaskell questions the Victorian class system, illustrated in detail in *Cranford*, by adopting a critical attitude towards these issues.

Keywords: Victorian class-consciousness, Elizabeth Gaskell, *Cranford*, the othering process, Victorian England, us and them attitude.

The type of reserach: Research

Throughout *Contemporary British Society* and *Victorian People and Ideas*, it is stated that British society is very class-conscious. Elizabeth Gaskell also questions the Victorian class-structures in her novel, *Cranford*. In the novel, she does criticise British society by creating a funny and utopic atmosphere since Cranford society consists of only women who care too much for manners. To begin with, talking about money is an unacceptable and inappropriate thing for the Cranford ladies. In order to fit into these Victorian norms, nobody in Cranford society talks about money or their financial troubles. The narrator says,

I imagine that a few of the gentlefolks of Cranford were poor, and had some difficulty in making both ends meet; but they were like the Spartans, and concealed their smart under a smiling face. We none of us spoke of money, because that subject savoured of commerce and trade, and though some might be poor, we were all aristocratic. (Gaskell, 1994: 17-8)

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Then, though they do not have the money, they have upper-class manners and act accordingly. They give value to reading classic books and this is depicted a bit satirically in the dispute between the two characters, namely Captain Brown and Miss Jenkyns:

Now Miss Jenkyns was daughter of a deceased rector of Cranford; and, on the strength of a number of manuscript sermons, and a pretty good library of divinity, considered herself literary, and looked upon any conversation about books as a challenge to her. (Gaskell, 1994: 26)

Miss Jenkyns is the typical conservative noble-lady, who has prejudice towards the new things and she divides culture as “low” and “high” culture (Arnold, 1994: 1404-1410) and looks down upon *the Pickwick Papers* and makes negative comments about it without even reading it and praises Dr. Johnson since reading Dr. Johnson is appropriate and acceptable by the elite. The irony is that most of the ladies in Cranford read *the Pickwick Papers*, but make sure they keep quiet about it. In the novel, Knezevic explains that Dickens is the emblem of a new literary culture, in which the middle-class authority is explained and upon this fact Miss Jenkyns does not like *the Pickwick Papers*. Therefore, she may be a parody of the well-educated Victorian people. She says, “I consider it vulgar, and below the dignity of literature, to publish in numbers” (Gaskell, 1994: 18). This sentence reveals that she does not like the technological changes, either.

In Cranford society, manners and social norms are put on pedestal and followed strictly. Accordingly, “[t]here were rules and regulations [even] for visiting and calls” (Gaskell, 1994: 40). Therefore, Cranford ladies pay attention to “never to stay longer than a quarter of an hour” (Gaskell, 1994: 17) in visits. To define the right way of behaviour and manners, the word genteel is used in many places in the novel.

Within the context of Victorian manners and gentility, the ladies of Cranford consider that people, who are involved in trade are socially inferior since trade is not an appropriate occupation for genteel people. For instance, Miss Jessie Brown’s admission that she has an uncle, who is a shopkeeper shocks the ladies and they try to keep this fact as a secret from Mrs. Jamieson, who is a noble lady and that she would not like to be “in the same room with a shopkeeper’s niece!” (Gaskell, 1994: 46). Furthermore, Miss Betty Barker is hesitant about extending an invitation to Mary Smith because of her connection with the industrial Drumble. Mary is aware of this fact as she said, “She gave me also an impromptu invitation, as I happened to be a visitor; though I could see she had a little fear lest, since my father had gone to live in Drumble, he might have engaged in that “horrid cotton trade”, and so dragged his family down out of “aristocratic society” (Gaskell, 1994: 106).

Obviously enough, these characters, coming from different classes, looked at life from different perspectives; even their view points about trading, which was at the heart of Industrial Revolution (Schultz 230-233), could reflect huge differences. For instance, trade was an occupation which was looked down upon by the upper-classes (Reader, 1974: 149). On the other hand, trade laid at the centre of middle-class life and was considered to be a very promising occupation.

As it is illustrated above, Cranford ladies are very “class-conscious,” but their class-consciousness is related to the culture rather than money. For instance, in the novel, another indicator of one’s class and culture is dining and it is assumed that creatures of the inferior races eat and drink; only man dines. Moreover, dining is perceived as the privilege of civilisation: The rank, which people occupy in the social-strata, may be measured by their way of taking their meals, as well as by their social manners. With regard to dining, Mrs Beeton, whose *Book of Household Management* was published in 1861, suggests that “[d]ining is the privilege of civilisation... The nation which knows how to dine has learnt the leading lesson of progress” (“The Victorian Dining Room”). Accordingly, since dining is associated with one’s class in the novel, Miss Jenkyns is stick to dining rules and expects the same thing from Miss Matty and warns her whenever Miss Matty ignores these rules. Miss Jenkyns criticizes Miss Matty in the following words: “[S]ome people having no idea of their rank as a captain’s daughter” (Gaskell, 1994: 44). In other words, one’s class and cultural background may determine how someone eat and make somebody either genteel or vulgar. In the novel, Cranford ladies choose to be genteel¹. Then, within the frame of gentility “it is considered vulgar to give anything expensive, in the way of eatable or drinkable, at the evening entertainments” (Gaskell, 1994: 19). This is a

¹ Gentility and class are two important factors in the lives of Cranford ladies and their fondness to the hats throughout the novel is also in line with their fussiness about gentility and class, since hat symbolizes aristocracy and gentility.

natural consequence of the prevalent poverty, but it is elegant. In Cranford, “economy was always ‘elegant’ and money-spending always ‘vulgar and ostentatious’” (Gaskell, 1994: 19).

Despite the fact that the Cranford ladies are not very rich, they still avoid to mingle with ordinary people such as farmers and therefore, they put a distance between themselves and a farmer’s daughter named Mrs. Fitz-Adam. Mrs. Fitz-Adam is very conscious of the fact that she is “nothing but a country girl, coming to market with eggs and butter, and such like things” (Gaskell, 1994: 194). Considering Mrs. Fitz-Adam’s country origin, Mrs. Jamieson overlooks her and tries to exclude her from the ladies’ society. In order to be accepted by the genteel ladies to their society, Mrs. Fitz-Adam buys an aristocrat’s house, but the ladies are still hesitant; the narrator says,

I remember the convocation of ladies who assembled to decide whether or not Mrs. Fitz-Adam should be called upon by the old blue-blooded inhabitants of Cranford. She had taken a large rambling house, which had been usually considered to confer a patent of gentility upon its tenant, because, once upon a time, seventy or eighty years before, the spinster daughter of an earl had resided in it. (Gaskell, 1994: 109)

However, ironically Mrs. Jamieson’s sister-in-law, Lady Glenmire marries Mrs. Fitz Adam’s brother, the surgeon Mr. Hoggins, which can be seen as a downward movement in the social strata for Mrs. Jamieson. Apart from her, Miss Jenkyns is very class-conscious and she does not allow Matilda to marry Thomas Holbrook as he is not a member of the upper class and hence he is not a gentleman. Holbrook wants to marry Miss Matty,

but his property was not large enough to entitle him to rank higher than a yeoman; or rather, with something of the ‘pride which apes humility’, he had refused to push himself on, as so many of his class had done, into the ranks of the squires. He would not allow himself to be called Thomas Holbrook, Esq.; he even sent back letters with this address, telling the post-mistress at Cranford that his name was Mr. Thomas Holbrook, yeoman. (Gaskell, 1994: 56)

Thomas Holbrook rejects the social strata by refusing titles and by speaking constantly “the dialect of the country in perfection” (Gaskell, 1994: 57) though he can speak elegantly, but his resistance² could not change the facts such as the class differences and “Miss Jenkyns³ and her father didn’t like Miss Matty to marry (Thomas Holbrook) below her rank” as “she was the rector’s daughter.. .” (Gaskell, 1994: 57). Whereas Thomas Holbrook may be defined only as a romantic yeoman, not a noble man by referring to the information given by the narrator, “I never met with a man, before or since, who had spent so long a life in a secluded and not impressive country, with ever-increasing delight in the daily and yearly change of season and beauty” (Gaskell, 1994: 62). Thus, in *Cranford*, the most important conflicts center on the problem of what constitutes a proper marriage⁴ in terms of rank.

Meanwhile, class-barriers begin to break down when Lady Glenmire marries the doctor, Mr. Hoggins. Glenmire’s marriage to surgeon Hoggins is seen as a step down in the rank since the concept of gentleman was still a bit problematic. David Cody puts this in “The Gentleman” as follows,

Members of the British aristocracy were gentleman by right of birth. Other Victorians - clergy belonging to the Church of England, army officers, members of Parliament – were recognized as gentlemen by virtue of their occupations, while members of other respectable professions - engineers, for example were not. (“Gentleman”)

This is pointed out in *Cranford* explicitly,

Indeed, we were rather proud of our doctor at Cranford, as a doctor... As a surgeon we were proud of him; but as a man - or rather, I should say, as a gentleman - we could only shake our heads over his name and himself; and wished that he had read Lord Chesterfield’s Letters in the days when his manners were susceptible of improvement. (Gaskell, 1994: 169)

Their class-consciousness may also be seen in their language as it is underlined in *The Language of Gender and Class-Transformation in the Victorian Novel* that language is also an indicator of one’s class and educational

² “He despised every refinement which had not its root deep down in humanity. If people were not ill, he saw no necessity for moderating his voice” (Gaskell,1994: 57).Furthermore, contrary to Miss Jenkyns, “he evidently chose his books in accordance with his own tastes, not because such and such were classical or established favourites” (Gaskell, 1994: 62). On the other hand, he is not an ordinary farmer due to the fact that he likes reading and therefore reads a lot. He says, “ Ah! We farmers ought not to have much time for reading; yet somehow one can’t help it” (Gaskell, 63).

³ Miss Jenkyns considers herself very clever and literary and takes control at every event in Cranford. When she dies, “something of the clear knowledge of the strict code of gentility goes out too (Gaskell, 1994: 217)”. Her death may be symbolic and can be interpreted as “the death of the class-consciousness”.

⁴ This issue is also discussed in the article entitled “Marriage and Morals among the Victorians” in detail.

background. Cranford ladies speak standart English, whereas common people in Cranford speak with a local dialect. Likewise, it is observed by Miss Matty that Mr. Hoggins says "Jack's up, a fig for his beels, and called Preference Pref." (Gaskell, 169). Contrary to him, Cranford ladies are fussy about the class manners and they discuss for a while "the most correct way of speaking to the peerage" (Gaskell, 1994: 118) before Lady Glenmire has come to Cranford and they could not decide which is better, to say Your Ladyship or My Lady and so on. Therefore, Miss Pole goes on searching about this issue with the anxiety that "one would not have Lady Glenmire think [Cranford ladies] were quite ignorant of the etiquettes of high life in Cranford" (Gaskell, 1994: 119). Furthermore, in Cranford even names show nobility and class and narrator refers to this fact when she tells that "when [my cousin] met with a Mrs. ffarrington, at a watering-place, he took to her immediately; and a very pretty genteel woman she was - a widow, with a very good fortune; and "my cousin" Mr. ffoulkes, married her; and it was all owing to her two little ffs" (Gaskell, 1994: 110). Mrs. Forrester gives importance to names as well and "she had always understood that Fitz meant something aristocratic" (Gaskell, 1994: 110). Besides these, Cranford ladies' sitting order in the Assembly Room reflects the separate spheres of classes and the aristocratic seclusion, "the front row was soon augmented and enriched by Lady Glenmire and Mrs. Jamieson. We six occupied the two front rows, and our aristocratic seclusion was respected by the groups of shopkeepers who strayed in from time to time and huddled together on the back benches" (Gaskell, 1994: 143). Thus, as Şakir Berber suggests in his article entitled "Social Classes as a Modern Phenomenon" one's class is one of the most decisive factors in one's daily life and in his/her relations with other people. However, Gaskell sometimes mocks with their belittling shopkeepers as she does in the case of Miss Betty Barker. She sets up a milliner's shop and begins to take the advantage of the Cranford ladies' fondness to being elite to gain customers among them:

Lady Arley, for instance, would occasionally give Miss Barkers the pattern of an old cap of hers, which they immediately copied and circulated among the elite of Cranford. I say the elite, for Miss Barkers had caught the trick of the place, and piqued themselves upon their "aristocratic connection". They would not sell their caps and ribbons to any one without a pedigree. (Gaskell, 1994: 104-5)

Gaskell's questioning of the Victorian-class-consciousness and the probable consequences of it can also be seen in the passage below:

Still, it was not at all a settled thing that Mrs. Fitz-Adam was to be visited, when dear Miss Jenkyns died; and with her, something of the clear knowledge of the strict code of gentility went out too. As Miss Pole observed: As most of the ladies of good family in Cranford were elderly spinsters, or widows without children, if we did not relax a little, and become less exclusive, by and by we should have no society at all. (Gaskell, 1994: 109)

Miss Pole's explanation seems quite logical and if they do not soften the class-boundaries, their precious blue blood will not flow in the next generation and their lineage will extinguish.

In spite of all their class-consciousness and their discriminative attitudes, in the novel, it is shown that Cranford ladies are not indifferent to the sufferings of other people. The best example to this can be seen when the Town and Country Bank failed. Cranford ladies decide to help Miss Matty by collecting money among themselves. Even her servant, Martha offers a room to Miss Matty in her house. It is made clear that "... for kindness to the poor, and real tender good offices to each other whenever they are in distress, the ladies of Cranford are quite sufficient" (Gaskell, 1994: 39). Especially, Miss Matty shows a great sense of responsibility through her altruistic behaviours. For instance, when a shopman in the market rejects a man's five-pound note due to the Bank's failure, she sees herself responsible and pays this man's money, since she is a shareholder in the bank, regardless of the fact that she loses a large portion of her income. This shows that in *Cranford* Gaskell emphasizes "cooperation" rather than competition between members of groups. Another example to the cooperation of Cranford ladies is seen well when Signor Brunoni, the conjuror is ill:

Everybody did as much as if there was great cause for anxiety...Miss Pole looked out clean and comfortable, if homely lodgings; Miss Matty sent the sedan-chair for him,... Lady Glenmire undertook the medical department under Mr. Hoggins's directions... Who says that the aristocracy are proud? Here was a lady [Mrs. Forrester] by birth a Tyrell, and descended from the great Sir Walter that shot King Rufus, and in whose veins ran the blood of him who murdered the little princes in the Tower, going every day to see what dainty dishes she could prepare for Samuel Brown, a mountebank! But, indeed, it was wonderful to see what kind feelings were called out by this poor man's coming amongst us. (Gaskell, 1994: 169-170).

These events show the interdependency of each class to the other for surviving. Moreover, in the end of the novel, as a result of financial problems, a servant called Martha ironically becomes richer than her lady, Miss Matty and their roles nearly change because Miss Matty looks after Martha's children, but she does it not for the sake of money, but just out of love of children. Moreover, in *Cranford* people from different classes unite in marriage and therefore, class distinctions nearly disappear. Thus, people begin to be more tolerant and let the other people experience social mobility.

In conclusion, through all the events in *Cranford* Gaskell suggests the softening or blurring of the class boundaries. She claims that regardless of people's different class backgrounds, people may have healthy relationships with each other since everybody has a place in the universe and deserves to be respected. Thus, no one is superior or inferior in relation to the other human beings. In other words, if people given the chance of social mobility (via education or marriages between the members of different classes), the strict class distinctions will diminish or blur in the long run. Hence, the blurred class boundaries may pave the way for more "cooperation and communication between the members of different classes" and in this way Gaskell's ideal society would be established. An ideal society, whose members are all equal, despite having different class backgrounds or genders. That is to say, an egalitarian society in which employees are equal with employers or women are equal with men.

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