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Gizem Kaptan
Kocaeli University
Kocaeli, Turkey

The Analysis of Social Stratification in Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton: A Tale of Manchester Life* from a Marxist Perspective

ABSTRACT
While the Industrial Revolution makes England a great power in the world, it brings about a huge gap between the middle class and the working class. Observing the condition of the society, Marx and Engels create their well-known claim of class struggle in *The Manifesto of the Communist Party*. They emphasize the gap between these two classes and how to revolt against the capitalist system by the working class. This paper ventures to study the difference between the middle class and the working class in the Victorian society together with the way to overcome the *bourgeoisie* supremacy by the *proletariat* from the perspective of Marxist literary theory. It analyses how the capitalist system makes working class people's lives miserable while it enriches the lives of the middle class people. In this respect, Elizabeth Gaskell's novel *Mary Barton* will be studied in parallel with *the Manifesto of the Communist Party*.
Keywords: capitalism; social stratification; the working class; Marxism; Mary Barton

Eighteenth century England has witnessed a dramatic transitional change after the Industrial Revolution. Some innovations pave way to

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this revolution such as machines powered by water which are good in producing more goods more quickly; fertilizers and crop rotation systems which enable more food production by fewer workers; extracting iron from rocks, making it possible to produce machines and engines for industry; coal extraction, which is a kind of safety lamp and it provides longer working hours for the coal workers in deeper pits; railways, making it easier for people to be carried to the industrial factories and enabling easy transport for the goods and lastly, the steam engine, helping the machines run more quickly (Berchaoua 2014: 17-18). The Industrial Revolution in England is pioneered by these innovations and society undergoes many changes.

One of the most important changes is social stratification as a result of the development in industry. The organization of inequalities and the formalization of positions in some hierarchical order are the basic characteristics of social stratification, so the labels 'working class' and 'middle class' come into use while aristocracy is labelled as 'upper class' in the nineteenth century. Although upper class is controlling the political system at the beginning of the century, their power over the middle class diminishes with the Reform Act of 1832 and the abolition of Corn Laws in 1846. The condition of the working class, however, stays the same and they become more oppressed with the further developments of the Industrial Revolution (Pasaribu 2011: 183-188). Mitchell (1996) states that with the Chartist movement during the 1830s and 1840s, working class people demand their rights such as secret ballot in voting, the abolishment of privileges for House of Commons members, and the right to vote for every man at the eligible age. The parliament, however, does not accept these demands and the Chartist movement vanishes because of the growing industry and wealth of the middle class people. This results in the spread of capitalism all over the Victorian society and later all over Europe (Mitchell 1996: 6).

Whereas the Industrial Revolution is in favour of capital and mill owners who live a wealthy life because of their income from the estates, it is disadvantageous to workers who live a miserable life owing to their low wages and bad working conditions (Pasaribu 2011:

188). Therefore, the imbalance in the capitalist society brings about a huge gap between the middle class and the working class. Marx and Engels examine the role of capitalism and its effects on social stratification within their well-known work *the Manifesto of the Communist Party*. They put forward the view that class struggle exists in the history of every society (Hout 2007: 2).

Boyer states that *the Manifesto of the Communist Party* is a collaborative work of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. They meet in Paris and start to work together since then. Marx forms a Communist Correspondence Committee to be in contact with groups of German communists in London and this group wants Marx and Engels to be the members of their committee. They attend a conference of Communist League in London and they are invited to write a manifesto to present the League's doctrines. When the manifesto is published, the revolutions in Europe have already begun. This work is comprehensible in relation to the history of its time that is written inasmuch as it presents the development of industrial capitalism and its effects on the social system (1998: 152-153). In the manifesto, by calling the working class people *proletariat* and the middle class people *bourgeoisie*, Marx and Engels emphasize the gap between these two classes and the phases of revolting against the middle class by the working class people (1888: 2). Boyer argues that the *bourgeoisie* improves the machines and takes control of the political authority after the industrial revolution. With the aim of increasing production and of becoming rich, they create big cities and factories. In addition, they search for new markets to exploit. These create the "modern industrial working classes" (1998: 153). In the manifesto, they define the working class people as follows:

> In proportion as the bourgeoisie, i.e., capital, is developed, in the same proportion is the proletariat, the modern working class, developed — a class of labourers, who live only so long as they find work, and who find work only so long as their labour increases capital. These labourers, who must sell themselves piece-meal, are a commodity, like every other article of commerce, and are consequently exposed to all the vicissitudes of competition, to all the fluctuations of the market. (1888: 6)

A closer look at the quotation above indicates that working class people survive only when they work since this is how they earn money. As a result of their labour, the middle class becomes rich and the capital becomes wealthy. Marx and Engels develop the claim that the middle class and the system are using the working class people as a tool to be rich and wealthy. Along similar lines, Mitchell argues that the wages of the workers are not enough to support themselves, so poverty and illness do not stop chasing them (1996: 18). The underlying argument, therefore, in favour of Marx and Engels is that workers are the victims of the capitalist system which exploits them even though they are the ones who make the capital rich.

Pasaribu puts forward the view that the literature of a society reflects the real life of this society, so the job of the writer is to display the society's way of life (2011: 182). Influenced by Marx and Engels, the fiction writers of the time employ the theme of social stratification. Since the nineteenth century is a time when material conditions define the social positions and money means an opportunity to have power, the literature of this century reflects these social positions and opportunities (Greenblatt 2005: 995). Being one of them, Elizabeth Gaskell employs the issue of class distinction in most of her novels, especially in *Mary Barton*. This novel emphasizes the difference between the lives of the working class and the middle class people in the nineteenth century. *Mary Barton*, in other words, offers a descriptive account of the effects of the industrial revolution on both classes. Since the manifesto by Marx and Engels investigates the role of capitalism and the industrial revolution on people of both the working class and of the middle class, it provides a good source in the analysis of *Mary Barton*. Accordingly, in this paper, the difference between the middle class and the working class in the nineteenth century by touching upon the ways to revolt against the *bourgeoisie* will be analyzed from a Marxist perspective. In this respect, Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton* will be studied in parallel with *the Manifesto of the Communist Party*.

Being Gaskell's first novel, *Mary Barton* consists of the sufferings of people that live in Manchester (Poovey 1995: 144). In this work,

Gaskell's characters represent the working class family life and the nature of work in the industrial society (Surridge 2000: 332). In the novel, Barton and Wilson families work at the factory of Carson family. Gaskell illustrates the different lifestyles of families as a result of social stratification. Whereas Carson family has a prosperous life, Wilson and Barton families have miserable lives. After the fire at the factory of Carson's, the lives of workers, John Barton and George Wilson become more miserable. Since they have no other place to work, their families suffer inasmuch as they do not have any other income. John Barton is involved in the Trade's Union and represents the working class' demands. He is the one who always questions the condition of the working class and highlights the inequality between the middle class and the working class, so he makes the problems of the working class visible in the novel. Before each chapter starts, Gaskell takes the attention of the reader with the use of poems about Chartism, ballads on the working class, proverbs or nursery rhymes:

> How little can the rich man know
> Of what the poor man feels,
> When want, like some demon foe,
> Nearer and nearer steals!
> . . . . . .
> He never saw his darlings lie
> Shivering, the flags their bed
> He never heard that maddening cry,
> 'Daddy, a bit of bread'
>
> *Manchester Song* (1849: 60).

With the use of this song above, Gaskell offers an insight into sufferings of the working class. She illustrates how the middle class people are indifferent to the pains of the working class. *Bourgeois* people, in other words, are unaware of what hunger means and they do not experience their children's sufferings as *proletariat* people do. Therefore, the middle class are not concerned with the agonies and miseries of the working class people. With this in mind, the use of songs, ballads and nursery rhymes reminds the reader of the particular position of the working class inasmuch as they provide an insight into the lives of the workers and their families. Surridge argues that the

employment of these songs and ballads add working class discourse into the text (2000: 332). Thus, the use of songs and rhymes together with ballads enriches the novel since they present the anger and agony of the working class in a different structure.

In addition, Gaskell presents a strong character that draws the distinction between the two classes. In the novel, the outstanding character who represents the working class is John Barton in that he highlights the condition of the working class. He implicitly underlines the argument of Marx and Engels in the manifesto in all of his conversations. During his talk with Wilson, for instance, the discussion centres on the inequality between the two classes. He emphasizes the controversy over the working class' poverty in spite of their struggle:

> "Eh, John! Donna talk so; sure there's many and many a master as good or better nor us."
> "If you think so, tell me this. How comes it they're rich, and we're poor?"
> … "You'll say (at least many a one does), they'n getten capital an' we'n getten none. I say, our labour's our capital, and we ought to draw interest on that. They get interest on their capital somehow a'this time, while ourn is lying idle, else how could they live as they do? . . . the very land as fetched but sixty pound twenty year agone is now worth six hundred, and that, too, is owing to our labour; but look at yo, and see me, and poor Davenport yonder; whatten better are we? They'n screwed us down to the lowest peg, in order to make their great big fortunes, and build their great big houses, and we, why we're just clemming, many and many of us. Can you say there's nought wrong in this?" (1849: 70)

That is, the *proletariat* works to make the *bourgeoisie* rich as Marx and Engels argue in *the Manifesto of the Communist Party*. The working class people, therefore, struggle to make capitals and its owners wealthy (1888: 6). In the novel, John Barton displays the differences between the working class people and the middle class people since he speaks out the distinction between two classes. The narrator introduces John Barton to the reader as a rebellious man: "But ever forgetting or forgiving those whom have caused all this woe. Among these was John Barton" (1849: 23). Marx and Engels put forward the view that proletarians must not give up the fight against the *bourgeoisie* since there is nothing to lose for them (1888: 26). In

the novel, John Barton is the one who will not forget and forgive. In the preface of his work, *The Condition of the Working Class,* Engels comments on the features of the middle class:

> You are right, perfectly right in expecting no support whatever from them. Their interest is diametrically opposed to yours, though they always will try to maintain the contrary … The middle class intend in reality nothing else but to enrich themselves by your labour while they can sell its produce, and to abandon you to starvation as soon as they cannot make a profit by this indirect trade in human flesh. (1887: 42)

The quotation above provides support for the disparity between the middle class and the working class. The former are selfish since the only matter for them is getting rich, so they make use of the workers to become wealthier. To this end, they do not consider the situation of the workers inasmuch as the only matter is earning more money. The owners, therefore, live a different life than the workers. This distinction is portrayed in the novel with the events after the fire of the factory. While Wilson suffers in desperate conditions because of his loss of job after the fire, the middle class people enjoy their spare time with their family. In this chapter, Gaskell presents this contrast between a middle class home and a working class home:

> It was a pleasant thing to be able to lounge over breakfast with a review or newspaper in hand … There were happy family evenings, now that the men of business had time for domestic enjoyments. There is another side to the picture. There were homes over which Carson's fire threw a deep, terrible gloom; the homes of those who would fain work, and no man gave unto them – the homes of those to whom leisure was a curse. There, the family music was hungry wails, when week after week passed by, and there was no work to be had, and consequently no wages to pay for the bread the children cried aloud for in their young impatience of suffering. (1849: 61)

That is to say, when there is no work for the workers, their poor conditions become poorer while the money holders or the owners of the factories just spend time with their families since they are already rich and do not have to work as the *proletariat* to earn money. Marx and Engels utter that the working class people can live as long as they find work to make the *bourgeoisie* rich (1888: 6). The above quotation underlines the gap between a working class home and a middle class

home. Due to the fact that Carson family own the factory and it is insured, the fire does not damage their wealth. The workers, however, suffer as a result of the devastating effect of fire on their lives. They cannot even buy bread for their only source of income was the factory they worked.

Marx and Engels offer a solution for the slavery of the *proletariat* in *the Manifesto of the Communist Party*. They state that the workers must get together against the *bourgeoisie*, so they must form Trade Unions (1888: 7). The same application is seen in the novel:

> So a petition was framed, and signed by thousands in the bright spring days of 1839, imploring Parliament to hear witnesses who could testify to the unparalleled destitution of the manufacturing districts. Nottingham, Sheffield, Glasgow, Manchester, and many other towns, were busy appointing delegates to convey this petition, who might speak, not merely of what they had seen, and heard, but from what they had borne and suffered. Life-worn, gaunt, anxious, hunger-stamped men, were those delegates. (1849: 93)

This reminds the argument of Marx and Engels inasmuch as they also emphasize the importance of *proletariat*'s forming combinations to protest the *bourgeois* society. Workers get together and evaluate their situation under the capitalist society, which provide them with many solutions for the problems that may cause distress (1888: 7). The novel presents the union of the working class with the Chartist movement of 1839. This movement is concerned with the demands of the working class who claim to have better rights. As Hovell argues, the Chartist movement is associated with working class movement and it finds its origins in the industrialised working class (1970: 1). This movement suggests that the working class people demand their rights and they struggle to better their lives. Joseph Raynor Stephens, whose name is associated with this movement and New Poor Law, state that the Universal Suffrage means having a good dinner on the table to feed the family, having a coat to protect their health, and having a house to be accommodated in it (Surridge 2000: 334).

The motif of a dying child is what the Chartists speak up inasmuch as a working class father must have a right to protect his family. In 1843, Chartist Richard Pillings speaks of his own child's death to the

jury: "How you would feel if you saw your son lying on a sick bed and dying pillow" (qtd in Surridge 2000: 335). His speech is to point out the conditions of the working class and to suggest a political action to change these conditions. The same rhetorical speech is used in the speech of John Barton to Wilson:

> If I am sick, do they come and nurse me? If my child lies dying (as poor Tom lay, with his white wan lips quivering, for want of better food than I could give him), does the rich man bring the wine or broth that might save his life? If I am out of work for weeks in the bad times, and winter comes, with black frost, and keen east wind, and there is no coal for the grate, and no clothes for the bed, and the thin bones are seen through the ragged clothes, does the rich man share his plenty with me, as he ought to do, if his religion wasn't hambug? (1849: 7)

The available quotation above points out that the fatal conditions of the workers' children is not the concern of the middle class. Along similar lines, John Barton states that the rich people are not involved in any action to make the lives of workers and their family better. He utters that the rich do not share their wealth with the people in need even though they have more than they need. Similarly, the Carson family does not help Barton to feed his son, Tom, when he is sick. Surridge argues that John Barton, being one of the appointed delegates, goes to London to present a petition and he says he will speak up about the children dying. He emphasizes how a child is born into the worst conditions (2000: 336).

Other than the Chartist petition that is rejected to be listened by the Parliament in the novel, the deputation of the workers meet with the mill owners to argue on the situation of the workers. The meeting with the *bourgeoisie* is important as it is stated in the manifesto that the struggle of the working class is a national struggle, so the workers must first settle the problems with the middle class (1888: 9). In the novel, there is a meeting with the mill owners. Nevertheless, let alone agreeing with the concession, the son of the factory owner, Harry Carson, makes fun of the workers. He draws a caricature of the workers while they are presenting their problems in the meeting (204). When this caricature is seen by John Barton, absent from the meeting,

he meets with the workers at the pub and expresses how angry he is at Carson:

> It makes me more than sad, it makes my heart burn within me, to see that folk can make jest of striving men . . . We donnot want their grand houses, we want a roof to cover us from the rain, and the snow, and the storm; ay, and not alone to cover us, but the helpless ones that cling to us in the keen wind, and ask us with their eyes why we brought 'em into th' world to suffer? (1849: 207)

These words from the novel above offer a descriptive account of what the workers want to achieve in life. What gets them on the verge of revolting is the caricature that Harry draws of them to make fun of their desperate situations. John Barton underlines that the working class demands a better life with better conditions, yet he emphasizes that they do not pursue the goal of having a luxurious life as the middle class has. They do not dream of, in other words, expensive houses with all the opportunities within them, yet they desire to have a roof that protects everyone in need of shelter from bad weather conditions. Therefore, Barton is full of anger and hatred for the *bourgeoisie*. He utters that the working class is the one considering the poor while the *bourgeoisie* is the one thinking about their own good and making fun of the poor.

Marx and Engels argue that the aim of the communist is to overthrow the *bourgeoisie* class and make the *proletariat* powerful (1888: 10). This can be seen in his speeches to the members of the Trades' Union:

> Shame upon them! It was taking advantage of their workplace being almost starved; but they would starve entirely rather than come into such terms. It was bad enough to be poor, while by the labour of their thin hands, the sweat of their brows, the masters were made rich; but they would not be utterly ground down to dust. No! They would fold their hands and sit idle, and smile at the masters, whom even in death they could baffle. (1849: 190)

John Barton criticizes the rich people for just sitting in their houses. He also criticizes the working class people for not saying anything to the masters since workers are the ones making them rich. The masters, however, are the ones making them poor. John Barton is aware of these facts and wants a change. Thus, as Marx and Engels state in the

manifesto, working man should recognize the faults of the masters and immediately get into action to change it (1888: 6).

As a conclusion, the Victorian period was a time when the lines between the social classes were clear-cut. After the industrial revolution, the middle class became rich, so they ruled the working class people. The analysis of *Mary Barton* from a Marxist perspective in parallel to *the Manifesto of the Communist Party* offers a descriptive account of the difference between the working class and the middle class in the Victorian period. With the employment of the Chartist movement and the union of the workers together with the lifestyle of the middle class people and how they make fun of the misery of the working class people in the novel, the inequality between the two classes is underlined. John Barton becomes the voice of the working class people inasmuch as he questions everything they experience as a result of the exploitation by the middle class. He is concerned with the indifference the rich people have towards workers who try to survive with their low wages. Therefore, he criticizes the condition of the working class who work to make the capital and the owners of the capital rich. He states that the workers become poorer even though they work more. Due to the fact that the factories are owned by the middle class, these owners become rich thanks to the labor of the working class. To portray the issue in Marx's and Engels' terms, the working class people are chained to the system and they do not have anything to lose other than their chains. They emphasize that the misery of the working class is the result of the oppression by the middle class and the capitalist system. This misery, however, must be overcome with the revolt of the workers all over the world, so *proletariat* will be the ruling class. In the novel, John Barton represents a communist worker who sees the unfairness and inequality for the working class. Even though Barton dies asking for forgiveness from Mr. Carson at the end, he underlines the condition of the workers in the Victorian period throughout the novel. Therefore, *Mary Barton* is a novel which implicitly presents the argument of Marx and Engels in *the Manifesto of the Communist Party* to readers. It offers a descriptive account of the sufferings of the working class together

with the wealth of the middle class, so it illustrates the argument of Marx and Engels with fictional characters and events. Hence, this article contributes to literature inasmuch as it analyzes the class struggle with reference to *the Manifesto of the Communist Party* which has historical information in it. Therefore, it displays how the historical analysis of Marx and Engels is portrayed within a fictional work.

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