



North and South

By Elizabeth Gaskell

Reviewed by Nazua Idris

NORTH and South, a novel written by Elizabeth Gaskell, was published in 1855. The novel is set in the nineteenth century industrial Britain, in a township named Milton, similar to the manufacturing center of England, Manchester. Margaret Hale, a young woman of 19, and the daughter of a pastor, is a fashionable lady. When the novel opens, she returns to her native village after ten years, and is overjoyed with the hope of living in its fairytale-like landscape. Helstone, her village, is located in the South of England, where industrialization has not flourished that much.

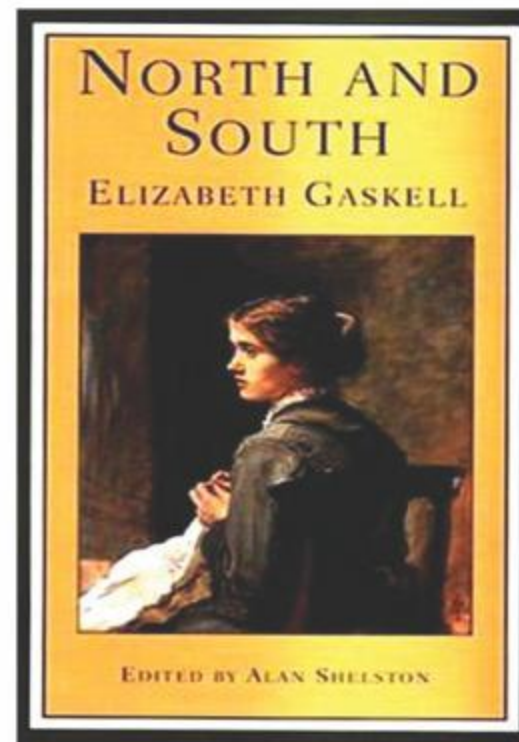
Though she is brought up in a luxurious environment at her Aunt's house in London, she has strong moral rectitude like a clergyman's daughter. To her, money invested in and made by business diminishes the dignity of people, and she even hates the idea of having a neighbor who is in trade. Henry Lennox, her cousin's brother-in-law, and a talented lawyer, proposes her. But she rejects him as she is still unprepared to accept marriage proposals, or leave the idyllic existence of Helstone. However, soon she is forced to leave her village, when her father, Mr. Hale, finds it impossible to follow the dictates of the Church of England, and decides to give up his parish, and move to Milton, located in the North of England. This news shocks his wife and daughter, as this decision will lead to an economic crisis since Mr. Hale will not get any decent job in Milton, except private tutoring.

As expected, the Hales find Milton as an antithesis to Helstone, with all its smoke, cotton dust, ruthless poverty and bleak landscape. They are

overwhelmed by the dystopic vision of the place and the thought of mingling with the nouveaux riches whose money comes from cotton-trade. John Thornton, a magnetic young cotton manufacturer and owner of Marlborough Mill, helps the family settle down in Milton. The crisis ensues when he and Margaret form a misunderstanding of each other's society. While Thornton criticizes the South for its lack of development, she criticizes the North for its lack of humanity and capitalistic pursuits. Though he is drawn towards Margaret's self-assurance and refined personality, his mother and sister are annoyed by her sense of independence.

At the beginning, the Milton people look at Margaret with surprise, mockery and suspicion because of the difference in her appearance and attire. Nevertheless, she tries to adjust herself to Milton community, and soon befriends Nicholas Higgins, and his daughter, Bessy Higgins, who works in Thornton's mill. Her prejudice against Thornton turns into hatred when Bessy and her father hold him responsible for the workers' misery, and inform her that a workers' union has been formed which will go on a strike to increase wages. In the meantime, the strikers are incensed with the news that Thornton has brought cheap workers from Ireland. They break into a mob in front of Thornton's house, and one of them throws a stone at him. However, Margaret saves him and gets hurt. Her bold act makes Thornton believe that she loves him, and the next day, he proposes her. Margaret's ego is hurt as she considers this proposal as an act of compassion, and she refuses him bluntly.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Hale's health is deteriorating, and the doctor suggests that she will not survive the trauma of living in Milton. Moreover, she is psychologically tormented by the absence of her son Frederick, who has led a mutiny against the oppressive captain of English Navy, and will be put to death if found. To console her dying mother, Margaret decides to write to Frederick. He visits the family, and Mrs. Hale dies after meeting her son. However, he is followed



by a guy named Leonards while escaping, and he and Leonards fight at the train station. At that time, Mr. Thornton sees Margaret and Frederick together and feels jealous seeing her out with a young man so late at night, and thinks the guy is her boyfriend since he is unaware about Frederick.

Few hours after this fight, Leonards dies, and a policeman comes to Margaret for query, but she denies that she has been at the train

station. The policeman discusses this incident with Thornton, but he asks the policeman to close the case, and saves her from being exposed before public. This incident makes Thornton restless, and he feels repulsive towards Margaret, while she starts appreciating him for his generosity. To her surprise, she discovers that his good opinion matters to her a lot. After a few months, Mr. Hale also dies while visiting Oxford, and Mr. Bell, his friend and Margaret's godfather, takes her responsibility. The consecutive deaths make Margaret lonelier, and she goes to London to live with her Aunt. After a few months, Mr. Bell dies and leaves her a large fortune. While she is in London, Thornton tries to improve the condition of the workers in his cotton mill. However, the previous strike makes him bankrupt. Due to moral responsibility to his investors, he does not take the risk of investing money in new business ventures and closes down his mill. Devastated, Thornton finds a ray of hope when Nicholas Higgins informs him about Frederick. Thornton understands that he has misunderstood Margaret. He visits her in London, and they confess their love to each other.

Though at first, Gaskell titled her novel as Margaret Hale, she changed it later into North and South as this title incorporates all the individual, cultural, social, economic, and geographical conflicts interwoven into the narrative texture of the novel. In terms of style, Gaskell blends the characteristics of Comedy of Manner and Social Realism to uphold the individual crisis along with the socio-economic crisis, stemming from the transformation brought by industrialization and urbanization.

She also followed the Gothic tradition in her portrayal of the sinister landscape surrounding Marlborough Mill. The novel is narrated in third person limited omniscient point of view where the focalizer is Margaret Hale. However, the novelist also includes the workers' and employers' perspectives to address the tension and crises between these classes from a vantage point. Gaskell blends the posh language used by the educated landed gentry in South with the dialects used in the Northern part of England where trade flourished. She blended two forms of local dialects for the characters of Milton – one is used by the upper class and the other by the workers.

The novel attracts the modern audience by providing an alternative view of the gender role and class distinction by blurring the gender and class boundaries. While the Victorian educated middle class women were supposed to stay at home, Margaret Hale becomes the "son" to her parents, and an investor, advisor and economic savior to Thornton. Again, the class boundary is blurred when the writer depicts Thornton taking meal with his workers, and near the end, Thornton becomes penniless, and says to Higgins that he is no longer a master. The novel also addresses various themes of individual and social importance, such as, death and spiritual awakening, psychological journey of the characters from naiveté to maturity, human relationships, industrialization, poverty, male/female relationship, family, socio-cultural transformation and so on.