

BEYOND AN ‘ETERNAL FEMININE’ IDENTITY: A FEMINIST STUDY OF “NORTH AND SOUTH” BY ELIZABETH GASKELL

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“North and South” by Elizabeth Gaskell is a mid- 19th Century Victorian novel, published only seven years after “Jane Eyre” by Charlotte Bronte which has been hailed as a feminist tract since the 20th Century. The novel “North and South” reflects an important turning point concerning identity of the female figure, as there is a divergence from the cultural construction of the ‘Angel in the House’ which encapsulates the ‘Eternal Feminine’ notion of Victorian society, that which has been maintained and encouraged by society for many years. Although the novel has been classified and widely researched as a social novel centered on areas such as cultural geography, class system, social crisis, political economy and transnational politics, limited recognition has been provided from a feminist angle. It has been widely accepted that the protagonist represents a “feminist ideal” due to her entry into the public sphere. Hence, certain critics have opined that the novel foresees modern feminist theory. Moreover, the political agency of the protagonist and appearance in the public sphere has been the central focus of such discussion. However, this research aims to expand the boundaries of this identity limited to her entry into the political sphere, and to explore the multiplicity in identity which eventually results in the formation of a modern feminist. It expands the scope of identity restricted to a mere socially constructed binary opposition in Victorian society. The research methodologies employed are textual analysis and a close examination of characterization in order to understand the instability in identity of the female figure in the novel. I argue that, this revolutionary deviance of the status of women from the traditional “other” to the future “equal” is strategically developed by Gaskell mainly through the flux in identity and its manipulation in the public sphere by the protagonist.

Key Words: flux in identity, Eternal Feminine, manipulation, modern feminist, revolutionary

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