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# Female Oppression and Aspiration in Selected Nineteenth-Century Novels by Elizabeth Gaskell, Charlotte Brontë, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps

Abdullah Fawaz Hamed Al-Badarneh  
*Indiana University of Pennsylvania*

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FEMALE OPPRESSION AND ASPIRATION IN SELECTED NINETEENTH-CENTURY  
NOVELS BY ELIZABETH GASKELL, CHARLOTTE BRONTË, HARRIET BEECHER  
STOWE, AND ELIZABETH STUART PHELPS

A Dissertation

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research

In Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

Abdullah Fawaz Hamed Al-Badarneh

Indiana University of Pennsylvania

May 2012

Indiana University of Pennsylvania  
The School of Graduate Studies and Research  
Department of English

We hereby approve the dissertation of

Abdullah Fawaz Hamed Al-Badarneh

Candidate for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

March 19, 2012

Signature on File

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Christopher Orchard, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor of English, Advisor

March 19, 2012

Signature on File

---

Susan Comfort, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor of English

March 19, 2012

Signature on File

---

Michael T. Williamson, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor of English

ACCEPTED

Signature on File

---

Timothy P. Mack, Ph.D.  
Dean  
The School of Graduate Studies and Research

Title: Female Oppression and Aspiration in Selected Nineteenth-Century Novels by Elizabeth Gaskell, Charlotte Brontë, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps

Author: Abdullah Fawaz Hamed Al-Badarneh

Dissertation Chair: Dr. Christopher Orchard

Dissertation Committee Members: Dr. Susan Comfort  
Dr. Michael T. Williamson

The present dissertation offers a critical analysis of the nineteenth-century patriarchal oppression of women in selected novels by Elizabeth Gaskell, Charlotte Brontë, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps. It also analyzes the intricate correlation of patriarchy and capitalism that achieve their desire of capital accumulation by taking advantage of female oppression. This will be seen in relation to religion, sexual division of labor, and class. In each chapter, I unveil the strategies, ideologies, and stereotypes patriarchy applies to women as well as to other oppressed groups such as slaves and the working classes in order to manipulate power, dominance, and capital for themselves, thereby objectifying and instrumentalizing the other oppressed groups in the process.

This dissertation also shows how Gaskell, Brontë, Stowe, and Phelps critique, dismantle, and undermine hegemonic patriarchal and capitalist discourses. These feminist women writers examine the position of women in relation to religion, labor, and class. They seek to empower women in each area through calling for equality and justice as women's rights. They emphasize women's rights of sermonizing, of having equal job opportunities, and of living in a cooperative, classless society. This study shows that the four women writers do not approve the patriarchal practices that dictate submission and passivity. Through their women protagonists and characters, they are able to represent the early feminists who resisted oppression and sought

justice. This dissertation employs the theories of Marxist feminism and ecofeminism in its analysis of oppression and resistance. Marxist feminism helps analyze the conspiratorial interplay of patriarchy and capitalism. It makes use of the theories of traditional Marxists and Socialist feminists in its quest of dismantling such oppressive structures. Ecofeminism is also employed to highlight the four women writers' comprehensive vision of interdependence, cooperation, and interrelationships between men and women.