

The Press-Gang and Impressment: Reading Mrs. Gaskell's *Sylvia's Lovers*

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Abstract—*The Victorian Era witnessed many great women novelists like Charlotte Bronte, Emily Bronte, Elizabeth Gaskell, and George Eliot, etc. Amongst them Mrs. Gaskell, a social novelist and short story-writer, was a pacifist, non-interventionist, non-resistant, non-aggressionist and anti-war novelist who raised her voice at struggles faced by working class and the ensuing conflicts thereof in the Industrial Age; as in her epoch-making Mary Barton. In Ruth, she talked about illegitimacy and unmarried motherhood.*

She also reacted against the concept of Conscription and the Impressment. She talked about the contemporary societal issues and political enforcements of common men in the wars that almost ruined their lives. She raises a very serious question of human rights violation:- "Is forced recruitment not a blatant violation of human rights?"

The present paper portrays how Mrs. Gaskell in her socio-historical novel- Sylvia's Lovers, looks at the Napoleonic war held between England and France. It analyzes how the British Royal Navy recruited soldiers for the Napoleonic wars through the Press-Gangs. The Press Gang were the men in the Impressments who recruited people as mandate for the naval services. They recruited men by force that resulted in their sufferings, depression, and a struggle to survive against the forced recruitment.

The endeavor of this research paper is to generate a deeper understanding of Mrs. Gaskell's Sylvia's Lovers, and reveal how she reacts against violence and forced recruitment in the wars. This paper analyses the grief and agony of the common men being forced to participate in war and to carry arms. For this, it studies the terms - Conscription and Impressment as to how are they related and how a solution was brought to curb it.

The Victorian Era witnessed many great women novelists like Charlotte Bronte, Emily Bronte, Elizabeth Gaskell, George Eliot, etc. Amongst them Mrs. Gaskell, a social novelist and short story writer, was a pacifist, non-interventionist, non-resistant, non-aggressionist and anti-novelist who raises her voice on the struggles faced by the working classes and the ensuing conflicts thereof in the Industrial Age; as in her epoch-making *Mary Barton*. In *Ruth* she talks about illegitimate acts and on unmarried motherhood.

Mrs. Gaskell also speaks against the practice of Conscription and the Impressment. She talks about the contemporary societal issues and political enforcements of the common men in the wars that almost ruined their lives. She raises a very

serious question of human rights violation! – Is forced recruitment not a blatant violation of human rights?

The paper portrays how Mrs. Gaskell in her socio- historical novel- *Sylvia's Lovers*, discusses about the Napoleonic wars held between England and France and their repercussions as faced by the British. It analyses how the British Royal Navy recruits soldiers for the Napoleonic wars through the Press-Gang. The Press-Gang comprised of the men in the Impressment system who recruited people as a mandate for the naval services. They recruited men by force which resulted in their sufferings, depression, and a poignant struggle to survive against their forced recruitments.

This research paper generates a deeper understanding of Mrs Gaskell's *Sylvia's Lovers* that reveals how she reacts against violence and forced recruitments in the Napoleonic wars. This paper analyses the grief and agony of the common men being forced to participate in war and to carry arms, and to murder. For this, it studies the terms - Conscription and Impressment as to how are they related and how their enactment affected the civilians.

The Press-Gang was the group that forced commoners or men from 18 till 55 years of age to join the military or naval services. They impressed sailors, non-seamen, merchants and traders and even incorrigible rogues. Initially, they used carrot and stick method of recruitment but later, they exploited the men and did not even show a bit of concern for their health and if they died, they did not bother. This system was also sometimes upheld in the courts, but the gang was always sanctioned as the government sought warriors in the ongoing battles. The Jane Austen blog writes "During times of war, 'the temptation of impressment' was too strong to be resisted by Parliament." [1] (**The Jane Austen Blog**). However, in 1795, "William Pitt introduced a Quota Act to reduce the pain of joining the service stated how many men each country had to provide for service." [2] (**The Jane Austen Blog**) It further stated that the "Convicted men were also given the option to serve out their harsh sentences in prison, or serve in the navy" [2] (**The Jane Austen Blog**) but the act got vanished with the illegal recruitments.

The Queen Elizabeth passed a decree to legalize the Act of Impressment in 1563 as “An Act touching political considerations for the maintenance of the navy” [3] (**Wikipedia Source**). After that, it was continually being enacted by further kings in England. However, this barbarous act on the civilians finally got cleared off when Napoleon surrendered in 1815, in the Battle of Waterloo, in the 7th Coalition Alliance of Spain, Prussia, Russia and Britain. The British won and restored the Bourbon kings to their states, otherwise, Napoleon was sent to exile to Elba. After the victory against Napoleon, the Royal Navy did stop impressing the men into navy or military services. They only volunteered. But, the entire span in which they recruited them by force was barbaric and uncivilized. In the Battle of Trafalgar, the Royal Navy recruited 120,000 sailors to impressment.

Mrs. Gaskell talks about this obnoxious practice in her novel *Sylvia's Lovers*. In this, the unfortunate Charley Kinraid, one of the victims of the Impressment System is impressed by the Press-Gang and later disappears for some time that creates an intrigue.

Kinraid likes Sylvia Robson, the only daughter of Daniel Robson, (not only a farmer but engages himself into various occupations like sailing, smuggling and horse dealing). Sylvia and Kinraid fall in love and even get engaged. It is unfortunate that as soon as they get engaged, Kinraid is impressed by the Press Gang. When Kinraid is attacked by the Press-Gang he shouts loudly, “I’m bonded specksioneer to the Urania whaler, Donkin Captain, North Shields port.” [4] He further adds that “as a protected whaler the Press-Gang had, by the 17th Section of Act 26 Geo III, no legal right to seize him, unless he had failed to return to his ship by the 10th March following the date of his bond.” [4] But he feels helpless and cries, “what use were laws in those days of slow intercourse with such as were powerful enough to protect, and in the time of popular panic against a French invasion?” [4]

After being impressed Kinraid, participates in the Napoleonic wars for three years. He gets an opportunity to raid on a French port but he is captured and is imprisoned for many months. When he escapes from the jail, he gets the post of a Lieutenant. He comes back to his town with so much of hope, he wishes to marry Sylvia but sees that she is already married to her cousin Mr. Philip and Sylvia has become a mother now.

Kinraid tries to convince her to leave Philip Hepburn. Philip has a major role in the novel. He loves Sylvia since his young age. He knew that Kinraid was impressed and stills loves her, but Philip lies to her by stating that he had died in the war. Philip confesses to Sylvia “I ha’ made thee my idol, and if I could live my life over again, I would love my God more and thee less and then I shouldn’t have sinned this sin against thee...” [5] (**Ch. 44**) He makes a humble request to Sylvia to “speak one word of love to me, one little word, that I may know that I have thy pardon” [5] (**Ch. 44**)

Philip marries Sylvia, when he gets an opportunity to marry her. He marries her and lives happily but always with a guilt inside. He never thinks that Kinraid would come back, but he returns. When Kinraid comes back, he reveals the truth to Sylvia about Philip, to convince her that she should abandon a false relationship. “Oh, thou false heart!... If ever I trusted woman, I trusted you, Sylvia Robson ...” [6] (**Ch. XXXIII**). Kinraid urges Sylvia to “Leave that dammed fellow to repent of the trick he played an honest sailor.” [6] (**Ch. XXXIII**). However, Sylvia’s refuses to go back to Kinraid because she has a baby now.

Gaskell refers to two men; Philip and Kinraid both love Sylvia. Philip has his own business and Kinraid is a specksioneer. Philip can lie to win Sylvia’s heart but Kinraid is a non-serious human being. He is a ‘cardboard hero’ lacking in depth, but he loves Sylvia. Philip lacks to react according to the lively experiences unlike Kinraid. Philip supports the Press-Gang for the fact that the recruitment will give their nation victory. He says, “it is made for the good of the nation, not for your good or mine” [7] However, Kinraid does not support the Press-Gang. Even, Daniel Robson disapproves of them, he says “Law is made for to keep some folks fra’ harming another. Press-Gang and coast guard harm me in my business.” [8]

Daniel even participates in the resurrection movement against the Press-Gang. In chapter VII – “Tete-a-tete: The Will”, it seems as, “But t’ Press-Gang had law on their side, and were doing naught but what they’d warrant for.” [9] He notices the insolent behaviour of Press-Gang and how they torture families. The entire atmosphere has become so tensed that a Yorkshire gentleman says, “his labourers dispersed like a covey of birds, because a Press-Gang was reported to have established itself so far inland as Tadcaster; and they only returned to work on the assurance from the steward of his master’s protection,..” [10] They were so full of fear that they even “begged leave to sleep on straw in the stables or outhouses belonging to their landlord, not daring to sleep at their own homes.” [10] Due to panic and lawlessness, “No fish was caught, for the fishermen dared not venture out to sea; the markets were deserted, as the Press-Gangs might come down on any gathering of men; prices were raised, and many were impoverished; many others ruined.” [10]

Dobson comments at Philip sarcastically because he likes Press-Gang “wives and uns’ may go to the t’ workhouse or clem for aught he cares.” [11] Nicholas Rogers asserts “press-gang operations and the extent of opposition to them. Families were left behind would often face a situation where they could not afford to pay for food or for lodgings and would have been forced to recourse to begging, or stealing, to avoid starvation” [12]. Daniel’s own family suffers a ‘clemming’. It was unfortunate for Daniel and his family that he is executed because he revolts against this practice.

Mrs. Gaskell shows her concern over the practice run by Press-Gang. But she does this practically. She shows two sides of belief. As we have discussed above, Philip approves of this practice but also fears that he may not be targeted, Daniel and Kinraid disapprove. Mrs. Gaskell observes two views on Press-Gang. It is because, she confronted the same experience when she had visited Whitby in 1859 and came to know about the assault of Press-Gang. She met Perronet Thompson who was against the impressment system. She portrays Daniel over this person. Thompson also tells her that the people of Whitby town support this practice. She shows them in the perspectives of narrator and Philip.

Mrs. Gaskell was an observer and she showed different perspectives over this practice through an art of storytelling; against the background of the practice of impressment during the early phases of the Napoleonic Wars. However, she was against this practice personally but she does not force her ideology on anybody. "Mrs. Gaskell has gauged the characters, and has shown the different atmospheres of the places, she was always careful not to get out of her depths, and that is why all her novels are so human and true to life" [13]

Not only Gaskell talks about this practice; Elizabeth Barrett Browning's first published poem, "**On the cruelty of Forcement to Man Alluding to the Press-Gang**", too refers to this situation when the English Navy impressed civilians and was also brought to debate in the Parliament in 1812. Even the Victorian poet Thomas Hood (1799 - 1845) wrote a poem titled "**Faithless Sally Brown**" in which he discusses the violence inflicted by the press-gang:

Young Ben he was a nice young man,
A carpenter by trade;
And he fell in love with Sally Brown,
That was a lady's maid.
But as they fetch'd a walk one day,
They met a press- gang crew;
And Sally she did faint away,
Whilst Ben he was brought to.

These lines imply how Ben was kidnapped by the Press-Gang when he was roaming with his beloved Sally Brown. Though this poem, he satirizes the press-gang with a touch of humour.

Thomas Hardy in his only historical novel *The Trumpet Major* (1880) which is set in Weymouth against the backdrop of the Napoleonic wars shows how the Press-Gang captivate men in their periphery and force them to fight in the war. This historical novel once again represents the barbarity of the Press-Gang though in a humorous manner through a French originated technique Commedia Del' Arte. Sara Malton in her article says "The representation of impressment in Thomas

Hardy's *The Trumpet Major* (1880) serves as an especially resonant illustration, drawing as it does on the Italian pantomime, or commedia dell' arte, in its treatment of the Press-Gang affray. Importantly, Hardy thus invokes the cultural legacy of the Harlequin, a figure often located at "the intersection of slave culture" [14]

These writers show that this practice was enacted by the sycophants of the King George III. To make him happy, the Press-Gang impressed the men forcibly. "It was a dangerous license, repugnant to the free spirit of our laws; and, in later times, the state has trusted to bounties and the recruiting sergeant, and not to impressment,- for strengthening its land forces." [15] Ennis says "The British government responded to this manpower shortage by initiating the process known as Impressment or the press" [16]. Cotterhill in his review of the novel briefs about the filthy acts of the Press-Gang, "The English are at war with the French (again) and the vividly depicted harbour town bustles with whaling activity while the King's Press-Gangs roam the narrow streets looking for able-bodied sailors they can strong arm into a navy desperate for new recruits" [17].

Gaskell also tries to prove that Impressment is different from Conscription. As conscription recruits men with a determination of offering an opportunity to men to participate in the war. It is the practice that recruits men by urging them. However, Impressment is the means to impress hard to recruit men in the wars. In this practice, Press-Gang forced men to join navy. They showed violence even, if someone showed reluctance. This practice is more barbarous than conscription. In conscription, one has a chance to serve at the back office as *Conscientious Objector*. Some nations provide an alternative service to those who refused to become Conscriptors. They were asked to attend to outside office works, related to the military services, "such as Siviilpalvelus (alternative civil service) in Finland, Zivildiest (compulsory community service) in Austria and Switzerland" [18] (**Wikipedia Sources**). So, the government was more lenient and more lawful in conscription than Impressment but to join the services become necessary in both the practices. Whereas, in conscription, the alternate services like doing social works, saving environment, performing rescuing operations offering food to people etc. are provided if one does not want to be a part of a battle or a war.

Mrs. Gaskell reacts against the practice of Impressment and offers that one can become a conscientious objector also. She portrays it's as an *Arrière-ban*; a practice used in the medieval ages when the men from 18 till 55 years of age were forced to join military by the king of France.

Through her work, which could not attain a good popularity, served a very good cause of showing the agony of civilians who were forced to do violence.

Hence Mrs. Gaskell with a romantic fervour portrays a tragic historical fact.

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