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The Effect of the American Civil War on the Aristocratic South Woman in Frazier`s Cold Mountain

[1] Asmaa Shaaban,[2] Iman Sehsah,[3] Akif Kaynak,[4] Nesrin Radwan

[1] MD, Department of Foreign Languages, Faculty of Education, Tanta University, Egypt.
corresponding author** asmaahs2025@gmail.com
[2] Professor of English Literature Department of Foreign Languages, Faculty of Education, Tanta University, Egypt
iman_sehsah@edu.tanta.edu.eg
[3] Professor of English Literature Department of Foreign Languages, Faculty of Education, Tanta University, Egypt
waleedsamir74@edu.tanta.edu.eg
[4] Lecturers of English Literature Department of Foreign Languages, Faculty of Education, Tanta University, Egypt
nesreen.radwan@edu.tanta.edu.eg

Abstract
This study primarily aims to explore how the American Civil War impacted aristocratic Southern women by examining the shifts in their societal and familial roles. Unlike men, who engaged directly in battle, women faced the war's consequences by enduring and adapting to the harsh conditions it created. The novels analyzed in this thesis portray the struggles and suffering of these women as they cope with the destruction of their families and social status. This research argues that these novels are not solely centered on the Civil War itself but also highlight the survival and resilience of aristocratic women during and after the conflict

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Introduction

The American Civil War is one of the most pivotal events in U.S. history. Known as the War Between the States (1861–1865), it erupted between the Northern and Southern states after the election of Abraham Lincoln in 1860. Central issues fueling the conflict included slavery, states' rights, and westward expansion. The war ended in 1865 with the Confederacy's surrender. This conflict exposed longstanding racial and social tensions that had existed since the United States Constitution was ratified in 1789, particularly regarding slavery and state sovereignty. Although the Northern victory preserved the Union and led to the abolition of slavery, it came at the devastating cost of nearly 625,000 lives.

Furthermore, the Civil War challenged the prevailing Victorian ideals of domesticity that had shaped gender roles throughout the 19th century. In both the North and South, the war forced women into public roles they had never envisioned assuming just a generation earlier. Prior to the Civil War, American women's lives were predominantly influenced by the ideology known as the "Cult of True Womanhood." This belief, common among the upper and middle classes in both the U.S. and the U.K. during the 19th century, emphasized that women should focus on maintaining a clean, nurturing home for their husbands and children. However, as men went off to fight, women were forced to assume new responsibilities. Middle-class women sewed shirts and flags, while working-class women worked in factories producing uniforms and ammunition. Women also managed family farms, cared for the wounded, and, in some cases, even enlisted in the war, representing a profound shift in gender roles. In a remarkable episode of American history, over 400 women disguised themselves as men to serve in both the Union and Confederate armies. This unprecedented participation marked the first significant military involvement of women, challenging traditional notions of "true womanhood. *Cold Mountain* celebrated as historical novels, not only for their vivid depictions of the Civil War era but also for their focus on the resilience and survival of aristocratic women during and after the war.

American Civil War:

a) Historical Background:

The American Civil War began on April 12, 1861, after Confederate forces attacked Fort Sumter, sparking a prolonged conflict between the Unionist North and the secessionist south. While the war's causes were multifaceted, central issues such as slavery and states' rights were among the most significant factors. The four years of fighting and the subsequent Reconstruction period led to significant societal changes in the southern states. The most notable change was the abolition of slavery, which dismantled the economic and social foundation of not only the planter elite but the broader southern society as well. During Reconstruction, the federal government sought to rebuild the South free from the antebellum plantation system while ensuring that freedmen received their civil and political rights. Women's roles during the war were indispensable, even beyond the traditional masculine sphere. As men left for battle and endured harsh conditions, women took charge of plantation operations, provided crucial supplies, and made significant sacrifices. Extensive records from wealthy white women shed light on their evolving

roles and how the war affected their lives. Through diaries and letters, elite women meticulously documented important events and personal reflections. Their memoirs, written in the postwar Reconstruction era, often nostalgically recount the lost antebellum stability and praised Confederate courage. Historian Catherine Clinton notes that the adaptability of southern women during the Civil War was not a new phenomenon but rather had historical roots. In the American Revolution, women had to step into estate management roles when men were away protecting plantations or securing provisions. Similarly, when men frequently left for political or business duties, women were often responsible for managing estates, sometimes alongside overseers. Widows also had to assume control of estates in the absence of male support. As a result, southern women were not unskilled or incapable when it came to managing estates and finances. However, the patriarchal system severely restricted their legal rights, including the ability to vote, sign contracts, or run businesses, making them highly dependent on men. Even daily activities like travel required male accompaniment, further curtailing their autonomy. The passage of time since the Revolution had a significant impact. The booming cotton economy afforded a privileged upbringing to elite youths, providing protections and security to women who married into planter families, although they still adhered to social conventions demanding their diligence. The assumed idyllic life of these women, however, was upended by the war, which forced them to demonstrate resilience in the face of the war's instability and hazards.

The South before the Civil War

For most Americans, particularly Southerners, the South is viewed as a distinct region with its own culture, language, lifestyle, values, and history. Today, the South includes the following states, as defined by the United States Census Bureau: Florida, Georgia, Maryland, North Carolina, South Carolina, Virginia, West Virginia, Delaware, Alabama, Kentucky, Mississippi, Tennessee, Arkansas, Louisiana, Oklahoma, and Texas. However, when discussing the Antebellum South, pinpointing the exact states becomes more complicated, as it depends on the criteria used. Economically, the South was composed of the 15 slave- holding states. Politically, the Confederacy of 1861 included 11 pro-slavery states: South Carolina, Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, Louisiana, Georgia, Texas, Virginia, Arkansas, North Carolina, and Tennessee. The original southern colonies often referred to as the Old South, included Virginia, Delaware, Maryland, Georgia, and the Carolinas.

C. Society:

The social structure of the antebellum South was vastly different from that of the North. By 1861, the South had a population of around 9 million, with nearly 4 million of them being enslaved individuals. In contrast, the North's population was approximately 22 million. After the Revolution, the South struggled to attract significant immigrant populations, unlike the North. Direct trade routes primarily benefited northern ports, and economic opportunities were limited without the use of slave labor. Additionally, the early settlers in the South held insular attitudes and were distrustful of outsiders, leading to slower demographic growth compared to

the North, with native births predominating. Among the white population, three distinct socioeconomic classes developed, excluding the enslaved. The wealthiest group consisted of affluent planters who owned vast landholdings, typically with more than 20 slaves each. These individuals made up about one-quarter of the white Southern population in 1860 and were the wealthiest and most powerful. The Southern culture celebrated the prosperous planter lifestyle, inspiring even modest landowners to aim for similar success. Although they lived lavishly, planters were deeply involved in managing the complex operations of their plantations.

At the opposite end of the spectrum were the poor whites, who owned neither land nor slaves and made up about one-tenth of the white population. Often residing in remote, rural areas, these impoverished families faced difficult conditions and were frequently regarded as descendants of former indentured servants. Between the elite planters and the poor whites were the yeoman farmers and laborers, who owned small plots of land and few or no slaves. These small farmers, the largest white group, worked alongside their limited number of enslaved people to grow subsistence crops and a few marketable goods. It was difficult for outsiders to distinguish between different lower-class groups, but yeoman farmers maintained a sense of respectability through land ownership, placing them above the poorest whites. Overall, the South's deeply stratified social order contrasted sharply with the more egalitarian structure of the North.

D) Economy:

Since the establishment of the first British settlement at Jamestown in Virginia in 1607, the South developed in a manner distinct from the North. Due to its climate, early settlers concentrated on growing and trading tobacco and rice, which were later supplanted by cotton, driven by demand from England. In the 17th century, the introduction of the first black slaves to assist with plantation labor became a crucial factor in shaping Southern society. The Southern economy thus became heavily reliant on agriculture, leading to a dependence on imports, particularly from the North, where large cities and industries thrived due to trade in mineral resources such as iron and coal, which required free labor rather than slaves. After the War of Independence (1775-1783), it became apparent that the South needed to achieve greater economic independence. In the early 19th century, cotton emerged as a highly profitable crop, fueling the growth of plantations instead of industrial development, and shifting the "Cotton Kingdom" to the Southwestern regions of America: Kentucky, Tennessee, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas, where slave labor was integral to cotton production.

However, the Antebellum South was not solely defined by plantations and cotton fields. Many areas lacked plantations or slaves, and agricultural production extended beyond cotton to include food crops and livestock. Industrialization, by contrast, took root in the North, where manufacturing expanded and railroads were built. While factories were not widespread in the South, a significant development occurred in 1822 when a new textile mill was established in Lowell, Massachusetts. This mill became a model for other factories, particularly in terms of women's employment, as many young, single women worked there due to a shortage of male

laborers moving westward. These women seized the opportunity to change their lives and earn money to support their families. They lived in boarding houses under strict supervision, with significant emphasis on their moral conduct and access to cultural and educational opportunities. While the paternal system initially worked well, with women working long hours, the focus gradually shifted from welfare to productivity, resulting in the very conditions the system aimed to avoid: dirty, unsanitary industrial centers and declining morale. Many women joined organizations, protested their working conditions, and even organized strikes. In contrast, women in the South had fewer opportunities for employment outside the domestic sphere.

D) Education

The Litchfield Female Academy, founded in 1792, marked an important step in the development of women's education in America. By the early 19th century, literacy rates were relatively high, with most children receiving their education through church schools or private/home schools. By 1830, the demand for public education grew, particularly among the working class, with reformers arguing that an educated populace would be more productive and that schools could aid in "Americanizing" immigrants. This led to the establishment of the common school system, making education more accessible to the general population. While the North made significant strides in the creation of public schools, the South lagged behind due to several factors. First, there was no established tradition of public schooling in the South. Second, many Southerners viewed education as a private matter, believing that families, not the state, should be responsible for children's upbringing and cultural education. Additionally, the lack of a strong middle class in the South contributed to the limited interest in public education. Wealthy planters could afford private tutors, thus seeing no need for public schooling, while poor families often had limited access to quality education. Enslaved individuals had minimal educational opportunities, primarily focused on skills necessary for labor.

Initially, only men served as teachers in public schools, but as the number of schools increased and attendance expanded, more women began to take on teaching roles. Teaching, along with nursing, became one of the few recognized professions for women. Basic education for women was generally considered adequate given their societal roles, though some, such as Abigail Adams, argued that educated women would make better wives and mothers. Throughout the 19th century, women gained access to academies and seminaries, although the curriculum for girls typically differed from that of boys. Girls were often taught subjects deemed more "feminine," such as manners, music, and art. As historian Catherine Clinton notes, "In the early years of the Republic, elite northern and southern women had identical educational opportunities, but because northern society offered educated women greater opportunities, it was wrongly assumed that women received little or no pedagogical training in the old [antebellum] South" (Clinton, 1999, p. 997). Most children of wealthy planters were sent to boarding schools. Following the American Revolution, attitudes toward women's education began to shift, though the focus remained on enhancing women's roles as wives and mothers rather than advancing their political or economic status, in line with the cult

of "true femininity." Higher education for women was associated with maintaining upper-class status and improving their prospects in the marriage market. As Clinton explains, efforts were made "to improve women in their roles as wives and mothers" (Clinton, 1999, p9).

While women in both the North and South had access to higher education, their opportunities were not on par with those of men. Educational programs for women differed between the North and South, with the South placing more emphasis on refining a lady's manners. Furthermore, after marriage, Southern women were expected to take full responsibility for managing the household, leaving little room for intellectual or artistic pursuits. Most Southern women's lives were confined to the home, and their education primarily prepared them for their roles as wives and mothers.

E) Social Status of Women

As settlers moved to the New World, they established a lifestyle reflecting what they had known in their homeland, carrying with them the traditional view that women were subordinate to men. Women were considered naturally weaker and thus expected to be obedient and submissive. Their roles were largely centered around obeying their husbands, bearing children, and managing the household. John Winthrop, a Puritan leader, argued that a "real woman" embraced this role, seeing it as her freedom. Laws and societal customs reinforced this subordinate position, limiting women's rights. They could not vote, preach, hold office, attend public schools or universities, take legal actions, form contracts, or own property (Clarke, E., 2011, p5).

Catherine Clinton, in *The Plantation Mistress*, explains that, in the early colonies, women—and by extension, the right to marry them—were treated like commodities and were essentially brought to the New World as property (Clinton, 1982, p135). Although women's status was somewhat better in America than in Europe due to the shortage of women during early colonization and the comparatively freer atmosphere of the New World, they were still highly regarded by male authorities (Clinton, 1982, p201).

The Enlightenment and the Great Awakening introduced ideals of individualism, tolerance, and a rejection of traditional authority, which contributed to the Revolutionary War (1775-1782). During the war, women stepped into roles typically held by men. They followed their husbands to army camps, cared for the wounded, cooked, and sometimes even participated in battles when necessary. The revolution brought about some social and economic changes that improved women's lives. While they did not gain political power, they did gain new opportunities, including access to higher education. The first women's colleges were founded, and some coeducational institutions emerged. Job opportunities also increased, especially in the North, where women worked as teachers, milliners, novelists, and editors.

Perhaps the most significant legacy of the revolution was the heightened questioning of women's social status and rights. In the northern colonies, where slavery was less prevalent, the fight for freedom fueled both the anti-slavery and women's rights movements. However, these changes were still limited. Women remained largely confined to domestic roles, with few obtaining formal education.

They continued to lack political and economic power, and their control over property remained restricted. Divorce was nearly impossible, and men continued to assume that women had no interests beyond the home.

By the 1830s, women began to protest against the patriarchal Victorian society, particularly in the North. Some historians argue that the rise of the women's movement was tied to the Industrial Revolution and capitalism, while others suggest that the influence of the French and American revolutions, with their emphasis on equality and individual rights, played a significant role. O'Neill, however, contends that these events do not fully explain the origins of the women's rights movement. He suggests that the newly emerging Victorian family structure, with its high demands on women, sparked the protests. According to O'Neill, the "conjugal family system," which placed a heavy burden on women, was a relatively recent development that became widespread in the 19th century (O'Neill, 1969). This restructuring of the family from a loosely organized unit to a central, socially significant one imposed heavy burdens on women, many of whom could not bear this new expectation (Clinton, 1999, p15). In Victorian society, men defined women's roles within the household, justifying this by claiming women's supposed superiority in moral and spiritual matters, attributed to their heightened intuition, refined sensibilities, and maternal powers. These qualities were believed to give life and challenge male authority. However, women were also seen as physically weaker, intellectually inferior, and unsuitable for the outside world. Feminism emerged as a response to these pressures, challenging the societal expectations that confined women to narrow, traditional roles. O'Neill summarizes the pre-war view of women:

> *"Women were seen as morally and spiritually superior to men due to their heightened intuition, refined sensibilities, and maternal powers, which gave life and challenged the power of men. However, women were also seen as physically weaker, intellectually inferior, and unfit for the harsh world outside"* (O'Neill, 1969, p. 200)

Charles Frazier, born in 1950 in Asheville, North Carolina, is a distinguished author known for his historical fiction, particularly centered on the American South and the Civil War. His academic background includes an undergraduate degree from the University of North Carolina, an M.A. from Appalachian State University, and a Ph.D. in 20th-century American literature from the University of South Carolina. His deep connection to Appalachian culture, shaped by both his personal experiences and research, profoundly influences his writing. Frazier's works often explore the complexities of life in the South, with a special focus on the lives of women and the effects of historical events on their personal lives and social roles (Schaub, 2004).

Frazier's debut novel, *Cold Mountain* (1997), achieved significant commercial and critical success, becoming an international bestseller and winning prestigious awards such as the National Book Award and the ABBY Award. It was later adapted into an Academy Award-winning film. The novel, set during the American Civil War, follows the journey of a Confederate soldier, Inman, as he makes his way back to his beloved

Ada in the Appalachian Mountains. The story is both an adventure and a poignant love tale, offering a stark portrayal of a beautiful yet brutal land.

In *Cold Mountain*, Charles Frazier masterfully explores the relationship between Ada Monroe, an elite white woman from a privileged background, and Ruby Thewes, a poor white woman from a more working-class and rugged environment. Their contrasting social statuses and personal experiences create a complex dynamic, reflecting broader themes of class, survival, and gender roles in the South during and after the Civil War.

Ada, the daughter of a wealthy plantation owner, is initially portrayed as fragile and inexperienced in the practicalities of life. When her father dies, she is left alone to manage his dilapidated farm in the mountains of North Carolina. Ada's previous life had been sheltered, marked by education and refinement but devoid of hands-on skills for survival. Ruby, in contrast, is a strong-willed, resourceful woman raised in a harsh environment, where she learned the physical labor necessary for survival in the rugged Appalachian landscape.

Their relationship begins with tension, as Ada's aristocratic background and Ruby's practical know-how initially seem to place them at odds. However, as the story progresses, the two women forge a deep and transformative bond. Ruby, though initially skeptical of Ada's ability to manage the farm, gradually becomes her mentor, teaching her how to grow food, tend to livestock, and endure the physical hardships of life on the mountain. In return, Ada offers Ruby something she had never had before: a semblance of security and the promise of a different, more dignified life, one that is not entirely defined by struggle and hardship.

Through this relationship, Frazier examines the intersections of class, gender, and personal agency. Ada, despite her privileged background, must confront her own limitations and develop a strength she never knew she possessed. Ruby, though seemingly more self-sufficient, reveals her own vulnerabilities and desires for connection and stability. Their evolving friendship also challenges societal norms about race, class, and gender. Ruby, though from a poor family, represents a kind of working-class resilience that is necessary for survival, while Ada, despite her initial weakness, finds strength through hard work and determination. Their bond symbolizes how women, regardless of social standing, must navigate the constraints and challenges imposed by a patriarchal society.

Frazier's portrayal of their relationship also serves to highlight the ways in which women's roles were shaped by societal expectations. While Ada and Ruby come from different backgrounds, both are ultimately shaped by the constraints of their respective roles in a patriarchal world. Ada's journey of self- reliance and Ruby's deeper emotional opening reveal the complex ways in which women can influence

and support each other in times of crisis, overcoming societal divisions to forge meaningful connections.

Ultimately, the relationship between Ada and Ruby in *Cold Mountain* is central to the novel's themes of survival, resilience, and personal growth. It reveals the power of women's relationships, the possibilities for cross-class solidarity, and the ways in which individuals can transcend the limitations of their social positions through mutual support and understanding. Frazier uses their evolving bond as a means of exploring larger cultural and historical themes, demonstrating how women in the South were often both constrained and empowered by the complex interplay of class, gender, and societal expectations.

Ada is introduced as a young, graceful Southern woman in her twenties, who moves to the Appalachian Mountains due to her father's declining health. She is sophisticated, idealistic, and artistic, with a deep, unwavering loyalty to Inman, the man she loves. She waits for his return from the war, unaware until she sees him that he is alive. Ada and her father relocate to Black Cove before the war, purchasing a farm from a family moving to Texas. Monroe builds a house according to his design, reminiscent of Tara, and adapts to the country lifestyle. He draws inspiration from nature's beauty and poets like Wordsworth. Ada, devoted to her father, feels responsible for the land after his death. Despite the advice of her friends in Charleston, who warn her of the hill country's paganism, Ada does not regret leaving Charleston behind. These friends disapprove of the lack of class distinctions, especially among women. Ada, however, never easily connects with the local women and feels more alienated than expected.

Although Ada reflects on her time in Charleston without nostalgia, she never conforms to its traditional expectations of femininity. She had previously rejected two marriage proposals and felt disconnected from the social dynamics of Charleston. Frazier's Ada defies the typical Southern belle, displaying an absence of confidence in using her allure. Ada's mother, Claire, who died giving birth to her, was of French descent. Ada's father, Monroe, navigated the war's hardships on his own, without the guidance of his wife. After her father's death during the war, Ada finds herself alone at Black Cove. She tries to maintain the farm, though her skills are limited, feeling resentment over her lack of practical knowledge. Ada's background left her ill-prepared for the physical work of survival, and she seeks comfort in books, though she resents their inability to solve her immediate problems.

Ada had never been overtly patriotic during the war and was criticized for her stance, yet her individualism shines through. She is uninterested in aligning with the traditional views surrounding the war. This attitude exemplifies her independence, which later influences her decision to stay in Black Cove rather than return to Charleston. Ada's life shifts with Ruby's arrival, an unrefined but self-reliant woman

who becomes Ada's equal in running the farm. Initially, Ruby and Ada are linked through mutual acquaintance, Sally Swanger, and Ruby offers to help Ada in exchange for food and lodging. Their partnership is founded on practical, mutual respect.

Ruby, strong and resourceful, gradually becomes indispensable. She teaches Ada the skills of survival, like farming, and even performs medical care using herbal remedies. When Ruby's father, Stobrod, is shot, she handles the emergency with remarkable competence. Ada, in contrast, depends on Ruby for guidance in handling life on the farm. Frazier uses intersectionality to depict the contrast between Ada's aristocratic upbringing and Ruby's working-class survival skills, showing that knowledge does not always stem from formal education. Ada learns from Ruby's practical wisdom, as Ruby finds value in Ada's intellectual education, and the two form a bond based on mutual growth

Ada's evolving view of life is evident when Ruby critiques a French hat Ada had bought, recognizing its insignificance compared to the land's tangible values. Ada no longer sees her education or heritage as superior, instead recognizing Ruby's practical knowledge as essential. This transformation also allows them to develop a truly equal partnership, where neither is superior. Ada and Ruby's evolving relationship represents a blending of different social classes. Ada, now focused on survival and practicality, rejects the trappings of her past life as a Southern belle. She begins to see her former identity as superficial and unnecessary, symbolized by her repurposing of a fancy dress for use as a scarecrow. This symbolic act reflects her new identity—one that is grounded in hard work rather than aristocratic appearances.

As Ruby and Ada's bond strengthens, they share a life built on equality. Ruby proves herself capable in nurturing roles, while Ada, though initially disconnected from this reality, learns to respect Ruby's skills. This dynamic subverts traditional patriarchal structures, where women are expected to rely on male authority figures. Through their partnership, Ada and Ruby create a unique family, with Ada adjusting her own worldview. In the epilogue, their lives illustrate a utopian vision where social class distinctions have been erased, leaving both women empowered and thriving together

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