

Women, Marriage, and Selfhood: A Feminist Reading of George Eliot's the Mill on the Floss

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Abstract:

The present study is a feminist interpretation of George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) with particular emphasis on the inter-connections of women, marriage and selfhood in Victorian patriarchal society. The paper makes a case that Maggie Tulliver's battle for identity reflects the constrictions imposed on women in educational, moral, emotional, and social realms. In Eliot's portrayal of Maggie, he does not simply cast her as a tragic woman but also as a vehicle through which he can expose the double standard by which women are harshly condemned for similar emotional or social lapses, whereas men are given social mobility and moral protection. The study looks at how Eliot criticized Victorian gender norms through textual analysis of Maggie's intellectual curiosity, her rebellion against the authority of Tom Tulliver, her social punishment after the Stephen Guest episode, and Maggie's death at the end of the novel. The paper further relies on feminist theories of Maggie that are based on the works of Simone de Beauvoir and Judith Butler to demonstrate that when Maggie does not perform femininity, she is positioned as the, Other and disciplined. Eliot is not a novel that gives Maggie full freedom, but nonetheless, it was a novel of immense import, one that revealed the social institutions that limited female selfhood, and that continues to offer insight into feminist concerns of gender equality, education, and female independence.

Keywords: The Mill on the Floss, Feminist literary criticism, Women and patriarchy, Marriage and gender roles, Female selfhood.

1. Introduction

One of the most remarkable female authors of the Victorian era, George Eliot often uses her writing to explore young women's moral quandaries in a patriarchal culture. *The Mill on the Floss*, which was released in 1860, was the most successful of her writings. If George Eliot was already well-known, she became much more so once this book came out. For feminist critics, it has been "a scandal and fascination". They often study it because, like *Middlemarch*, it takes into account a woman's role in a society ruled by men. However, there is disagreement among reviewers over whether this book upholds the patriarchal system or demonstrates protofeminist views. It has drawn criticism from Elizabeth Earmnath for failing to uphold the feminist ideal and for failing to provide her heroine with a feeling of complete accomplishment. However, since the work is so sympathetic to the situation of women, George Eliot might be defended against this accusation. Given that Maggie is at the start and finish of the book, it may be categorised as a feminist work. Feminist interpretations are made easier by the novel's prominent female character. According to Alice Walker,

"You acting womanish", that is, like a woman usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous, or willful behavior...woman is to feminist as purple is to lavender."

Poetic Content

Maggie Tulliver, a girl in the book, has severe emotional anguish as a result of being discriminated against by a society that has two different standards: one for males and another for women. She has experienced severe gender prejudice since she was a little kid. The varied therapy she received is explained in Book I, Chapter II. In order to further his education and become "a sort o'engineer or a surgveyo'or an auctioneer and Vallyer, Like Riley, or one o'themsmartish business as are all profits and no outley," her father, Mr. Tulliver, sends her brother to a school. As she feels compelled to continue patching like a tiny lady:

"Oh dear, oh, dear Maggie, what are you thinkin' of, to throw your bonnet down there... do, for shame, an' come an' go on with your patch work like a little lady"

She has been aware of the egregious gender discrimination women face in a culture with separate laws for men and women since she was a little girl. She recalls how women are ridiculed and denigrated if they deviate from the roles that society has given them, while men are free to live the lives they want. When Maggie and Stephen elope in the book, Stephen Guest stands out from the norm due to his unusual actions. He never receives criticism or condemnation from the public for his actions. In other words, since he is a man, his activity may be excused, and as such, no one in the community holds him accountable for his wrongdoing. The situation with Maggie, however, was different. When Maggie elopes with Stephen Guest and returns without being married, many are astonished and disapprove of her behaviour. She is relegated and rejected by both the world and her own brother. The following exchange between Tom and Maggie Tulliver demonstrates the predicament of a socially marginalised woman:

"Tom, she began, faintly, „I am come back to you-I am come back home-for refuge-to tell you everything."

"You will find no home with me, he answered, with tremulous rage. „you have been curse to your best friends...I wash my hands of you forever. You don't belong to me."

"Tom, said Maggie, with more courage; I am perhaps not so guilty as you believe me to be. I never meant to give away to my feelings. I struggled against them. I was carried too far in the boat to come back on Tuesday. I come back as soon as I could."

„I can't believe in you any more", said Tom roughly, „you shall not come under my roof. It is enough....the sight of you is hateful to me"(42)

George Eliot criticises a culture that discriminates against women. For instance, in the book, Tom wants to get a job to help his family when Mr. Tulliver passes away, but Mr. Deane tells him that his degree is useless for business and that he has to learn bookkeeping. Maggie states her desire at this point: "If he had taught me bookkeeping by double entry and after the Italian method, as he did Lucy Bertram, I could teach you, Tom" (205). However, Tom's discrimination against women is clear as he is intolerant of her request and accuses Maggie of being conceited and egotistical, reprimanding her as follows: "You're always setting yourself up above me and everyone else, and I've wanted to tell you about it several times." The way you talked to my uncle and aunts was inappropriate; instead of putting yourself forward, you should let me take care of you and my mother. Even if you believe you know better than anybody, you're almost always mistaken. I'm a better judge than you are. (142). She is compelled by George Eliot's feminism to demonstrate against the patriarchal society's social structure, which disregards women's preferences. Maggie doesn't want her hair to appear nice in *The Mill on the Floss*. All she wants is for people to believe she's a smart young girl and not criticise her. However, everyone berates her and takes every opportunity to make fun of her. Even her mother chastises her in this way:

"Maggie", said Tulliver, „go and get your hair brushed-do, for shame. I told you not to come in without going to Martha first; you know I did"(51).

The patriarchal culture that views women as inferior is also criticised in the book. In this culture, women are seen as stupid and useless. They think women are solely supposed to perform housework because they can't be creative. The masculine culture ridicules and condemns them if they are successful in producing any clever work. For instance,

Maggie stays for a few days in Book II's chapter I after seeing her brother, Tom Tulliver. She becomes quite engaged with Tom's teachings. Tom discovers that Elucid's geometry and

Latin grammar have complicated his life. Because she is familiar with Latin grammar, which she studied on her own, Maggie wants to offer him some condescending comfort. However, as a member of a male-dominated culture, he mocks her offer of assistance rather than acknowledging her effort:

„You help me, you silly little thing!“ said Tom, “I should like to see you doing one of my lessons, why, I learn Latin too! Girls never learn such things. They’re too silly.” (125)

This study argues that *The Mill on the Floss* should be read as a feminist text not because it gives Maggie complete freedom, but because it reveals the structures that deny such freedom. Through Maggie's intellectual hunger, emotional conflict, social punishment, and final reconciliation with Tom during the flood, Eliot exposes the limits placed on women's agency in Victorian society.

2. Literature Review

Myers, Elizabeth M (2010) explored in detail the concepts of marriage, gender, and class in the works of British novelist George Eliot (1819–1880) and American author Louisa May Alcott (1832–1888). Additionally, and where appropriate, other subjects and categories are examined, such as education, morality, religion, and race. The three main Alcott novels that were examined are *Work* (1873), *Little Women* (1868–69), and *Moods* (1864 & 1882). Adam Bede (1859), *The Mill on the Floss* (1861), *Middlemarch* (1871–72), and *Daniel Deronda* (1876) are the main fictional works of Eliot that are being analysed. While their most well-known works are the main emphasis, other novels, essays, and other publications are also taken into consideration when appropriate.

Naseb, & Razan A (2024) explained the George Eliot's 'The Mill on the Floss,' which focusses on the Tulliver women's struggle in a patriarchal society, explores complex mother-daughter relationships and social criticisms. It eloquently illustrates how Mrs. Tulliver prioritises social standing and material stability above Maggie Tulliver's emotional and intellectual demands, reflecting the strongly held gender standards of their day. The study contends that the novel's examination of women's limited roles and the lasting impact of maternal figures continues to resonate, addressing ageless concerns about gender and family dynamics. Eliot highlights the loneliness and challenges women have in claiming their uniqueness by drawing a sharp contrast between Maggie's vibrant inner life and her mother's obsession with looks and social status. According to the thesis, Mrs. Tulliver's treatment of Maggie reinforces the limitations she is subjected to and indicates her involvement in unfulfilled social expectations. The study reveals a moving irony in Mrs. Tulliver's adherence to patriarchal norms, highlighting the novel's critique of Victorian gender norms and their continued applicability.

Rozaqoh, Uswatun (2009) determined the oppression of women and the fight against it, a feminist perspective is used. The original text of *The Mill on the Floss* by George Eliot served as the source of the statistics. According to the study's findings, Eliot's work *The Mill on the Floss* features several forms of oppression against women, which the main character fights against. The researcher learns from the analysis in this study that Maggie Tulliver was oppressed in terms of gender and education. Regarding the educational aspect: believed that women's incapacity to read, their inability to acquire Latin, their rejection of educated women, and their shallowness in solving Euclid were all factors. Pregnant women, prejudice against women, bridled women, and dependent women are all considered gender features. As members of a patriarchal culture, they see women as possessions and things devoid of morals or the right to be treated with dignity. They prioritise males and disregard women. The main character's fight against tyranny is shown in a number of acts, including: In the educational element, Maggie grows up to be an educated woman who is capable of geography, knows Latin, and is proficient in Roman Empire history.

Akça (2009) said it is common to treat women's involvement in the print culture of the Caroline court as a distinct area of literary history, apart from the particular circumstances of Charles I's policies and the continuous theological disputes that were upsetting Europe. Charles I's choice to govern without Parliament from 1629 to 1640, his strict censorship of political and theological opposition, and his acceptance of the idea of the Divine Right of Kings all signalled a slow shift towards absolutism throughout his reign. His contentious adherence to Arminianism and ongoing persecution of

Roman Catholics also made sure that some groups continued to be excluded from the court. Analysing women authors' roles within the larger print culture created in this environment is more productive than looking at them as a distinct category. The court was by no means a homogenous group, even while its growing feminocentricity allowed some women to defy orthodox gender standards in order to establish themselves as writers. Texts written by men and women often show the writers' main dedication to certain religious and political groups as well as their readiness to compromise with the court's prevailing discourses in order to advance them. However, a more noticeable feature of Caroline literature was the presence of women as writers or recipients of written writings on religious loyalty. Court propaganda and efforts to influence court discourses were both included in the genre I refer to as "conversations with a lady."

Mathieson, Charlotte (87-102) explained that 1. The novels *Adam Bede* (1859), *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), and *Silas Marner* (1861) as well as the short stories *Scenes of Clerical Life* (1857–8) all use a variety of locales as landscapes to create the "rural realism" that Eliot felt was absent from many literary and artistic depictions of rural areas. One These works are closely plotted against meticulously observed details of the agricultural landscape, such as harvest dates, flora, and fauna, and are enhanced with acute attention to the distinctive local dialects and customs that give each rural location its unique characteristics. They are based on scenes from her early years in Warwickshire and were further developed through meticulous research into agricultural life and rural traditions. 2. Eliot's choice of early nineteenth-century locations, as critics have often noted, may sometimes arouse romanticised yearning for a picturesque pre-industrial environment, and even though Eliot intended to more accurately portray the rural working people, his social perspective is nevertheless somewhat constrained. 3. However, the human relationships that take place in these settings are often far from ideal, illustrating the moral complexity of the sociocultural ideas that both influence and are influenced by the rural environment.

Smith, & Sherri Catherine (97-111) stated that recent feminist work on phallocentrism and knowledge criticism has elevated the question of "equality politics" to a high-stakes investigation. The masculinism that defined George Eliot's personal and professional life is, in fact, perplexing because she refused to accept the egalitarian feminist politics of her own time. However, I contend that Eliot's uncomfortable stance points to a more complex interpretation of the binary that underpins gender hierarchy—one that places equal emphasis on the meaning and the form of gender. My discussion of Eliot's "straight drag," a pattern of social self-positioning that necessitates a keen aesthetic sensibility for the formal unity of gender (that is, the commerce between form and idea, between what "manliness" looks like and what masculinity means historically and politically), is counterbalanced by Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity.

Sunar, Thakendra (2014) examined the changing societal and individual perspectives on marriage and love as they are portrayed in George Eliot's *Middlemarch* by contending that Eliot foreshadows contemporary unions by challenging conventional Victorian marital ideals. Sexuality, changing gender roles, and a rejection of socioeconomic status as the primary determinant of a spouse are relevant elements of contemporary marriage for the purposes of this research. It takes more than merely focussing on love, sexuality, changing gender roles, and discounting socioeconomic status as the primary driver to challenge the conventionality of marriages. These are essential to updating the outdated conception of marriage and its societal purpose. It's creative and contemporary to challenge the traditional view of marriage as it is portrayed in *Middlemarch*. This has been accomplished by using a modernist perspective to analyse how *Middlemarch* is influenced by its contemporary setting. As a result, this study examines the problems faced by Victorian women who experienced various forms of tyranny and male domination in many spheres of life. The research focusses on marriage, which was one of the most pressing concerns for women at the time, in the reflection itself.

According to Thomas, Jeanie G (392-415) *George Eliot, Middlemarch, and Feminism* George Eliot allows her heroine to confess, "I used to despise women a little for not shaping their lives more, and doing better things,," during one of the tender and tense farewell conversations between Dorothea and Will in *Middlemarch*. Dorothea acknowledges that she has learnt to think differently after experiencing "the unexpected way in which trouble comes, and ties our hands, and makes us silent when we long to speak." Dorothea's developing awareness of limitation reflects some of George Eliot's most profound life lessons. However, they are misunderstood by many contemporary feminist critics who, mirroring Dorothea's initial prejudice, hate George Eliot for not letting her character have more control over her life and accomplish better things. I want to address this gap between George Eliot and many of her feminist readers in an effort

to mend it. George Eliot, in my opinion, has strong feminist credentials, and the considerable amount of conflict between her and her critics is not due to a significant difference in opinion regarding the many forces that maintain women's limited lives, but rather to a different understanding of the processes of change. Let me state right away that George Eliot has a conservative viewpoint, but that doesn't mean she is any less dedicated to a richer life for both men and women than her contemporary feminist critics, whose cause she is accused of betraying.

According to [Yadav, Sanju, And Anju Yadav \(2016\)](#) Feminism is the process of examining how women are treated in patriarchal societies or talking about women's concerns in order to change the reader's perspective and address the injustices that women have faced. Although there have been many outstanding feminists who made significant contributions to the feminist movement, George Eliot's handling of women's issues has caused disagreement among feminist critics. The present research uses a largely feminist viewpoint in an attempt to overcome this purported ambiguity. Examining George Eliot's opinions on the gender issue is a modest attempt. It aims to answer a number of concerns, including whether Eliot's portrayal of women has helped to subjugate and stifle women in patriarchal society or, on the other hand, whether she has tried to question and eradicate male domination and dogmatism. In addition to highlighting the ridiculousness of rituals and conventions that contribute to the spread of the patriarchal society myth, *The Mill on the Floss* delves deeply into the misery endured by women in a male-dominated society. In fact, it tells the whole tale of Maggie's suffering as a result of egregious gender discrimination. Maggie endures severe suffering as a kid and as an adult. When she must give up her sweetheart, she endures a great deal of suffering. From the reader's perspective, her lover's rejection is the most heartbreaking. Since renunciation implies giving in, George Eliot's idea of renunciation has drawn a lot of criticism. Since "renunciation" is associated with independence in this book – possibly the only freedom attainable for a woman in Maggie's circumstances – the book may be justified.

Existing studies have examined gender oppression, marriage, maternal authority, and female suffering in Eliot's fiction. However, many of these studies remain descriptive and focus mainly on Maggie's victimhood. Less attention is given to how marriage, family discipline, education, and social morality work together to restrict Maggie's selfhood. This paper addresses that gap by analysing Maggie not only as a tragic heroine, but as a figure through whom Eliot critiques the gendered organisation of Victorian society.

3.Theoretical Framework

This work is an application of feminist literary criticism to the construction of women's identity in *The Mill on the Floss*. Maggie's marginalisation in family and society can be attributed to Simone de Beauvoir's concept of woman as the — Other. Maggie is not evaluated based on her intelligence or moral complexity - she is evaluated on the basis of an expectation of feminine obedience, modesty, and sacrifice. Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity is also relevant as it considers how femininity is socially enforced through repeated behaviour, discipline and public judgement, which Maggie's conflict demonstrates. Maggie's ability to refuse to play the role of the passive Victorian woman makes her socially unacceptable.

4. Research Objectives

- To examine the institution of marriage in the novel as a site of negotiation, conflict, and compromise for female characters, and to assess how it influences their sense of selfhood.
- To analyse the portrayal of women in George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* through the lens of feminist literary criticism, focusing on how societal expectations shape their roles and identities.
- To highlight the relevance of Eliot's narrative in modern feminist criticism, emphasizing the continuing significance of questions about women's selfhood, individuality, and social roles.

5. Research Questions

- How does George Eliot portray women's struggle for selfhood and individuality in *The Mill on the Floss*?
- In what ways does marriage function as a social constraint on women's identity in the novel?
- How does Maggie Tulliver's journey reflect the conflict between personal desire and societal expectations of Victorian women?

- What feminist themes can be identified in Eliot's depiction of women's roles in family and marriage?

6. Research Methodology

Examine critically George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*'s literary topics of marriage, women, and selfhood. The study heavily relies on existing academic works, critical essays, dissertations, books, and peer-reviewed journal articles that analyse the novel from feminist, sociocultural, and historical viewpoints since it is based on secondary data collecting. The main focus of this study is a primary examination of George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*. Background information, context, confirmation, and further support for the interpretations were all supplied by the secondary sources. The technique used was textual analysis of the book with an emphasis on the female characters' fight for individuality despite being constrained by patriarchal norms, mainly via marriage. The research analyses and critiques the social aspects of gender roles and power hierarchies using a feminist theoretical framework that was inspired by feminist critics such as Judith Butler and Simone de Beauvoir. The book gives a holistic understanding of Eliot's complex position on feminism through the comparison of numerous schools of critical inquiry. Data will be collected and synthesized from a range of secondary material including relevant books, academic databases (including JSTOR, Google Scholar, and ResearchGate), and online libraries. Readers might also pursue the current debates surrounding Eliot's representation of Maggie Tulliver and the more overarching issues of women's identities in Victorian society through the secondary literature. The project also takes into account the intersections of gender with cultural norms, family expectations, and class.

This approach prefers the interpretation synthesis process and critical reading, comparative analysis, over simply data collection. The method situates the work more closely to feminist studies and allows for an overall understanding of how Eliot's narrative both portrays and then considers how women negotiated their circumstances in a patriarchal society.

7. Discussion

A feminist analysis of George Eliot's *an Mill on the Floss* can reveal the multifaceted relationships between women, marriage, and identity in a Victorian patriarchy. We see that marriage is a social good and also a limit to agency in our first objective, which is to analyze marriage as a space of negotiation, conflict, and compromise for female characters. Maggie Tulliver identifies marriage as a socially constructed institution rather than a personal choice. Maggie's relationship with Stephen Guest indicates the privilege of men, who face no moral condemnation but whose women face social consequences. In Victorian England, marriage determined respectable femininity, and women's humanity and value were ultimately determined by their adherence to their responsibilities as women rather than their uniqueness. Maggie's first refusal and subsequent alienation after the elopement can be a way to illustrate this. Our second goal, which is to interpret Eliot's views on women in the book as a site of feminist critique, is to observe how social norms restrict women's roles and identities in society as well as their ability to participate in society as women. Maggie had previously experienced societal prejudice and deplorable views towards women since she was a young girl. These included depriving her of a good education, publicly reprimanding her for her beliefs, and disparaging her brains and appearance. These examples point to a society that views women as purely domestic and devoid of thought. The feminist criticism indicates that Maggie's search for education, knowledge, and emotional satisfaction makes her an aberration in a patriarchal society. Maggie operating mostly represents what happens when one does not conform to a enforced way of thinking that patriarchy has imposed upon her. Maggie's family, represented by Tom's character, is presented as a microcosm of patriarchy. Maggie's family is a microcosm of patriarchal control, in that it forces Maggie into a family structure that negotiates that power is dictated by both societal and familial parochial relationship. The novel's commitment to women's selfhood and individual independence can be shown by the third objective; revealing the narrative's substantial role in the critique of contemporary feminist practice. Maggie's personal experiences and struggles can resonate with women's current feminist conversations on pressure for conformity, individuality and expressiveness. Although this narrative occurs in the nineteenth century the references made to unequal educational opportunities, gender biased morality and constraints on women's decision making have not lessened the relevance of the issues addressed in the past and should still be relevant now. This includes feminist theorists such as Simone de Beauvoir and Judith Butler who see Maggie's predicament as the plight of all women, a phenomenon that is produced and diminished in the same way by gender. Eliot's work may prove helpful for a targeted feminist engagement because

of her attempt to reconcile her character's individuality with social regulation that depicts the larger contestation between individuality and patriarchal containment. Eliot's contained and controversial definition of feminism. Whether Eliot's story criticizes or legitimizes patriarchal ideology is debatable among critics. On the one hand, Maggie's acceptance of pain and anti-escapeism from love depicts an endorsement of female roles and patriarchal ideology. Eliot critiques patriarchal structures by highlighting the injustice of categorizations of women by compassionate inference to Maggie's pain. The book ultimately depicts the confined realities for women who have difficulty identifying themselves within restrictive societal influences that contain social criticism and acquiescence to patriarchal ideologies. The intercourse debate shows how Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* highlights not only the systemic injustices of Victorian society, but elaborates the challenges facing women to become self-governing agents with identities. Eliot articulates a typology of subjectivity deserving feminist analysis through Maggie, a melancholy and multi-dimensional portrait of female selfhood limited by marriage, family, and societal orthodoxies.

8. Conclusion

The Mill on the Floss is a nuanced feminist commentary on Victorian gender ideals, the life and tribulations of Maggie Tulliver. This research has revealed that George Eliot does not merely present Maggie as a tragic female figure, but he has relied on Maggie's experiences to uncover the social, moral and familial domains that limit women's sense of self. Eliot's writing is confined to the constraints of the 1800s, but the novel gives a clear impression of the myriad of inequities by which women were expected to live, to obey, to sacrifice and to maintain social respectability.

The main conclusion of this analysis is that in the novel marriage is not just a personal relation but also a social institution which helps to regulate women's identity. Marriage is associated with respectability, obedience and moral judgement for women, and greater freedom and social protection for men. This double standard is evident when Maggie and Stephen Guest have their episodes. Stephen is not condemned or rejected, judged and socially isolated as Maggie is. By creating this contrast Eliot reveals the Victorian morality of his society.

Maggie is also a character reflecting the institutionalised inequalities associated with education, family power, power to act and independence. Maggie has always been a curious and emotionally charged and complex girl, but the society she lives in does not look favorably on those qualities in a female. She is not afforded the same educational opportunities as Tom and is constantly corrected when she does not behave as a woman. The authority of the home is embodied in Tom Tulliver, who represents the concept of authority, authority, love and duty are inseparable. The way he judges Maggie exemplifies how patriarchy works in society and even in the family.

The feminist message of the novel continues to be reinforced by its conclusion. Maggie is not a suicide victim, she is killed by the flood while attempting to save Tom. This ending symbolises both reconciliation and tragedy. The society in which Eliot situates Maggie does not give her total freedom, but it does reveal the harmful effects of limiting women's opportunities for self-expression and individuality.

Thus, *The Mill on the Floss* has continued to be significant in feminist literary criticism as it illustrates how women's identities are constructed, constrained, and evaluated in the context of family, marriage, schooling, and public morals. Eliot's feminism is not so straightforward as it may seem. She does not offer a completely emancipated heroine, but she does reveal the injustice of the world in which the heroine can never be free. Maggie's story resonates with contemporary issues of gender justice, women's agency, and women's quest for selfhood.

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