

## CONSTRUCTION OF WOMANHOOD IN VICTORIAN FICTION: A STANDPOINT FEMINIST STUDY OF GEORGE ELIOT'S FEMALE PROTAGONIST IN MILL ON THE FLOSS

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### Abstract

*The purpose of the present research is to analyze the contents of the text with a thick descriptive method. Maggie's character is evaluated within the paradigm of Victorian socialization as it is a necessary element of understanding the psychological dimensions of her growth into a woman. She is the heroine of George Eliot's modern novel, Mill on the Floss, which is considered by many to be the forerunner of the modern psychological novel. The way females define their personalities during their encounters with the environment and its inhabitants are clearly seen in multifarious aspects of Maggie's development.*

**Key-words:** Construction, Standpoint, Womanhood, Protagonist, Socialization, Psychological novel, Descriptive method.

### Introduction

The current research undertaken is an exploration of the socio-political and cultural forces operating in the Victorian era that played a significant rather decisive role in the construction of the notion of womanhood. The discursive category of womanhood in the Victorian age was heavily influenced by the social structures that were predominantly dictated by the male figure. The woman's identity as well as her various roles in society was the outcome of what the male figure thought of her and wanted her to be. The present inquiry into the construction of her womanhood is mediated through the feminist standpoint theory which "argues that the world may be known only in partial perspectives given to us by where we are situated in the world in terms of class, race, gender, geography, sexual identity, and so forth" (Brummett, 2006, p. 173). The feminist standpoint theory which is an offshoot of the feminist movement and this theory maintains that woman and her womanhood is basically a discursive construction and the dominant male society constructs the images of woman that suit their vested interests. Feminists' standpoint theorists such as Nancy Hartsock (1983) and Sandra Harding (2004), while explicating the relationship between womanhood and patriarchal societies note that woman's "socio-political positions are powerful sites of epistemology as well as the methodology for understanding their material and emotional relationships with those around them. Methodologies based on feminists' standpoint theory shed light on the struggle of womanhood in patriarchal society". Victorian literature offers a rich site where such struggles for womanhood and various factors influencing the construction of this womanhood have been artistically delineated by the great novelists. The present study delimits itself to the process of the construction of womanhood as well as how women conceive of themselves concerning the expectations of the patriarchal society in the novels of two outstanding novelists of the Victorian age: Thomas Hardy and George Eliot. Furthermore, the research is inspired by the motive of exploring what socio-political, ethical,

cultural, and religious factors determine and affect the thoughts, identity, role, and image of a woman in the Victorian era.

## Significance of the Study

The current study is significant in relation to pointing out how the male and female experienced the social and physical environment in quite different ways which ultimately leads to the unique construction of their personality and gender. This study discusses in detail not only the dynamics of a relationship between male and female gender in specific Victorian settings but also traces out the process by which the growth of feminine personality remains predicated upon the patriarchal norms and expectations of society.

## Research Questions

1. How is the womanhood of Maggie Tulliver conditioned by the patriarchal-led socio-political modes of thinking of her society?
2. How are Maggie's experience and epistemology different from the male gender and yet influenced by dominant oppositional male figures?

## Literature Review

The feminist theory holds that the repression of woman's emotions in the Victorian era was in particular because she realizes the sacrificial role she was made to perform by the male counterpart. In this regard, for example, Virginia Woolf, while critiquing George Eliot and her heroines, demonstrates: "The burden and the complexity of womanhood were not enough; she must reach beyond the sanctuary and pluck for herself the strange bright fruits of art and knowledge. Clasp them as few women have ever clasped them, she would not renounce her own inheritance – the difference of view, the difference of standard (Adams, 1978, p.204)". Woolf's assertion for the need for self-actualization for the woman through feminine epistemology becomes a fundamental point of standpoint feminist theory as she aspires for women to have access to the knowledge of their culture and society gained through their own epistemology. Not denying the fact that this access to the world of knowledge has not been easy for a woman to gain but unless women try to know themselves and their environment through active participation in it, they are unlikely to execute the process of self-actualization. However, ironically such access to and understanding of male-dominated culture bring with it pain because "access to male-dominated culture may equality be felt to bring with its alienation, repression, division – a silencing of the feminine, a loss of women's inheritance" (Jacobus, 1986, p.27).

Maggie, the heroine of George Eliot's novel *Mill on the Floss*, has been portrayed by the authors as a very sensitive child whose process of maturing from childhood to youth has been captured in close relation to what happens to her when she interacts with the people in the family, community and outside society. The environment in which she is brought up and becomes part of cannot be separated from her overall development as a female character of acute sensibility. The way people of her society, in-home and outside, think about the female gender in general deeply influences her thinking and she imbibes the dominant currents of the society therefore her thinking about herself and the people is conditioned by the modes of thinking of her milieu.

In order to investigate the inevitable relationship between her personal world at the macro social world in which she moves, feminist standpoint theory is a very crucial theoretical tool

that would enable the study to find out how “one’s views of the world are shaped by where and when s/he is located in the socio-political landscape. In the broadest sense, standpoint theory argues that the world may be known in partial perspective given to us by where we are situated in the world in terms of class, race, gender, geography, sexual orientation, age, and so forth (Brummet, 2006, p. 173). From Brummet’s comments about the nature of one’s perspective of the reality around it becomes obvious that the complete knowledge of the world and the reality around cannot be achieved because of one’s relative position to the knowledge about the world. Factors like class, race, gender, etc. play a very significant role in the acquisition of knowledge of the world as with the change in any of these factors one’s knowledge of reality may undergo broad transformation. Instead of establishing a singular, universal or essentialist version of reality, standpoint theory offers numerous possibilities of reaching a different perspective of reality. Maggie’s character when approached from standpoint theory reveals the interesting epistemological understanding of her character and the formative influences.

Nancy Hardsock (1983) and Sendra Harding (2004), the two eminent Feminist standpoint theorists, note that socio-political positions of women are powerful sites of epistemology as well as the methodology for understanding their material and emotional relationship with those around them. Methodologies based on Feminist standpoint theory shed light on the struggle of womanhood in patriarchal societies. George Eliot delineates one such struggle made by Maggie in her celebrated novel, *Mill on the Floss*. Maggie right from her early childhood has been depicted concerning the overwhelming influence of the male figures in one or the other form that not only restricts Maggie’s natural talents from flowering but also requires her to conform to certain ossified social norms.

The burden and the complexity of womanhood were not enough; she must reach beyond the sanctuary and pluck for herself the strange bright fruit of art and knowledge. Clasp them as few women have ever clasped them, she would not renounce her own inheritance – the difference of view, the difference of standard. (Adams, 1978, p. 204)

This “difference of view” and “the difference of standard” that Virginia Woolf has articulately emphasized upon in her review of George Eliot’s representation of female characters is significant in terms of the later development of Feminist standpoint theory.

Woolf was one of the most powerful Feminist theorists and activists whose sterling writings upon feminism urged the woman to stand up for their rights waging the powerful struggle against exploitative patriarchy. Woolf’s review clearly indicates the essential difference of the opinion, standards, and standpoints between the male and female gaze when it comes to defining the existential realities of the female gender. In order to make a comprehensive analysis of Maggie’s character in relation to her social milieu and the specific ways of interaction between individual and society, it is better to look into the process of Maggie’s development as a character in depth.

The way females define their personalities during their encounters with the environment and its inhabitants are clearly seen in multifarious aspects of Maggie’s development. Even the very appearance of Maggie is a point in contrast to not only the males but also other female characters like Lucy. The appearance of her outward being includes her unusual facial features, her undesirable weird hair, and unusually dark complexion of her skin. Surprisingly, her physical appearance contrasts her from the normal Victorian ideals of beauty. Maggie in contrast to Lucy who is the paragon of beauty possesses traits that associate her more with the

gypsies than her class. How Maggie stands at once deeply rooted in her society's conventions and to what extent she struggles to depart from those stifling conventions is obvious from the ways George Eliot has endeavored to portray her character in colors that simultaneously belong to and depart from the Victorian tapestry.

Focusing upon the character of Maggie I have engaged myself in finding the questions of how the silencing of the feminine takes place, and how relations based on feminine affections bring alienation and repression. Describing at length the hair politics, George Eliot shows that in her youth, Maggie's hair becomes slightly more fashionable and her hair is braided and coiled in a more socially acceptable fashion.

### **The Analysis of the Constructed Nature of Maggie's Womanhood in Victorian Age**

The analysis is carried out within the theoretical framework of feminist standpoint theory. Even though Maggie was a distinguished child from her birth, the novelist shows that with the passing years as Maggie interacts more and more with the socio-political world of her times, she feels compelled to think, act and behave in the manner the society at large scale expects her to. Though she finds it increasingly difficult to compromise with society in the matters of her nature and fashion, yet she is left with little or no choice at all to go her own way. She realizes that her desire to live life in her own preferred ways will entail issues that would make her pay a heavy price for her dissenting views. Eliot writes at one point of the novel Mrs. Tulliver "would still brush and carefully tend Maggie's hair, which she had become reconciled to, despite its refusal to curl, now it was so long and messy". Her hair symbolizes her initially rebelling nature as like her nature her hair too does not easily bend to conventional ways and dominant traditions. Just like many other women of her age, Maggie would also have liked to carve out her own way of life, but given the inflexible nature of society, she had to end up as a doomed person whose flight of departure from the inexorable societal values thwarted her efforts leaving her battered, disillusioned and frustrated.

Apart from the psychological reasons of the failure of Maggie to live an independent life, what is of particular importance to me is her placement in the social environment and her struggle to transcend those values which hinder a woman's emotional and intellectual development? Where her refusal to bow before pitiless social conventions demonstrates her firm resolve to nurture her natural personality growth by meeting people like Mr. Wickham and Philip against the wishes of her family and the established conventions of the society, her final tragic extrication from society because of her unconventional ways of life and the consequent tragic death indicates that a complete digression from the incarcerating conventions of the orthodox society was not likely to happen without tragic consequences. The norms and expectations of society in which Maggie grows up put restraints upon her potential and restrain her from attaining the full human potential which she was quite capable of and in any circumstances less intolerant of women's freedom than the Victorian age, Maggie would have lived a fuller and independent life.

Her observations of the society around and the things she is taught in the family make her realize that repression not the expression of desires is the rule of Victorian morality and as a consequence of this internalization of Victorian morality and education she learns and

practices, though against her nature, to suppress her internal desires. This repression of desires makes her psychologically weak and depressed resulting in her inability to make decided opinions about life and people. Her internal resources which she once had in plenty are never restored because of their immature death in her psyche. She grows weaker in the matters of depending upon her judgment and approval of the matters concerning her life, fears more the criticism of others, and learns to keep away the risks.

Very relevant in this context is the observation of Elizabeth Ermarth “by internalizing crippling norms, by learning to rely on approval, to fear ridicule and to avoid conflict, Maggie grows up fatally weak. In place of a habit of self-actualization, she has learned a habit of self-denial which Philip rightly calls “long suicide”. We content that this “long suicide” remarked by Philip refers to the societal pressure which exerts itself through indefatigable conventions and ruthless expectations of society as well as familial expectations. By no means to the study establishes that Maggie is a flawless character or she does not contribute in any way to her tragic end. Typical as it is to George Eliot, being the representative figures of Victorian morality and mentality which requires women to stay away from emotionalism, Maggie experiences numerous tormenting human passions, the human passions which are often used as a device for bringing catastrophe upon women. I argue that the fundamental forces that bring about the ruin of Maggie include family values, gender roles prescribed for women by patriarchal lords, and crippling limitations i.e. what is right and what is wrong for woman, what she should do and what not, society’s inflexible views about marriage, rigid patriarchal attitude towards forgiveness and the lack of independent exercise of personal delight. Making Feminist standpoint theorists my guides, we emphatically argue that Maggie faces grave tragedy and fails to become a fully independent human being because of the oppressive gender roles imposed upon them by the opposite gender in an attempt to keep the females from attaining full growth of humanity. Maggie’s standpoint, that is, her feminine position in the society provides her a vision to analyze social reality around and thus absorbing herself in the dominant ways of thinking behaves accordingly.

Her unique standpoint as a woman enables her, on one hand, to understand the nature of social reality and act accordingly, and on the other hand, the same realization of the knowledge of reality brings upon her miserable plight because the knowledge of societal norms and values runs counter to her desires. The standpoint of Feminist theory, as it enables us to approach the female struggle for her place in society from a Feminist perspective, has its roots in the works of the great political philosopher Hegel and Marx-the two great interpreters of human history from a materialistic perspective. Based on the Marxist theory that explains how the bourgeoisie and proletariat experienced alienation in different ways, Lukacs explained the proletariat standpoint which was later on taken up, molded, and used by many scholars in diverse theoretical fields. One of the central notions of the Feminist standpoint theory is the significant idea that the epistemologies of the dominant groups are sharply different from, and contradicted with, the epistemology of the oppressed groups, the oppressed groups often being women. The orientation of human experience is not a simple matter because the contradictory ideologies circulating the society influence the thinking of an individual and his/her experience is organized around and conditioned by diverse factors such as gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, nationality, age, political affiliation, language and so on.

### **Maggie as the Product of Societal Norms**

It follows that the process of the formation of an individual’s view of the world is mediated and determined by specific social spaces and often contradictory views of those who inhabit different social spaces. This knowledge about the other gender and its requirements of being,



as well as feelings and ambitions, is always fragmented and socially located epistemologies severely undercut a group's ability to understand other people's common-sense view of the world. From this background of the standpoint theory, it follows that this theory is predicated upon this belief that knowledge and power (which Foucault says constitute the power structure of society) are allied forces and that human relationships are not clearly defined an understandable "because of the differential power relations relative to knowledge production and because of the epistemological limits carried with viewpoint provided by specific locations" (Au 53). It is now established that human activity itself is an epistemology and like any other epistemology is subject to different interpretations of truth as Nietzsche had famously said that there is no absolute truth, there are only the interpretations of truth. This leads us to believe that individuals as speaking acting subjects create their own realities, which inform their own unique ways of understanding the world and the people around them. For the illustration of the points discussed above the text of Mill on the Floss and especially the passages concerning Maggie's interaction with the other people and the consequent formation of her thoughts about herself and the society offer ample evidence, for example, Maggie's friendship with Philip, or evolution of this friendship into love meets with aggressive disapproval from the family. Everybody in the family sees this relationship as a mark of disrespect that causes the downfall of Maggie's image as a doted and sister. Maggie's mother, Mrs. Tulliver, the wife of a patriarch who has learned in her lifetime the values appropriate to a Victorian woman, sternly disapproves of Maggie's relationship and warns her to avoid such reckless behavior which is not suitable for Dodson girl. As a mother and the guardian of her daughter's proper behavior, she sends her a cautionary message that her good image depends upon her submissive performance of responsibilities and that if she failed to keep up this image by refusing to comply with her domestic and social roles, she will not only be disliked by all but the prospect of her happy life will also suffer. In other words, what Mrs. Tulliver has internalized during long years of womanhood, she wants to transmit to her daughter. She tells her "what is to become of you if you are so naughty? I'll tell your aunt Glegg and your aunt Pullet when they come next week, and they will never love you anymore" (Adams, 1978, p.31). Mrs. Tulliver's threatening advice clearly indicates that Maggie should not think of severing family ties, and if she preferred her personal feelings over the family's age old traditions, she will have to pay a heavy price for it which she actually does when she is excommunicated by her family and society alike.

Maggie's sufferings stem from her sacrificial nature but the point to ponder is that how Maggie developed this sacrificial attitude towards others: whether she had in the born quality of sacrificing her personal comforts for the whims and wishes of others, or the growth of this attitude was the result of series of ideological assumptions that were indoctrinated her thoughts to adjust her thoughts according to what the society expected of her.

The study of her character with a Feminist standpoint perspective reveals that Maggie comes to acquire Victorian standards of womanhood through her interaction with social doctrines about how a woman should behave and live in society. When she, in the enthusiasm of her newly found youth, enacts her passionate desires for Wickham in the first place, and later for more desirable Philip by courting with them, she faces bitter experiences as the people around her condemn her for inappropriate behavior. As she fails to act in accordance with the desired responses of society, she faces dehumanizing humiliation and finally sacrifices her personal delights and agency to ensure the protection of her family. Maggie is unable to claim the greatness of her soul and fails to soar to the great heights of individuality because of the gender roles and expectations. For her domesticity and socialization are not her own wished-for spheres, rather imposed upon her are the responsibilities which if she ignores would divest her of the love of her own family and the respect she commands in the society. What is

depressing, however, is the fact that her genius goes unnoticed and unrewarded not only because she is a woman but also because her family, her own people are the slaves of dominant morality which does not see a woman having potential for great things, nor is she conceived of equal to her male counterpart, therefore, Maggie's family does not recognize the genius.

To her is accorded inferior position not only by her father and brother but also by her own mother which indicates that society had inculcated in the mind of the female that she can never be equal to man in genius, intellect, potential and social status, therefore, Maggie's mother treats her in a humiliating manner when it comes to her unruly hair and physical robustness. By no means is Maggie inferior to Tom, but her mother, in accordance with Victorian educational standards which were different for males and females, gives no importance to Maggie's education, giving the impression that Maggie is inferior to Tom. When Maggie goes to visit the town, he says "Girls can't do Euclid: can they, sir?" Tom's teacher Mr. Stelling, responds, "They can pick up little of everything, I daresay. They have a great deal of superficial cleverness: but they couldn't far into anything. They are quick and shallow" (Adams, 1978, p.158). Despite the fact that Maggie has super genius, fascinating beauty, and conscientiousness towards family, she is portrayed as a mistake of nature, as if she had wrongly had the qualities which were supposed to be the exclusive privilege of males. It follows that the vision of happiness and pain that Maggie has is qualitatively different from the male character in the novel. The woman's standpoint enables them to bear the sufferings with a broad heart taking the misfortunes to be a natural part of their life. The knowledge that these sufferings are caused to them by internal and external forces does not hinder them from lavishing love and affection to the other people surrounding their life. Their sacrificial nature speaks of their greater humanity as compared to male members of the society and yet the humiliation, deprivations, and disrespect they face in the society make them miserable creatures.

Love for women in this society comes only as a reward of submission, not as a natural feeling of humanity for them, for example, Tom's love for Maggie springs from Maggie's submission to him. She loves her brother passionately, with heart and soul, and cannot imagine her life without her brother's love but Tom, on the other hand, far from feeling genuine love for his sister, feels affections for her only because he returns her dependency upon him. Maggie's mental condition is described beautifully by the narrator thus: "What use was anything if Tom didn't love her?" (Adams, 1978, p. 40). Tom being the cynosure of the family possesses all the love, care, affection, and financial support while for Maggie the doors of opportunities are closed. Tom cannot fathom the love of Maggie for him until she proves it by sacrificing her own life for him when she drowns with him as a token of the superiority of her brother's love over her own romantic love for her lover(s). Contrasted with the profound and unalloyed love of Maggie, Tom's love for her betrays shallowness and superficiality. The narrator sets the distinction by reminding us that Tom "was very fond of his sister, and meant always to take care of her, and punish her when she did wrong" (Adams, 1978, p.44).

## Conclusion

It is concluded in the light of a detailed analysis of Maggie's character from standpoint of Feminist theoretical assumptions that her femininity and womanhood are discursively constructed realities in the Victorian era. She remained heavily dependent upon the male-dominated social structure for the definition of her role in society. Her sense of familial and social responsibilities, as it was structured by her social environment, required her to sacrifice her subjective desires and feelings for the satisfaction of the male desire.

It is obvious that Maggie receives the love of her brother not as reciprocity of mutual love rather as a reward for her unconditional submission to Tom. When approached from Feminist standpoint theory, it becomes clear that Maggie's vision of love is constructed by her social location. From the societal norms, she learns the thirst to be loved by men which provides her with a unique vision of love. This vision, however, leaves her frustrated most often because the male is not always ready to give this love unconditionally. This is because both men and women conceive of love from fundamentally different standpoints, and their ideology of love is constructed by their respective social locations. Similarly, the notion of marriage is constructed by Victorian patriarchal society solely for the convenience of men. There is no marriage in *Mill on the Floss* which could be turned into what Margret Fuller (2007) would call "a union of the soul" It is also not worthy that Victorian men give priority to family over personal virtue when it comes to making the matrimonial decision. When Philip, for example, wishes to marry Maggie, his father strongly disagrees. Philip's effort to present Maggie as "a helpless girl, who has too much sense and goodness to share their narrow prejudices" and who "never enters into family quarrels" (Adams, 1978, p. 443) meets only disbelief. His admiration of Maggie's genius and praise of her superior personality cut no ice with Mr. Wakem who pronounces his opinion thus "we don't ask what a woman does, we ask whom she belongs to". Mr. Wakem's categorical denunciation of Maggie's talents betrays on a broader level a Victorian male's indifference to and disregard of female genius because the standards of marriage between the sexes were not mutual understanding, the merit of the character or strength of personality but the superficial notion of class and economic status.

Maggie's falling in love with Stephen, although it has been traditionally discussed to show her socially unacceptable development of her intelligence and wisdom, needs to be viewed from different angles taking into consideration Maggie's difficult situation. I agree with her when she cries to Tom "Tom, I am perhaps not so guilty as you believe me to be. I never meant give way to my feelings. I struggled against them." (Adams, 1978, p. 504). Maggie's entreaties fall flat upon Tom's ears as he remains adamant in not forgiving her.

The detailed analysis of Maggie's character in the light of standpoint Feminist theory reveals, on one hand, the constructed nature of womanhood in the Victorian age and, on the other hand, claims that individuals in one particular socio-economic location can hardly be realized the pain and the sufferings of those in a different social location. It becomes obvious that in the light of standpoint Feminist theory that material life and class positions structure influence individuals' ability to understand social relationships. Victorian woman, as we see in the case of Maggie, in spite of having the greatness of heart and broad humanity, remains tormented by external forces such as Maggie's responsibility for her father. It is concluded that these external forces play a vital part in Maggie's tragedy because she is female in a social contact where women are deprived of full independence and growth of full human potential.

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