

# A Juxtaposition of the Pre-Determined Roles of the Female Gender in George Eliot's *Adam Bede* and *The Mill on the Floss*

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**Abstract:** This study will scrutinize the gender roles in George Eliot's *Adam Bede* and *The Mill on the Floss* thoroughly to see how these two novels reflected the roles of women and their pre-coded roles in Victorian society. Besides, this study focuses on where George Eliot stands for feminism. George Eliot, one of the most important writers of the Victorian age, has been debated over the years about being a feminist or not. Although she offers limited choices to the female characters she creates in her fictions, her living her private life without any boundaries caused reactions. Actually, Eliot sees the problems of women in the male-dominated Victorian society and reveals 'Woman Question' with the characters in her fictions. This work claims that Eliot's aim is to promote the idea of women having a good education and an ability to exist in their societies.

**Keywords:** George Eliot, Adam Bede, The Mill On The Floss, Woman Question, Axis of symmetry

## 1. Introduction

From a different angle, this article purports to look at a very known author who almost automatically declared herself as an adamant defender of womankind in a humanistic way to adjust the gap between tough feminists and patriarchal society. That is to say, this work looks awry at these things from a position to review what is implied-whether consciously or unconsciously-by George Eliot. The very analysis of the selected texts by Eliot will be scrutinized thoroughly to confirm that, most probably, George Eliot was a bold humanist. She is called here a bold humanist because of the courage she had to objectively bring forward the inequalities among man and woman of the Victorian Era.. Like "the battle for supremacy and immortality among humans and gods is the main theme and humans," (Tarakcioglu, et al., "A Comparative Analysis Of The First Epic Quests In The Selected Eastern And Western Myths", 2018, p. 102) the contest between men and women has always existed for man tends to declare his supremacy over the other. Thus, in that respect, Eliot presents a humanistic approach in which she tries to equate the distinction between man and woman as much as she can.

This study will analyze the first two novels of George Eliot: *Adam Bede* (1859) and *The Mill on the Floss* (1860). These two novels were consecutively written with similar plotlines, and they involved similar themes. In *Adam Bede*, Eliot created two opposite women characters, Dinah and Hetty. Dinah was a Methodist preacher who showed people moral values and the path to human happiness. She liked helping people and making them happy. She was an unconventional example of the unexpected Victorian character whose role was not only to teach moral values to the readers but also to show the abilities of a woman. She was as beautiful as her cousin, Hetty, but what was more beautiful than her physical appearance was her personality. In contrast to Dinah, Hetty was a narrow-minded Victorian girl whose only aim was to get married to a rich man in order to live an easy life. She dreamt of taking a lady status and only thought of herself. Adam, the protagonist, was a carpenter who was devoted to

his job. He was a strong character loved by everyone. Adam had great virtues, like credibility and fairness.. He, who was admired by every young girl in the village, was deeply in love with Hetty.

On the other hand, *The Mill on the Floss* was an autobiographical novel in which George Eliot reflected fragmentations from her own life. For instance, Maggie, the protagonist of the novel, was George Eliot herself. Maggie was a very smart and talented girl compared to her peers. She was also a headstrong character who went against the demands of her family, which upset them. The novel also narrated her relationship with her elder brother, Tom, whom she loved very much, but with whom she also had a lot of problems. Unlike Maggie, Tom was not a clever child. He did not want Maggie to get an education. Instead, he wanted her sister to marry a suitable man, like the other Victorian girls.

Eliot became the target of critical arrows of feminists. Why did such an intellectual, independent woman who had violated Victorian conventions with her illegitimate, scandalous relationship with a married man not write in harmony with her private life? This is the central question for students who study on George Eliot's life and works. George Eliot's marital status had always caused confusion about her position on feminist issues. Exposed to criticism because of her relationship with a married man, she defended herself with recourse to the "right to free love where marriage was not possible." (Laski 1987 pg. 26)

Eliot always wanted women to be educated. She defended the liberation of women by education. In her essay "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists", George Eliot noted that "no educational restrictions can shut women out from the materials of fiction, and there is no species of art which is so free from rigid requirements like Crystalline masses" (Eliot 2010 pg. 33). She always supported women's education, which she found to be an undeniable issue, so she defended the establishment of Girton College. It's very clear why she supported women's education, but did not support women's

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suffrage. She saw education as an alternative to elections. She believed that such policies could not be realized in a short time,

## 2. Literature Review

Eliot gave her characters limited choices, which caused her to be judged by zealous feminists. The literary review below considers the critics of Eliot in three groups: those who thought that she was not a feminist, or even that she was an anti-feminist; those who found implicit or indirect feminism in her work; those who argued that she is a feminist.

For example ; according to Nancy Paxton, many of Eliot's critics thought of her as a kind of “literary hermaphrodite (*sic*)”, i.e., a woman by sex, but one who wrote “like a man.”(Paxton 1991 pg. 10)her priority should have been finding the balance between men and women, and this could have been acquired through neutralizing her attitudes as much as she could. In *A Literature of Their Own*, the author Elaine Showalter argued that feminist literature began with the death of George Eliot (Showalter 1977 pg. 29). According to the author, Eliot and other feminine novelists of the period, including Elizabeth Gaskell and the Brontes, had enormous anxiety over social transgression, and this delimited their potential feminism (Showalter 1977 pg. 29).

Some critics have considered Eliot to be a humanist who wanted to show the corruptions in her society. According to Dorothea Barrett, George Eliot saw the problems of humanity as primary and those of gender as secondary (Barrett 1989 pg. 188). George Eliot refused to be marginalized and implicitly claimed that she was human first and female only second, therefore, we can come to a quick conclusion that as an ardent but an objective author, when she looked at people, before their sexes, she tended to see them in human forms no matter what their gender was.

As Jeanie G. Thomas succinctly pointed out, she (Eliot) was profoundly feminist in her insight into the restrictions on women's development and the complex social and psychological dynamics that maintain those restrictions and her feelings for the human waste and suffering they often thereby engendered (Thomas 1987 pg. 29). However, this feminist view is rather a limited perception towards the limitations of the women within the frame of education and some universal rights which would still fit into the conventional ways of the Victorian Era.

## 3. Portrayal of women in the Victorian Age

Although England was ruled by a woman (Queen Victoria at that time), it was the period when women had trouble with a lot of issues like separate spheres, the suffrage, property rights, law, economy, and prostitution. Queen Victoria gave importance to family values, as she was seen as the leader of morality. Nevertheless, women's rights were limited, compared to men's. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century society, the women suffered a lot from male dominance. They had different gender roles, which is what separate spheres means, in terms of the Victorian ideology. In Anne Digby's article, she explained these roles as being the “public sphere (viewed as a masculine domain concerned with paid work and national

politics), and the private sphere (viewed as a female domain concerned with one's home and family) (Digby 1992 pg. 196). Women were categorized into two types by the Victorian ideology. One of them was mothers or wives, who were called “angels in the House” - signifying purity and chastity, and the other one was prostitutes, who were undervalued and humiliated. Prostitution was constructed by the state with the laws. It wasn't against the legislation. With these laws, prostitution became a different class among other worker. Greedy male gender formed this class. In this male-dominated society, the women were created to bring up children, while the men were created to dominate them. Earning money was the men's responsibility. Politics were not for those “foolish” women. The women were undervalued and oppressed.

## 4. The women's bildung in Adam Bede and The Mill on the Floss

Childhood was one of the significant matters in Victorian times, since it is the time when the mother's affects on their children could be best observable. In *The Mill on the Floss*, when Maggie's mother asked her to go on with her patchwork as the little ladies were supposed to do and Maggie declared that she didn't want to do her patchwork.(Eliot 1964 pg. 8).Eliot wanted to show the Victorian hypocrisy.While boys were educated, girls were not allowed to get education. Also in *Adam Bede*; people didn't carefully listen to Dinah when she was preaching, since she was a woman. People gathered around her not because they intended to listen to what she was saying, but just because they wondered what was going on.(Eliot 1962 pg.14). Besides ; the family concept in Eliot's novels was very vivid and quintessential. There were various references to the relationships between the father and the daughter, the mother and the son, and vice-versa.The family ties were rather strict in both novels since Eliot emphasized the significance of having strong connections among family members. Yet, still the unbalanced love shared for daughters and sons by their parents demonstrated the inequal system of their family notions.

When it comes to the concept of love, it is better to focus on Maggie first. The protagonist in the *The Mill on the Floss* was always in need of any kind of love. There were two other men in her life besides her brother and her father. They were Philip and Stephen. Maggie's love to Philip was platonic and cerebral. In other words, Maggie's love for Philip was as if her love was one-sided, rather a feeling of fidelity in response to the fact that she did not want to hurt him. Conversely, in *Adam Bede*, Hetty was just interested in money and climbing to a better position in society, in other words, in moving from the lower class to upper class. Though Maggie and Hetty drew parallelisms in their axis of symmetry due to their similar fates, Hetty was represented in a negative way with her interest in money and the way she relied on her sexuality. Adam was deeply in love with Hetty to such a point that he could not recognize her selfishness. Hetty did not even care about Adam, who was just a carpenter after all. She only enjoyed being liked and flirted at by him, like any other men around her. Eliot narrated Hetty's dreams in the quotation below:

“[P]erhaps someday she should be a grand lady, and ride in her coach, and dress for dinner in a brocaded silk, with feathers in her hair, and her dress sweeping the ground, like Miss Lydia and Lady Dacey, when she saw them going into the dining-room one evening as she peeped through the little round window in the lobby; only she should not be old and ugly like Miss Lydia, or all the same thickness like Lady Dacey, but very pretty, with her hair done in a great many different ways, and sometimes in a pink dress, and sometimes in a white one—she didn't know which she liked best. (Eliot 1962 pg. 136).”

When Dinah was compared to Hetty, the most remarkable point about her was her inner beauty, which Hetty lacked. Hetty had only outer beauty and had a dark soul. The evil ideas in her mind led her to get out of line. She shaped her own cursed fate by herself. It should not be forgotten that Eliot's humanism involved the concept of love. Therefore, love forged the personalities as well as it determined the humanistic values. The tenderness and purity of love made the characters lenient as well.

In *The Mill on the Floss*, When Stephen took a ride with Maggie by boat, they were very far away from St. Ogg. It was too late to go back home. After spending a night in the boat, despite the fact that there was no information about sexual intercourse between Maggie and Stephen given by Eliot, people in St. Ogg already made their judgement. The only thing they noticed was Maggie's disappearance with her cousin's fiancé and not returning that night. Society punished her. Maggie, who was outcasted from St. Ogg, was banished. Also, Eliot gave her punishment by getting her drowned in the flood with her brother, Tom. It seems that for Eliot, Maggie deserved it because she was the one who acted against the rules of her society and ignored the moral and familial values.

In *Adam Bede*, Hetty got pregnant as a result of her sexual intercourse with Captain Arthur. Arthur disappeared after this event. He didn't even know about this pregnancy. She wanted to conceal it because she didn't want this unexpected child, and this brought the end of her life. She got the inevitable punishment from Eliot. She was sentenced to death by the court for killing her “bastard” child.

Marriage was one of the key concepts of the Victorian society. While Adam was trying to persuade Dinah into marriage, he said that she could do her work, meet and help people again as it was before. Adam's speech is in the lines below:

“And you can do almost as much as you do now. I won't ask you to go to church with me on a Sunday. You shall go where you like among the people, and teach 'em; for though I like church best, I don't put my soul above yours, as if my words was better for you to follow than your own conscience. And you can help the sick just as much, and you'll have more means o' making 'em a bit comfortable, and you'll be among all your own friends as they love you, and can help 'em and be a blessing to 'em till their dying day. Surely, Dinah, you'd be as near to God as if you was living lonely and away from me (Eliot 1962 pg. 465).”

Here, Eliot declared that when a woman gets married, she doesn't have to renounce things. In other words, it is not the end of her life, but in a way a new beginning. Therefore, on the contrary, she thought that marriage should bring happiness to a woman's life. She should be able to keep on educating herself. Although Hetty went astray and was punished with death, Dinah was rewarded with a happy nest. She was not obliged to get married. Because of it being her own choice, Eliot seemed to vindicate the secrecy of a happy marriage. In *The Mill on the Floss*, sweet Lucy, who was innocent and sinless married Stephen and caught happiness, like Dinah. She got married and became happy.

## 5. Conclusion

Eliot was a conventional reformist who was neither a complete feminist, nor a traditional woman who completely subdued men. Since she followed the tradition of realism, she tended to portray the situation of women in her time as being mediocre. Thus, the characters who she utilized in her novels were not extreme ones but the ordinary characters who demonstrated a binary opposition and a juxtaposition to reveal the very results of their actions and decisions.

Eliot might have lived a different life which clashed with what she created in her novels. However, it shouldn't be forgotten that Eliot emphasized the importance of life-like characters, thus she maintained objectivity as much as she could. For this reason, her life shouldn't be intertwined with her novels.

Eliot revealed the fact that the education system was completely biased when it came to women. On the other hand, extreme feminists have tended to ignore the very facts of their time and tried to situate themselves over the blue skies. Eliot was different from feminist writers. She always wanted women to get a good education. She did not want women to sit and write in “a room of their own”. Instead, she wanted them to make action which should have been in a small degree. She gave signature to ensure girls' admission to college. So, she showed her insistence on women's education. Also, she signed women's property act because she wanted them to have their own properties and have their own identity which was not under the shadow of men. These acts were the small ones which could help women to forge ahead. She argued that the actions which were exaggerated would not succeed. Considering the fact that such exaggerated actions would backfire on them, Eliot criticized those feminists to be unrealistic.

Consequently, George Eliot (whether some critics agree or not) successfully portrayed the oscillation among the characters, different social classes' beliefs, and genders to reflect the position of the women, and the position of women that she intended to see in her selected novels.

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