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Anguished: She flaps her wings haplessly in the prison

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Abstract

This paper is going to attempt a gender critique of George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*. The paper seeks to investigate how George Eliot's myriad childhood experiences helped in shaping the character of Maggie, the protagonist of the novel *The Mill on the Floss*. George Eliot does not only focus on Maggie's bildung but also on the bildung of Maggie's brother Tom. The paper tries to depict a picture of the then society.

Keywords: Gender, patriarchy, bildung, childhood, autobiographical

Introduction

As I go for an appraisal of George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), I cannot but discern how inextricably George Eliot is identified with her tragic protagonist, Maggie Tulliver. I cannot but envision the near homogeneity between the author's early hood and that of her Maggie. There is no doubt that no other novel written by George Eliot is as intimately autobiographical as *The Mill on the Floss*. Maggie's plightful advancement towards adulthood in a provincial milieu ruthlessly adverse to her passionate, imaginative nature religiously reflects her creator's uphill struggle towards maturation, intellectual and moral, with little encouragement and niggardly academic facilities. What is important about George Eliot's childhood, and particularly to the readers of *The Mill on the Floss* is a deep emotional attachment to her brother Issac. It is an emotion that forms the bedrock of much of the occurrences in the novel. When Eliot developed an amorous affinity with G.H. Lewis, a literary stalwart and decided to live with him in spite of his not being divorced from his wife, her charming sibling ties was ruthlessly snapped by Issac himself. This breach was not repaired till 1880, when Eliot married John Cross and received a letter from Issac saying: "I have much pleasure in availing myself of the present opportunity to break the long silence which has existed between us" (The George Eliot Letters 7). To this very stolid letter of forgiveness, Eliot wrote joyfully'. It was a great joy to me to have your kind words of sympathy". (The George Eliot Letters 10). Maggie's fraught relationship with her fond but dogmatically authoritative brother Tom closely resembles Eliot's with Issac. Eliot's 1869 sonnet sequence "Brother and Sister" is reminiscent of their childhood intimacy: "Thus rumbling we were schooled in deepest love/ and learned the meanings that give words a soul/the fear, the love, the primal passionate store/ whose shaping impulses make manhood whole". The heart of this poem is revealed by the incident of the fishing rod. The sister is given a fishing rod by the brother and while holding it in water, she falls into a reverie, which is broken by a shout from the brother. Startled, the girl pulls up her rod and found a shimmering fish at its end. A near disaster thus ends in triumph. This delicious incident is recapitulated in *The Mill on the Floss* with a clinical precision. In fact it is her sharing with Tom the fishing adventure that appears as it were, to have served as a very foundation of her rootedness in the past, where she mentally travels again and again to find herself together with her Tom, partaking a chunk of his delight. It is simply marvellous and moving because we all, in a way or other, have such mellifluous experiences with our siblings and we feel like to keep them in the trove of our memories of the golden days of our past.

The Mill on the Floss with its early childhood scenes is a novel of growing up, getting educated through experiences. However, it is a bildungsroman with a marked difference. Its centre stage is occupied by a girl/woman, and Eliot's focus "on a female as well as a male child basically reverses the traditional plot of personal development and vocation.

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Maggie struggles in quest for identity, a higher life of beauty and culture and spiritual satisfaction. With it she seeks to coalesce her own perception of the reality of ordinary life in St. Oggs. Maggie desires to fuse her inner life with the external to be cosy at both; but there seems nothing in St. Oggs that can satisfy her desire. In a way, entirely characteristic of George Eliot, Maggie's character is related to the wider world about her. One aspect of this akinness between Eliot and Maggie is of special importance: Poor child...she was as lonely in her trouble as if she had been the only girl in the civilized world of that day who had come out of her school life with a soul untrained to inevitable struggles with no other part of her inherited share in the hard won treasures of thought...than stretches and patches of feeble literature and false history" (Book 4, Chapter 3.

A close survey of the dynamics of Maggie's dilemma should reveal to us that it is specifically related to her station as a girl in Victorian England. As such, she is given no more than a meagre education that was considered enough for girls at that time and, apart from marriage she cannot hope of extending her personal and social sphere.(it is only under the stress of adversity that Maggie succeeds in her insistence on being self-supporting by working as a governess). George Eliot herself escaped many of these hurdles, at least partially through her own determined efforts, but it is worth noticing that she disguised her identity- Mary Anne Evans-beneath a male pseudonym; and one motive for this must have been the belief that her work would be taken more seriously if she were taken for a male author. In the case of Maggie's bildung, we find how repeatedly her dreams and desire are molested by male chauvinism, especially represented by Tom's power. Maggie lives in a society where girls are vulnerable to repressions perpetrated mostly by the family. If St. Oggs has a fogey vision of a patriarch, then within her home, she has to constantly embolden herself, break loose from the fetters in a tempest of furies.

Eliot does not dismiss Tom's bildung. His difficult journey to adulthood is brought to light. Like her sister, Tom also suffers from the inadequacy of the kind of education that would have gone down well with his natural talents. If Maggie was denied the consummation of her cerebral faculties through rich academic enlightenment, Tom is ironically threshed into a sophisticated and eclectic curricula comprising Latin grammar and Euclidian geometry in which he had neither interest nor efficiency. Thus both the siblings are unfortunately exposed to the torments of stunted growth, neglected childhood and flawed education, for which none other than the familial short-sightedness and social stringency are accountable.

Tom, by virtue of his bulldog tenacity, assiduity and some agreeable factors manages to make a man of himself. The reader does not get to share the pain that Tom must have brooked on his way to maturation, only because of his reticent self that stands out in direct contrast to Maggie's disarming candidness. "Besides, Eliot has left out of the reckoning Tom's experimental moments, perhaps in order to ensure Maggie's enshrinement as the pivotal character...The charge of inadequacy in her portrayal of men may be perceived as relevant by some critics. As far as Tom is concerned, though, it seems to have been done with deliberation so that he may emerge as another tragic protagonist, different from Maggie but certainly as

singular" ("Tragic form and the problems of Narrativity in *The Mill on the Floss*", Alka Kumar) Tom, trudges tough in the process of his bildung and finally rises to prominence and succeeds in restoring his family to former status. Strong and silent, he carries his cross all by himself.

Maggie Tulliver being the cynosure of the novel, claims a thorough insight into what ails her. A discourse on her inner conflict is most necessary in order to see through the very nucleus of her tragedy. Maggie is unquestionably maltreated and is thrown into a morass of trials and tribulations by the contemporary familial and societal circumstances. Nevertheless, an honest and unbiased scanning of her inner conflict makes it clear that, Maggie too is atleast partially accountable for the laceration of her selfhood and her catastrophic nemesis. In fact, Maggie's tragedy is a faithful reflection of George Eliot's concept of a tragic character. According to Eliot, "If the ethics of art do not admit the truthful presentation of a character essentially noble but liable to error-error that is anguish to its own nobleness-then, it seems to me, the ethics of art are too narrow." It is on the basis of this conception of hers that Eliot has depicted Maggie with all her intrinsic struggles, and her ultimate calamity. Maggie's very character indicates that she has to suffer her unhappiness, her electric sensitivity, her indomitable impulsiveness, her rebellious spirit and her hapless desire for love and affection, specially from her brother Tom, lead her from the beginning into tragedy. Her imaginativeness inevitably suffers raps over the knuckles from the world of the Tom Tullivers. She is out of harmony with her environment. The repressed poetry in her soul beats its luminous wings against orthodoxy, complacency, unimaginativeness of a worm-eaten society within which she is hurled like nobody. Maggie's reading of the book, *Imitation of Christ*, infuses her mind with a belief that self-fulfilment can be attained only through self-abnegation. This is where arises the issue of George Eliot's captivation to a new faith, quiet long after her official renouncement of Christianity. Though she had no more affiliation with the creed, yet she invariably imbibed the very essence of it, and developed a notion that duty and renunciation had redemptive virtue. There is no doubt that the author's conviction has cast its shadow upon Maggie, thereby entangling her into a most painful and insoluble mental conflict. Maggie forged a sort of spiritual affinity with Philip mainly because of their identical taste for books and music. However, she finally cuts herself off from his company because her loyalty towards Tom pulls her back. The next phase of suffering in Maggie's life opens with her amorous involvement with Stephen. She initially allows herself to be borne along with him, but soon thereafter she is oppressed with a contride spirit for having erred against Lucy, who is supposed to be Stephen's fiancé. She again goes for renunciation at the call of moral responsibilities, but mainly because of her rootedness in the past: "If the past is not to bind us, where can duty lie? We should have no law but the inclination of the moment". Again when Stephen seeks to assert the veracity of their amorous ties, saying: "My life is bound up in your love"; Maggie's reply is recapitulation of the past: "there are hold on me. Thus we find our heroine, torn to shreds by her own perception, by her obsessive nexus with the past, at the centre of which is none but her morally unimaginative, self-righteous and despotic brother Tom. Maggie's attachment to the past also owes its origin to Eliot's own belief in one's unavoidable

ties with one's yesterday. In this respect, Eliot was influenced by the Kantian theory, which has laid great importance upon man's past relations.

Tragedies of larger import remains hidden in the shadows confirming the prevalent social order. Severing of roots may lead to a brave new world but the ambivalence that tinges this transition makes for tragedy. Rosemary Ashton suggests that the events of George Eliot's personal life contributed to the development of a vision that made her ambiguous about progress. "Brought up in rural England on traditional values in social, political and religious matters, she found her intellect rejecting them in favour of religious scepticism, political radicalism, and social unorthodoxy. "She had entered into a melting pot, a progressive world, but she bemoans the loss of piety and tradition, of those first affections". Hence, her "double view" on the life of the Dodsons and Tullivers as narrow, phlegmatic, even dreary, and yet at the same time genuine, honest and even enviable in their old-fashioned certainties.

However, the society represented by St. Oggs, the Tullivers and the Dodsons in particular, are too dull, and too limited for the full-fledged flourishing of children's personalities. Mr. Tulliver, very much typical of this society, is over-indulgent to his wife, who is submissive, snobbish and she sarcastically echoes the Dodson's heartless deprecation of Maggie's look and demeanour. The Dodsons represent the typical Victorian English petty Bourgeois: "To be honest and poor was never a Dodson motto, still less to seem rich though being poor; rather, the family badge was to be honest and rich, but richer than was supposed" (Book 4, Chapter 1). This, then is the social milieu within which Maggie has to live with her aspirations for a wider life continuing to be throttled. Yet, it is aunt Glegg, the most inflexibly stringent of the Dodsons, who offers to take Maggie in when she is practically downhill. Thus Eliot seeks to portray her contemporary middle class English society with much of her stigma with a little humane to reduce its acridness.

It would be entirely an act of callousness and impertinence on part of us if we confine our evaluation of the Victorian English society to the Tullivers and the Dodsons, representing the petty Bourgeois flashpoints of the Victorian English society. We need to bring into limelight things, which have received but a very meagre focus. Well, I mean to point at the basset world - the "beggarly parish", which is amusingly opulent in the wealth of warm, wholesome and unaffected milk of human kindness. This is revealed through the humanitarian behaviour of the poor peasant couple Aunt Moss and her husband. This is revealed brightly when this poor aunt visits her Brother Mr. Tulliver's family during his serious illness. Mrs. Moss's presence with her innocence strikes a nerve jerking contrast to the Dodsons' sham, contemptuous attitude. Mrs. Moss tells Tom and Maggie: "Oh my dear children, you've no call to think o' me; I'm a poor aunt to you for I'm one o' them as take all and give nothing". Here she acknowledges candidly their financial obligation to Mr. Tulliver. When Mrs. Glegg throws a very insulting insinuation, Aunt Moss retorts in a manner characteristic of the toiling class with an ethos of self-dignity: "We're not that sort of people,... as 'UD rob my brother's children, and we look to paying back the money, when the times got a bit better". There remains in this novel to a large extent, these diligent, purely honest, genuinely compassionate and morally sound people, pushed down to the margin. These people really imbibe the true spirit of

catholicity and emerged as a new class, not necessarily committed to the divine aspect of religion, but very much committed to rectitude and fellow-feeling, untainted by their adversity.

Another character, Bob Jerkin, situated in the periphery, his worth a congratulatory review because of his artless and unselfish fellowship for Maggie and Tom in their family's crisis. In fact, a society has a hope of recovery from its malices only from such characters incognito, with their hearts resplendent with truly spiritual benignity.

George Eliot, in her profound application of psychological realism in bringing out her pathetic heroine's messy psychic structure, her continuous pang of languishment and her wishful yearning for a kind of life that would have been blissful for her and for all those for whom she has an impeccable solicitude, has realistically exposed the hard fact that girls/women are left with no option but either to reconcile themselves submissively to what the prevailing social construct has slated for them, or to just pine away in sheer anguish. Well, this reviewer has a different idea which shall be illuminated later.

The draconian social construct has, over the ages tagged on to women's entities such derogatory nomenclatures as monster, she-devil, demon, witch and so on. Thus Maggie's shorn hair makes her a "bedlam creature" even in the eyes of her own mother who has so ironically, leagued herself with the very patriarchy, which continues to stem roll her own tribe mercilessly. The patriarchal power-structures are internalised by the children themselves. For instance, Tom, even at his early teens, manifests a rigid gender bias. Maggie is definitely inferior to him just because she is a girl. Maggie knows she behaves impulsively, and she also knows that "Tom never did the same sort of foolish things as Maggie". We find Tom to have internalised the role of a patriarchal figure entitled to penalize aberrant behaviour. He considers himself infallible, hence, he never does deserve punishment. In her essay, "History and Gender in the making of fiction", Debjani Sengupta observes prudently: "His patriarchal position of brother/ protector gives great power to those scenes of rejection that Maggie faces after she comes home after her night with Stephen". Book 7, Chapter 1 in *The Mill on the Floss* acquaints us with Eliot's own mixed feelings about her brother. Her brother was the human being of whom she had been the most afraid since her childhood. The very root of Maggie's fear is her love for one who is inexorable, supercilious and dogmatic, so typical of the patriarchal temperament. The fear and longing find the most poignant expression when Maggie says, "I am come back to you...for refuse". The infallible Tom punishes her into the gloomiest desolation: "I wash my hands of you forever. You don't belong to me". The harsh language of patriarchal ownership rings acrimoniously in Tom's dismissal of Maggie.

In the immediate former paragraph, I have indulged in spending quiet a few words on how Tom's treatment of his sister has always been insolently authoritative, terms dictating and unforgiving. I have shown it just because I take a strong exception to the histrionic manner in which Eliot has led Maggie into a chasm of nothingness, whereas she might well have opened up, quiet in conjunction with realism a convincing scope for a palpable and blissful emancipation of Maggie. After all, poor Maggie who looks "Like a small Medusa with her snake cropped" has intermittently tossed about in anger, punishing in fetish a

wooden doll, cutting her hair all in a turbulent protest against her confinement. She would like some story: "Where the dark woman triumphs". I wonder why on earth Mrs. Eliot didn't present Stephen as a youth, competent for Maggie. I wonder why Mrs Eliot has precluded our dear Maggie from carving out her own destiny. Renunciation does not seem to be a result of mature reflection capable of giving Maggie inner peace. It only suppresses her desire. She continues to remain compulsive and insecure till the end. According to David, a notable critic, "Maggie's intellectual being is relegated to a tops of moral choice".

A few critics have explored Maggie's culmination to sage hood, because of her virtuous attempt to save her brother's life. Tom's ultimate appreciation of her self-sacrificing love is also highlighted by some readers. However, Maggie's valiant odyssey on the water reminds me of one of her childhood fantasies: The "Woman in the water's a witch". The brother who has always pushed her back into the limbo, sneering at her intellectual ambition, plundering her freedom and condemning her most unkindly in the light of his rigid moral codes, is finally punished when she drags him down into the dark deep in her "Embrace of death". It reminds me of that Tagorian message: "Jare tumi niche falo/se tomare bandhibe je niche/ poschate rekhecho jare se to mare poschate taniche". The epigraph "In their deaths" they were not divided "is, to my mind purely euphoric, a sort of popular myth. What is naked reality is that, through out their lives Tom and Maggie were divided, Tom, riding the crest of a masochistic social order, and Maggie continuing to be deprived, denied and desecrated. It is only in a purely Eaglitarion society that Toms and Maggies can walk hand-in-hand with a world of empathy for each other.

In the conclusion, I would like to speak in great admiration for George Eliot's acumen in weaving the plot, tragic story of Maggie and in treating psychological realism in connection with the presentation of individuals' psychological push and pull and the collective mind of the society. Her application of various types of imagery is also commendable. She has beautifully presented quiet a few animal imagery, mainly in order to bring out the EDENIC candidness and innocence of childhood. On top of all the imagery is a recurrent presentation of the river imagery, with which her story begins and completes her circle. Finally, I cannot but regret the fact that like her compatriots, Mrs. Eliot too seems too waver in deciding on where she should lead such forceful, dynamic yet socially confined girls like Maggie. So naturally, anguished, the bird keeps on beating her wings all in a hapless struggle to break down the fetters and fly at large in the sky, chanting "Let things take its own course/tomorrow is another day /oh! I don't want freedom when I am dead/I don't want to live for tomorrow's bread". Are you listening to this outcry, Mrs Eliot?.

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