

## The Mill on the Floss: A Scrutiny of Maggie Tulliver's Feministic Overtones

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### ABSTRACT

Mary Ann Evans, using a pen name George Eliot was one of the leading women writers of the Victorian era. She was known for her intellectual insight and psychological permeation. Her importance as a writer was considerable because she gave a realistic touch to her novels, which acted as the mirror to the society of her time. The writing journey of *The Mill on the Floss* played an important role in George Eliot's growth as a novelist, which showed her sympathetic attitude towards her characters. According to Pyle, *The Mill on the Floss* is, "Crucial to the formation of the narrative principle of sympathy" (5). It is a novel of almost astounding melancholy and brings to reader's glare the issues pertaining to family loss and cruelty of destiny towards the end.

Victorian novels were evident of the issues of right and wrong and the ideology of manpower in the patriarchal society during this era. Maggie Tulliver, the main protagonist like many other nineteenth century literary girls, was full of intelligence and emotions. This paper will study Maggie's maturity from a feministic point of view.

The Mill on the Floss, by George Eliot, narrates the story of a young girl who lived a life full of predicaments and the treatment meted out to her speaks a lot about the position of women in the Victorian society. All the women characters portrayed in the novel are typical examples of Victorian women, except Maggie who in contrast with other female protagonists is quite different as an individual which clearly indicates that women in those times were undergoing a change into a new being. Maggie's outer appearance is shown as unattractive with unwanted hair and dark complexion as compared to other female characters in the novel especially, her cousin Lucy who is projected as the symbol of beauty while Maggie's traits are compared with that of gypsies. Maggie's father often took his daughter's side but ultimately, it is her older brother Tom who gives her emotional comfort and dependence. Tom's affection becomes Maggie's greatest source of happiness and his displeasure in particular creates despair in her. With a tough moral code, Tom appears to be a patriarchal male in this piece of fiction. It is his hardheaded and introvert nature that comes in direct conflict with Maggie's perfectionism and devoutness for intellectual gain. It is this intellectual quest, which brings to surface Maggie's feminist thoughts.

Women of her time were given a low position in the society and were subjected to men's abjection. In early childhood, everybody, especially the Dosons, ridiculed Maggie. Her mother considered her as nature's mistake because she did not take after her mother's beautiful looks and her Cousin Lucy's elegant behaviour. Maggie rather, gave her entire attention to books and music, which nourished her cramped soul and her thoughts about life and its various manifestations. Maggie's father, her only support system in the family also failed to provide her with education as he like other members of the family too believed that her educated self would invite troubles in the future. Although, he did not doubt his daughter's ability for learning yet he sent his son to learn who was weak in bookish knowledge. However, it was

her aunt Pullet, who took the decision of sending her to a remote boarding school for tuitions so that she could have an access to some education. But her desire to complete studies could not ripe; as she had to return home leaving studies in between because of some family crisis whereas Tom was allowed to continue with his studies. Karen examines that:

Men were seen as superior while women inferior, men were seen as active while women passive. Men were strong while women weak; men possessed the power to shape the world, the woman emotion and motherly love; hence men were dominative, women submissive. (153)

Maggie's life gets burdened with hardships; Mr. Wakem takes the ownership of the mill from her family and in order to survive they sell most of their treasured possessions, which is devastating for her mother who becomes stoic and slips into depression. In order to keep the household cycle moving her father starts working for Mr. Wakem, which filled him with rage. On the other hand, Maggie starts having secret meetings with Mr. Wakem's son, Philip with whom she discusses music and art. Philip has due to a deformity on his back, also been the subject of people's mockery and harsh treatment. His friendly gestures soon take the shape of love, and she begins to get puzzled on learning about his interest in her. Tom on the other hand gets frantic on hearing about their secret love and rebukes Maggie. This incident gives a final blow to Maggie's father who falls ill and in due course dies. Maggie struggles inside:

She rebelled against her lot, she fainted under its loneliness; and fits even of anger and hatred towards her father and mother...towards Tom...would flow out over her affections and conscience like a lava stream, and frighten her with a sense that it was not difficult for her to become a demon. (292)

She is left shattered and hopeless on losing her only confederate in the family. She is also forced to suppress her love. Tom on becoming the head of the family summons her to explain her position. This event shows that:

They had gone forth into their new life of sorrow, and they would never more see the sunshine undimmed by remembered cares. They had entered the thorny wilderness and the golden gates of their childhood had forever closed behind them. (178)

Masculine power always looked down upon women as mere commodities. Women are expected to suppress their emotions and aims in life. In this business of marriage a man expects his wife to be beautiful, skillful and gentle which were seen in Lucy by her fiancé, Stephen. Though, Maggie failed miserably in that department for she was too intelligent to be judged on mere physical attributes. She became an example of women of Victorian time where they were even denied of their basic right of choosing a life partner. Maggie, like other ambitious women was required to snub her ambition and perform the task of a housewife efficiently. Due to suppression by patriarchal society for a considerable time, Maggie still could not give up the desire of equality with men. She realized that her present condition could be changed only if she educates herself. In books she found a much needed solace and never gave up on knowledge. With a single-mind she took knowledge as her weapon to garner mental equality with men of her age. She even tried to help her brother, Tom when the family was in distress. She even took up the job of a governess, which was considered to be the last option in order to acquire financial independence.

Maggie's relation with her brother was that of submission, on being threatened by Tom to make a choice between him and Philip, she chooses her brother. Gordon comments that, "Maggie's obstinacy was the only way to remain independent and to maintain her own desires and beliefs in the face of coercion" (92). In the end Maggie fails to save Tom and herself and both drowns in each other's arms when the boat is capsized by debris in the river. There is a close relationship between the author and her heroine, Maggie, as both reflect a painful life full of emotional extremes and subsequent.

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