



# Maggie Tulliver and Dorothea Broke as the progenitor of new woman in *The Mill on the Floss* and *Middlemarch*

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## Abstract

Society comprises of two sexes that is men and woman. Where on one hand the superior sex became the ruler while the inferior or the second sex became its slave. This rule of the patriarchy became the rule of the law since the man was both the creator as well as the enforcer of the law. He ruled the society with an iron fist. The new woman was one such woman who instead of being a blind trend follower she was a trend setter. She aspired for freedom, for education in fact she aspired for all those aspects which were completely denied to woman.

Key words: Subjugation, New Woman, Victorian Conventions, Patriarchy

Victorian Age was an age of progression, an age of industrialization, an age of development with the all its pros and cons which both influenced as well as effected the lives of the people to a great extent. If one takes a leap at the past ages throughout the history of Britain one would not find women being a topic of discussion in a particular context. If the women had found any place it would always been through the pen of the male writer but only in a universal context not in general at all. It happened so because the society was basically a male dominated or let's say male centric society. Coming forth to the Victorian society if one attempts to make a contrast between the past eras and the Victorian era one can say that for the first time in the history of Britain women became a topic of discussion or let's say women got an identity. Seeking an identity was once again not as easy as it appeared for the people. Victorian society too was a typical male dominated patriarchal society full of rigidity, full of hypocritical believes, full of domination. In the Victorian society, women were imprisoned inside their houses "from early childhood, women were trained to accept a system which divided society into male and female spheres, with appropriate roles for each, and which allocated public power exclusively to the male sphere" (Millett 26). Despite of the above mentioned facts one finds that women still carved a niche for themselves in the rigid atmosphere of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Victorian society.

Before one deals with the above stated fictions it is very important to cast a glimpse upon the novelists' persona and some aspects of her life which influenced her to pen down these two characters. George Eliot was believed to be the greatest novelist of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Eliot was one such woman who not only broke the conventions of the 19<sup>th</sup> century by living in a relationship with a married man that was George Henry Lewis but she was the first one who presented such female characters who were her lifelike. Or one can also say through the medium of fiction she rebelled against the rigid laws of the society and hence presented the women in the new light rather than modeling them on the same sphere as was done by the previous women writers.

The research paper aims at bringing forth the persona to two female protagonist of George Eliot's fiction both these women stand as an epitome of new women in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Victorian society. If one attempts to understand the new woman in the Victorian concept the term might not stand apt because of its evolution in the later 19<sup>th</sup> century but if one looks forth at the traits which the term new woman held it does stand apt for the women personas like Maggie Tulliver and Dorothea Brooke. If one looks forth at the scenario and the concepts which were faced by the women in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Victorian society one would find that the concept of new woman might not stand apt but there were numerous women character which were found in the 19<sup>th</sup> century fictions which can be called as the forerunner of the new woman in the Victorian society.

Before one begins to deal with these two women characters it is very important to understand some significant traits of the new woman. A new woman was someone who stood as a foil to the Victorian women. Where on one hand Victorian women was an epitome of womanhood she was symbolic of meekness, submissiveness, docility, simplicity, trend follower. she possessed all the necessary traits of femininity which were needed to be present in a 19<sup>th</sup> century woman on the other hand a new woman was someone who was totally a foil to the traits present in the Victorian women. A new woman as the word stands for desired no more to be an object, she was no more a trend follower, she believed in refuting the laws and the conventions of the society which the society imposed upon her. She instead of being a mute, docile creature was fierceless, possessed self-expression, gave vent to her desires; she wanted to be an independent persona who was no more an object in the hands of the patriarchy. She was not only a man's counterpart but she possessed an identity of her own.

The two characters with which the following paper deals with stand as an epitome of new woman. The first character with which the reader comes across is Maggie Tulliver from *The Mill on the Floss*. The Mill on the Floss by George Eliot is considered to be an autobiographical novel of George Eliot. one can say that the persona of Maggie was portrayed in the light of Eliot herself. Eliot too was one such women writer who broke the typical conventions of the Victorian society but in fact her femininity too was became an object of criticism. Eliot was in an illegal relationship with George Henry Lewis who was legally married since both George and his wife Agnes believed in free love, Agnes too was in a relationship with Lewis's close friend,

about eight years into the marriage, Agnes began an affair with Lewes' close friend Thornton Hunt. Both Lewes and Agnes were believers in "free love" and felt that feelings were stronger than legal bonds. So, when Agnes gave birth to Hunt's son, Lewes claimed the illegitimate child as his own (Haight 131).

Secondly use of male pseudonym in her works in order to prevent her works being misjudged.

In the Victorian society when it came to women's beauty and femininity was believed to be one of the defining traits of women. The world of Mill on the Floss provides the readers with an abundance of typical Victorian women characters that were both idealized and cherished during the 19<sup>th</sup> century Victorian society. The first such character is Bessy Dodson Maggie's mother who is an embodiment of typical Victorian women. According to Susan Rowland Tush, "Mrs. Tulliver explains a woman's first duty is to follow the simple, primeval law of obedience" (Tush 64).

Coming to the character of Maggie Tulliver in order to analyze the character of Maggie and look for the all the traits which makes her fall into the category of new woman one needs to study the character of Maggie Tulliver from the beginning of the novel. There were several parameters of femininity on which Maggie failed to stand. Maggie was portrayed as someone who refuted the laws of the society silently. Since her childhood Maggie is portrayed as a rebellious daughter who refutes the conventional roles of submissiveness and obedience as was expected from a Victorian girl. Maggie is not even afraid of facing any sort of criticism instead “Maggie hated blame: she had been blamed all her life” (Eliot 250). When Maggie is asked by her mother to do the patchwork she rejects, and says, “I don’t want to do my patchwork” (Eliot 19). She finds that all sorts of activities which were imposed upon women as monotonous and meaningless. Instead of being a submissive and an obedient daughter like her foil Lucy Maggie flaunts her unconventionality to everyone. She enjoys autonomy and strictly refutes conventionality. She is not interested in becoming an object of praise and admiration in the eyes of her relatives. Therefore, Maggie refuses what she is ordered by her aunts and mother as she utters, “I don’t want to do anything for my aunt Glegg. I don’t like her” (Eliot 19) when asked to do so. Another such incidence which brings to light the rebellious character of Maggie is her rebel against putting curly hairs as was accepted in the Victorian society. Maggie’s dark hairs are unacceptable in the society. Maggie is keen at accumulating knowledge which is even appreciated by her who when he finds admires Maggie’s reading capability and is proud of finding that Maggie “read almost as well as parson” (Eliot 42), while on the hand one finds that Maggie’s intelligence, her keenness towards education fails to seek any kind of admiration from her mother who is an embodiment of a typical Victorian woman. Femininity and woman’s beauty was what the Victorian girls were been prepared for. From their childhood their objectification as a perfect object for their husbands would begin. Maggie’s mother was a follower of the same conventions and was always worried about her daughter’s rebellious attitude. Unlike every Victorian mother she too never wanted to get criticized by the society if she failed in abiding by her motherly duties. Maggie’s mother was always worried about Maggie getting curls while Maggie’s messy hairs were symbolic of her unconventionality and refutation of Victorian conventions. In an attempt to free herself from the bondage of the society Maggie insulates herself from her mother and society which enforced her mother to state Mrs. Tulliver states that, “Lucy takes more after me nor my own child does” (Eliot 19)

Maggie believes that society enforces their rules and regulations upon her. Maggie since e her birth fails to live in bondage. She rebels against the unnecessary conventions and norms of the society which were enforced upon her. Maggie longed for love and independence which the Victorian society could never offer her. She at one point of time started considering herself as a gypsy since the world of gypsy offered her more solace in contrast to the Victorian world of manners and conduct.

The next set of differences which one experiences as one attempts to analyze the character of Maggie is that Maggie is a complete foil to her cousin Lucy who is an epitome of an ideal Victorian girl. Where on one hand Lucy possessed all those aspects whether it is her fair complexion for which she is appreciated and which fits as per the Victorian parameters of beauty. Whether it is her curly hairs which are admired by everyone while Maggie is neither as white as Lucy in fact she is believed to possess a dark complexion nor when she is compared to her brother she appears to be darker than her brother Tom. The contrast between the two girls that is Maggie and Lucy is clearly stated in the novel, “the contrast between the cousins was conspicuous, and to superficial eyes, was very much to the disadvantage of Maggie” (Eliot 76). Maggie was not only disliked but criticized by the members of her family. The stark contrast which the two cousins held “was like the contrast between a rough, dark, overgrown puppy and a white kitten” (Eliot, 76). Instead of being a being a part of the Victorian society Maggie wanted to be counted amongst the gypsy. When she wanted left her home in order to stay with the gypsies. Her repeated failures to confirm to the societal norms and finding solace with the gypsies when she was being asked in the gypsy camp that from she comes, she replies “I’m come from home because I’m unhappy, and I mean to be a gypsy. I’ll live with you if you like, and I can teach you a great many things” (Eliot 46).

The next undertaken character who stands as a prototype for the new woman in the Victorian society is Dorothea Brooke. Dorothea Brooke is another such woman who attempts to refute the norms of the society and hence establish an identity of her own. Dorothea is portrayed as someone who is keen to gain knowledge. Someone who wants to establish an identity of her own. There are numerous such incidences which take place in the novel which reminds the readers of Dorothea's independency and freedom. When Dorothea attempts to help her uncle Mr. Brooke in his official work her request to help him out is rejected by him. Dorothea puts forth her request towards her uncle, "I wish you would let me sort your papers for you, uncle," said Dorothea. 'I would letter them all, and then make a list of subjects under each letter" (Eliot15) but Dorothea's humble request is being shunned by her uncle. Her uncle's reaction to Dorothea as he says, "No no said Mt Brooke shaking his head I cannot let young ladies meddle with my documents. Young ladies are too flighty" (Eliot 15). Dorothea unlike other Victorian women doesn't dreams of financial settlement instead her subject of choice that is Mr. Casaubon is totally a foil to the kind of man a young girl of her age should admire. It is neither his riches, nor his personality which attracts Dorothea as it usually happens in case of Victorian girls when they dream of a husband in case of Dorothea. It is Casaubon's intellect his capabilities which admire Dorothea instead of his physical appearances which are also criticized by her sister Celia. Dorothea believes that by marrying Casaubon whom she believes to be "one of the most distinguished-looking man I ever saw" (Eliot16) Dorothea really had very high aspiration for Casaubon and by marrying a man like Casaubon she would also be able to able to achieve some height in life and he would be like an intellectual father figure for her. Dorothea believed Casaubon to be someone who could "understand the higher inward life, and with whom there could be some spiritual communion, nay who could illuminate principle with the widest knowledge: a man whose learning almost amounted to a proof of whatever he believed" (Eliot18).

Dorothea does not like to be confined with the four walls of the house and therefor after the death of Casaubon Dorothea decides to take over and manage all the business which Casaubon was managing till now since she was his legally wedded wife. Her idea of managing her husband's business is refuted by the relatives because nothing of this sort has happened till now. If one goes by the conventions of the Victorian society women did not possessed any right over the property of their husbands. While her relationship to Will Ladislaw is disclosed Casaubon ensure that if after his death Dorothea marries Will Ladislaw all the property which belonged to Casaubon would simply be confiscated from the hands of Dorothea since they did not possessed any legal heir apart from Will. Dorothea is portrayed as a woman of both intellect and individuality. She is someone who is interested I the welfare of the people around her. In the beginning of the pages of the novel one finds that she is quite interested in the business talks which takes place between the male members and is curious to give her verdict as well. Her uncle and other male members do not take her seriously hence making her appear as a fool in front of those intellectual people.

If one looks upon both these women characters at a glance one finds that these two women though they belonged to the Victorian society but stood as a complete foil to the existing women of their age. Society always aimed at the subjugation of the women in all the codes and manners. Whether it was morally physically, intellectually, economically that is every attempt was made to confine the women within the four falls of the house. Society never aimed at women's progression those same norms which have been constructed they were rigidly propagated as well as promoted throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century Victorian society. Every woman to whichever class she belonged to was expected to go through those conventions and any kind of deviation from that made her appear someone different from her sisters. That different woman was what the new woman all about though she did not had the power all alone to bring about a change in those norms but there was no doubt that she sometimes refuted to follow those norms and hence desired for something which was not meant for her. Hence in the end one can conclude that by attempting to revolt against the Victorian conventions both these women could be called as the progenitor of new women in the Victorian society.

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