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ETHICAL ISSUES IN THE MAJOR CHARACTERS OF GEORGE ELIOT'S *ADAM BEDE*

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Abstract: This paper aims to show the ethical issues in George Eliot's novel *Adam Bede* as treated by the author. In the novel George Eliot stresses on virtue and vice which she believes lead to a good or bad life. *Adam Bede* is regarded as a great piece of work with its picture of rural life and the ethical development of its characters- Adam, Hetty, Dinah, and Arthur. Eliot accounts this pathetic story of Hetty with an emphasis on the partial treatment of society towards criminals and questions the moral and sexual double standards of her time.

Index Terms- George Eliot, Adam Bede, ethical, moral conflict, tragedy

1. INTRODUCTION

Mary Anne Evans, who wrote under the pseudonym George Eliot, was born on November 22, 1819, at South Farm, Arbury Hall in Warwickshire. She was the youngest of five children. Mary Anne was afforded the privileges of a private education. She enjoyed books and learning from a young age. Unfortunately, Eliot was forced to leave school at the age of 16, when her mother died in early 1836. Her father continued to indulge her love of learning, purchasing books for her and helping her to learn German and Italian.

George Eliot's debut novel, *Adam Bede* was published in 1859. Even though Evans was a widely famous and well-regarded critic and journalist by the time the novel was published, she preferred to publish the novel under a pseudonym. Eliot claims that the story of the novel was inspired by the true story of a girl who was condemned for killing her child. *Adam Bede* is set in the lovely countryside of late-18th-century England. Eliot's aunt the Methodist preacher, Mrs. Samuel Evas anecdote inspired George Eliot to write the story of *Adam Bede*. Leslie Stephen in "Adam Bede" mentions: "It was suggested by an anecdote which she had heard from an aunt, the Methodist preacher, Mrs. Samuel Evans"(Stephen 65). Her aunt narrated to her the true account of a young girl she had met. The girl was an ignorant and condemned criminal who hid the truth about killing her child. According to Eliot, the character of Dinah evolved from her distinct memory of her aunt. While her father's early life provided some clues about Adam's personality and a few incidents that have a connection to him. The background of the novel is the English countryside of Eliot's early childhood years, where her father worked as an estate manager in the midlands town of Warwickshire.

Adam Bede is set in the rural background of Hayslope in 1799. The novel revolves around the four main characters Hetty Sorrel, a beautiful but arrogant village girl; Captain Arthur Donnithorne who charms her; Adam Bede, her neglected admirer; and Dinah Morris, Hetty's beautiful cousin, a Methodist preacher. Adam Bede, a local carpenter is madly in love with Hetty Sorrel. Joan Bennet in *George Eliot's* comment:

“ The simple well-contrived pattern conveys the sense of a social structure enclosing four human beings as completely as the soil encloses the roots of a growing plant and, in so doing, it illustrates one aspect of the author's vision of life”(Bennet 203).

Hetty stays with her uncle Martin Poyser, on the farm. Arthur Donnithorne, an old friend of Adam does not know about the deep love of Adam for Hetty, is fascinated by her beauty and offers himself as her lover which is accepted by Hetty and they start meeting secretly in the woods. Hetty is much impressed by Arthur's wealth rather than his morals and develops a fancy of being a country lady. Thus, she does not stop him from coming close to her. On one of the occasions, both Hetty and Arthur were seen by Adam embracing and kissing each other, who did not tolerate and fought with him. Arthur, not equal to Adam in physical strength, leaves the place. He makes a hasty decision to bid farewell to the village and joins the regiment of which he becomes a captain. Hetty somehow comes out of the situation and agrees to marry Adam but shortly before their marriage, Hetty discovers that she is pregnant. In despair, she leaves the village to find Arthur with very little money in her pocket.

Due to extreme depression and lack of sufficient food, she prematurely delivered her child. Excessive sadness makes her murder her child. She gets convicted of the crime. In the end, Adam and Dinah get married and live peacefully with his family. Commenting on George Eliot's power of weaving tragedy W.H. Hudson in *An Outline History of English Literature* mentions: "Eliot's tragedy is as poignant and deeply moral as anything to be found in Aeschylus or Shakespeare, out of homespun material"(Hudson 294).

Victorian society was rigid. It had a strict view concerning women. Also, it was affiliated with prejudices against women. It had various anti-women viewpoints. Any attempt of women to enter the world of freedom and employment was met with mockery and derision. Men were the primary providers while women were expected to carry out domestic chores. In the novel Adam opines that a woman's role is to make a man's life comfortable: "A workingman 'ud be badly off without a wife to see to the house and the victual, and make things clean and comfortable"(149). When one of the characters in the novel Dinah Morris becomes a preacher, many people in the village indirectly criticize her. Dinah Morris was a gorgeous young lady. People thronged to her preaching, not to listen to her preaches but to see her "pale pretty young woman"(34).

Another issue that was common in the novel is the issue of social chasm. In the village of Hayslop, feudalism was prevalent. Arthur Donnithorne belonged to the federal order, while Hetty Sorrel was a commoner. Hetty who belonged to the working class found the feudal class, Arthur Donnithorne charming. Hetty's family was poor. It was because of her uncle she was leading a dignified life otherwise "Hetty has been but a servant elsewhere, if her uncle had not taken her in and brought her up"(59). She, therefore, desired to marry Arthur Donnithorne and enhance her social standing by becoming his spouse. However, Hetty's desires which were fantasy-driven destroyed her own life. Her unfortunate end left the Hayslop people in a deep psychological shock. This incident in Hetty Sorrel's personal life serves as a stark reminder of the harsh realities that society must confront when two social classes that are inherently unequal attempt to come together based on emotion rather than logic.

In the novel, Hetty always aspires to live in her fantasy world, where morality does not exist. She only thinks about getting a wealthy and attractive man as her husband. Eliot describes Hetty's nature as: "Her very vanity made her more coy of speech"(78). She submits to her temptations, which sets her on a tragic course. She has a coy, opulent, and pleasurable nature that cowers at the first sign of discomfort. Finally, her beautiful dream came to an end. Despite Hetty's regular attendance at church, she has not acquired a single Christian teaching that she could live by. Similar to Hetty, Arthur is also a man with weak morals who gives into his temptations. His temptations reduced him into a degenerated personality. As a result of their lack of morality, Hetty and Arthur both experience intense spiritual suffering. Eliot wanted to convey the message through both the characters that people who have moral weakness will have to experience such punishment and suffering.

Eliot's human approach becomes more humane when she portrays the character of Dinah. Dinah is a girl with morals and serves as one of the best role models in the novel. She is a preacher who works as the father confessor to whom poor Hetty admits her inhuman action. There is also Adam, another morally upright person. "good-humored honest intelligence"(7). For him, work is a form of worship. From the beginning to the end of the novel, both Dinah and Adam remain morally upright. They show respect to everyone. Mr. Irwine is an honorable and "friendly clergyman"(115) who serves as an illustration of exceptional morality in *Adam Bede*. He is a selfless spiritual man. By her experience, Dinah represents the ideal goal, whereas Mr. Irwin represents the practical one. From the portrayal of Adam, Dinah, and Mr. Irwin we can observe that Eliot's serious characters are only seen from their moral perspective. Through the characters of Adam, Dinah, and Mr. Irwin, Eliot wanted to imply that the morally upright characters ought to be rewarded for their virtue. Eliot has therefore emphasized the contemporary concept of morality by placing morality at the forefront of all three characters. Due to their moral sensibility, they also live successful lives.

Moral conflict is one of the major themes in *Adam Bede*. Eliot did not believe in art for art's sake, but in art for morality's sake. Leslie Stephen in *George Eliot: English Men of Letters* says: "George Eliot believed that a work of art not only may but must, exercise also an ethical influence"(Stephen 205). The underlying message that Eliot conveys is that one must never succumb to their temptations because it will solely result in suffering and unhappiness and ultimately have to face the consequences. Arthur and Hetty both experience pain as a result of violating moral principles. Arthur and Hetty's lives end in tragedy as they both are morally vulnerable. The Arthur-Hetty tale demonstrates how vulnerability results in immorality and immorality results in tragic downfall.

In the novel, Eliot asserts that family is the most fundamental influence in a person's life. Every person learns to interact with society with the help of his family. A family "provides the first context for the recognition and communication of affective messages" (Boyo and Parke 1). An individual's holistic growth occurs through his or her family members such as parents and siblings. They have a significant influence on the person. This influence has such a profound effect that it shapes a person's future. This influence is shown in the novel to be the reason behind the establishment of personality traits of some of the major characters. Adam is the one who suffers from his father's shifting roles and his mother's whining, while Dinah, Hetty, and Arthur are the ones without parents or siblings. Both Dinah and Hetty were forced to live with their immediate family members: Hetty was forced to manage the home and children on a farm while Dinah spent her childhood with her Methodist aunt. Arthur was looked after by his grandfather and aunt. "It's Captain Donnithorne as is the heir, sir—Squire Donnithorne's grandson" (14). He leads a freer, more reckless life than the other characters because he lacks a stable family and is constantly traveling due to his work. He leads a more freer and reckless life than the other characters in the novel because he lacks a stable family and is constantly on the go due to his line of work. According to Eliot, a stable family life is the foundation for the growth of a good personality.

The characters in *Adam Bede* are constantly seen in a state of dilemma to make decisions. Their weak personality traits influence them to make poor decisions, which, can also be as Eliot suggests, a result of the absence of parental influence. All of these flaws and poor decisions cause the characters to self-deception. Eliot believes that this is a coping strategy used to deceive oneself to deal with challenging circumstances.

In *Adam Bede*, Eliot explains her ideas about motherhood as "the mother's yearning, that completest type of the life in another life which is the essence of real human love" (Eliot 371) which implies that she places a great deal of value on maternal love, something she was deprived of, just like the characters in the novel.

Even though Eliot led an infamous lifestyle, and was shunned from society, she takes on the responsibility of a moral guide in her novel. Richard Strang in *The Literary Criticism of George Eliot* says:

“Art has a societal and ethical purpose: it assists in dismantling our self-centeredness and links our sentiments to alternative entities. By provoking the reader's imagination, art cultivates ethical and compassionate sentiments”(Strang 952).

Eliot uses art as a platform to bring moral awakening and insight to her readers. Eliot serves this purpose perfectly.

According to George Eliot, Hetty's failures are partially attributed to her lack of maturity and education. She reminds her readers that Hetty is a simple farm girl with little education. However, Hetty is not pardoned based on these arguments; others who are nearly as uneducated, such as Adam himself, are perceived as having stronger moral principles.

Hetty's ignorance could also be explained by her young age, inexperience, and innocence. Being an orphan also had its drawbacks because intimacy with a parent cannot be shared with any close friend or relative. It is also a contributing factor to her uncertainty and lack of readiness for the circumstances she found herself in. The crime was committed because the victim was afraid of social rejection and shame as a result of her situation. But even then Hetty's action is considered as a crime. Both crimes and justice are always based on societal norms that are the outcome of the perception and considerations of leaders and elders of that particular region and era.

For the kind of issue Hetty faced in the novel, western society today has better safety provisions and counseling systems. The lack of a system to deal with unintended pregnancies in Victorian society in the middle of the 1800s, particularly in rural and still feudal English Society, is probably one of the causes of this crime. Female honor during that time was primarily linked to chastity. A woman lost her chastity when she lost her honor; in contrast, a man's honor depended on his property, his occupation, and his individuality. The crime and the circumstances in which it was committed by Hetty are also attributed to the fact that the novel is set in Victorian times when chastity was a major issue.

"The sense of family dishonor was too keen even in the kind-hearted Martin Poyser the younger to leave room for any compassion towards Hetty... Hetty had brought disgrace on them all—a disgrace that could never be wiped out"(259).

Hetty does not develop psychologically despite confessing the crime to Dinah and receiving counseling from her. Dinah also admits, "her poor soul is very dark and discerns little beyond the things of the flesh."(477) Hetty still displays her childish behavior even when she accompanies Dinah to the gallows. She acted very much the same way from the time when she was first discovered romancing Arthur Donnithorne.

Donnithorne's speedy arrival saves Hetty from dying, but she continues to act selfishly. She is transported from England and dies while traveling back home after serving her sentence. Patricia Beer comments:

"She dies before she can come back to shame everyone, with nothing more than an awkward remark from Dinah . . . and remorse from Arthur Donnithorne that he cannot appease his conscience with some form of charity" (Beer 206).

Arthur's speedy action to rescue Hetty is evidence that he still cares for her and wants to atone for his action is a universal quality of humanity. Kennard adds, "We are never asked to accept Hetty as mature - merely as punished for her past"(114). For this reason, Eliot decides to kill the character of Hetty in the novel because there is no sense of realization or repentance for the sin that she had committed.

Eliot is very much concerned with social and moral issues in the novel *Adam Bede* in the sense that ethics is such a ladder from which man can lead to a better life. Eliot didn't believe in art for art's sake but in art for morality's sake. She especially talks about virtue and vice. For her, the virtuous characters should be rewarded for their moral virtue and those who have moral weakness should be punished. Tragedy occurs because of temptation and sin which is too far from morality.

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