



Aspirational conflicts in George Eliot's female fictional protagonists - A critical study

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George Eliot believes that character cannot be judged on merits of only one action in life. Evidently one's behaviour at any given moment is the inevitable result of what has gone before and for this reason some past judgement is always echoed in the content of any event in the present. On this ground she gave importance to human intentions, feeling and motives rather than actions.

Character is indeed the most important single structural feature of her novels. It is in her treatment of character that George Eliot's more active intelligence gives her a conspicuous advantage over the typical Victorians. George Eliot's plot was secondary to her characters. She does not begin with the personality as it appeared to be outside world but with the psychological elements underlying the personality. Her portraits are primarily concerned with psychological elements.

The behaviour of a person reflects the personality of that person and is mostly governed by the inner working of his mind and heart. Meredith also is a psychological novelist. Though both analyse the character's motives and impulses, the differences between George Eliot and George Meredith are even more striking than their resemblances. George Eliot worked through tragedy and Meredith through comedy. George Eliot's approach was ethical to the problems confronting her character. Meredith's approach was that of a poet.

George Eliot believed in right and wrong deeds of man. She thought that every man's character is in his own hand to mould into the right shape or the wrong. She believed that one cannot escape from the consequences of one's deeds. "She was sure that those who live a virtuous life are essentially contented and those who live vicious are essentially discontented."¹

It is in the light of these views that George Eliot constructs her novels. The ideas from which the novels germinate are moral ideas, the conflicts which are the mainspring of the actions are moral conflicts.

George Eliot is one of the most distinguished writers of the Victorian age. She has spell-binding power of presenting the characters from the psychological perspective. The age in which she was writing was such that the social norms and codes of conduct were highly moralistic. Sometimes the result of such conditions were very unfortunate. George Eliot probes deep into the psyche of her characters and brings out the intellectual and emotional conflicts arising out of these conditions.

George Eliot is a psychological novelist and the primary object of her art is to lay bare the souls of her characters. She attempts to present the inner struggle of her characters to reveal the motives and impulses and hereditary influences which govern human actions. Since she is a woman novelist nearly all her subjects have been studied from the woman's point of view. The major women characters in the novels of George Eliot have some ideals and they strive to achieve their goal, though many times they fail because of circumstances beyond their control.

All George Eliot's heroines, Maggie Tulliver, Esther Lyon, Dorothea Brooke and Gwendolen Harleth go through the difficulties, agonies and the struggles that had fallen to her own, Diana Niell adds:

“Her novels reveal an exceptional sense of pathos of human life and deep conviction that human nature can be tried and purified in the fire of sufferings.”²

George Eliot knows why ambitions are frustrated, why idealists desert their ideals, why the bright promise of youth is betrayed. It is because nature is betrayed by what is false within itself.

George Eliot's later novel 'Felix Holt' was published after a gap of three years after the publication of Romola. About Felix Holt Robert Speaight remarks:

“It points the way to George Eliot's future triumphs.”³

In her novels we find the evolutionary process of moral development and this is delineated through Esther Lyon and Mrs. Transome. Mrs. Transome is the moral protagonist of the novel. She undergoes a terrible mental struggle between egoism and altruism. George Eliot believed in meliorism. She believed that the gradual improvement in man's lot can be effected not by divine grace or by any miraculous intervention but only by the thoughts and deeds of a man. In planning Felix Holt, George Eliot has two themes in mind. One is political and the other is moral, “The development of character is determined by circumstances and by the choice made at some important turning point or crisis in an individual life.”⁴

The heroine of the novel is Esther Lyon. She has expensive tastes and imagines that those who have money must be enjoying a full life. George Eliot hints about her: "She was alive to the finest shades of manner to the nicest distinction of tone and accent, she had a little code of her own about scents and colours, texture and behaviour by which she secretly condemned or sanctioned all things and persons."⁵

Esther cares for nothing but refinements of life. She has educated abroad to prepare her for a career of a governess. But her ideals are self-deluding. In this way she finds herself surrounded by petty conditions of life from which there seems to be no escape. But her confusion deepens as she dreams of a better life.

There is conflict in her mind regarding her status in society. Her trouble is caused by social differences. As is well known, characters in George Eliot's novels evolve through sufferings and moral education. Conflict is the result of a clash between the individual's aspirations and achievement, dream and reality. In relation to Rufus Lyon George Eliot tells us:

"Esther has affection for her father. She has recognised the purity of his character but she does not like to walk with him... She fancies that she should have loved her mother better than she was able to love her father."⁶

Esther is a complacent girl. She has peculiar notions of her own, which guide her judgement about people. She confuses the social superficialities with their moral content. Even at the very first meeting with Felix she finds herself measuring him with her own standard and finds him a very coarse and rude person. At first Esther is highly scornful of Felix for his show of erudition. At the same time there is an unwilling realization in Esther that he is her superior. Felix gradually tries to change her idea about him through love. Felix endeavours hard to enlighten her through a striking statement:

"I want you to see that the creature who has sensibilities that you call opinions is simply a lower, pettier sort of being- an insect that notices the shaking of the table, but never notices the thunder."⁷

During her stay at Transome Court the conflict of status is successfully resolved. In Transome Court Esther sees through the deluding brightness of the so-called high life and finds that its glamour is only the outward expression of a moral emptiness within. She realizes that she is in love with Felix. Felix is responsible for this new change in Esther. D.H. Lawrence adds:

"The actual evolution of the individual psyche is the result the interaction between the individual and universe."⁸

This means that the individual needs the help of an outside personality for the evolution of his character. One of the significant moments comes on the crucial day of Felix's trial, because the fate of Felix depends on it.

Esther undergoes an emotional conflict when Felix tells her of his love. Esther feels sympathy for him. At the same time there is conflict. She has to make a choice between Harold with his wealth and Felix with his poverty. As has been pointed out George Eliot in all her novels emphasises the importance of moral education. While debating whether to accept Harold's offer or not she makes a thorough analysis of her situation and realizes that by choosing Harold she will have nothing but a 'well-cushioned despairs' and restlessness in the midst comfort.

She comes to this decision only after watching Mrs. Transome's behaviour and her pitiable loneliness. She visualizes the deep contentment she will get by marrying the poor Felix and therefore she renounces the allurements of easy pleasurable existences with Harold. Felix and Esther get married, their marriage raises so much interest in the people of Terby Magna that everyone wants to see bride, "who had renounced wealth and chosen to be the wife of a man who said will always be poor."⁹

Thus a kind of moral levelling takes place and Esther finds her true self through an understanding of the real values of life.

Another great character of Felix Holt is Mrs. Transome in whom we observe the effect of past actions. Mrs. Transome undergoes a terrible mental struggle. She is an aristocratic lady and is completely indifference goes hand in hand with her excessive egoism. She likes to do everything according to her whims. Mrs. Transome always deceives her husband. She wishes that the tenant should stand bareheaded before her and bow to her whenever she passes by. At the same time she yearns for her affection, for fifteen years she has been cherishing a "powerful compensatory" illusion that with her son her joy will return to Transome court. But she feels depressed when she finds Harold so completely different from her dreams. Harold's decision to stand as a 'Radical' in the elections shocks Mrs. Transome, because her only motive now is to get the succession of Transome court for Harold. Her social hopes are frustrated. Her life has been that of a clever sinner who has cherished secret motives which were completely self-centered.

As a result of shock due to Harold's behaviour Mrs. Transome feels bitter. She becomes a pathetic figure, victim of irrational fear. Because of her guilt her sufferings know no end. "Mrs. Transome is probably George Eliot's finest and most intense embodiment of retribution for wrong action."¹⁰

The awareness of her sin shapes her whole being secret remorse eats her away like cancer.

To show moral and psychological progress in the characters, George Eliot uses certain images and symbols. In Mrs. Transome's cases the image of disenchantment is expressed through the description of Transome court, "There are a great deal of tarnished gildings and dinginess on the walls and furniture of this smaller room."¹¹ At the end Mrs. Transome tells Denner that she is like an old furniture with a new drapery.

Mirror images are also used this novel to show self pity and self contempt. One day when Mrs. Transome herself in the mirror.

"Probably she had ceased to see the reflection in the mirror, for her eyes had fixed wide open...she looked like an image faded, dried and..."¹²

Mrs. Transome's affair with the lawyer Jermyne corrupts her life. "The consequences of the past cannot be rejected."¹³

In Mrs. Transome's case we see that realization of her errors takes place but before she can redeem herself death overtakes her. The problems which her women characters face are the problem arising out of the adjustment of the individual with the community. George Eliot was a keen observer of society.

The novel Middlemarch is concerned with a community, with inter-relationship, with individual response to social pressure and the effect of society on individual aspirations.

We find in Middlemarch a microcosm of a wider world. Here we can study the working of society as seen by George Eliot. She delineates a number of lives compelled by many conflicting currents in their daily flow. Middlemarch is a masterpiece. It shows the lives of some fifty people and has as its central theme the tragic waste of feminine idealism and energy in the trivialities of provincial life.

Dorothea Brooke is the first major character to be introduced. She wants to do great things in the world. Dorothea visualizes the fulfillment of her duty in being able to become the wife of a real scholar. Dorothea's devotion to serve her kind can be clearly assessed from the novelist's comment:

"Now she would be able to devote herself to large yet definite duties... All Dorothea's passion was transferred through a mind struggling towards an ideal life."¹⁴

Dorothea yearns for sacrifice which will be spiritual and unique. Joan Bennet adds:

"The story had been recorded 'among the possible themes, since she is that of a woman endowed with quality of mind and heart and a passionate desire to serve her kind, which makes her comparable with St. Theresa but whose opportunities are confined by conditions of well-to-do provincial English girl in the nineteenth century."¹⁵

Dorothea is an ardent girl but she is self-willed and stubborn. Due to the intensity of her ego, Dorothea ignores facts which most of the people around her can plainly see. Lydgate's first impression of Dorothea is that of a 'virtuous and earnest' lady. She yearns to get more than others but without knowing what she is striving for. She is circumscribed by some silly notions. She thinks: "The really delightful marriage must be that when your husband is a sort of father and can teach you Hebrew if you wished it."¹⁶

Dorothea holds childish ideas about marriage. David Daiches comments:

"...marriages for her was ennobling discipleship to a father figure."¹⁷

She wants to have a husband who is above her in judgement. Labouring under such delusions she sets her heart on Casaubon, twenty-seven years her senior. There are two important themes, the theme of egoism and theme of frustration. This is delineated through various images. There are three important repeated images, the image of mirror, image of water, and image of dark and narrow place. Barbara Hardy adds:

The image of water is repeated in different tones, comic, critic and highly serious. We meet it first in conjunction with the image of mirror and image of the labyrinth. Dorothea is learning to have her future husband, and imagery here has highly critical function:

"Dorothea by this time had looked deep into the ungauged reservoir of Mr. Casaubon's mind seeing reflected there in vague labyrinthine extension every quality she herself brought." [Ch III]

Next the image is put into Dorothea's own words and the shift in view point brings its irony.

...or rather, he thinks a whole world of which my thought is but a poor two penny mirror. And this feeling too, his whole experience-what a lake compared with my little pool."¹⁸

Dorothea looks through distorting mirror reflecting herself, not showing through clear glass a true image. The image of labyrinth is also echoed in it.

But soon after her marriage the illusion is over. She marries him with the lofty thought that she will get an opportunity to serve humanity. During their stay at Rome Dorothea comes to a relatively deeper understanding of herself and her husband. Consequently discovery of her husband's impotence. Dorothea comes to experience a shock. There can hardly be nothing more depressing to a young and ardent person as Dorothea who has come to lose all interest in life. She feels humiliated. Her misery is further aggravated when Casaubon inquires of her whether she had a pleasant time, Casaubon added:

"See Rome as a bride and live thenceforth as a happy wife." The unconscious irony of the sentence heightens her misery.

Dorothea's visit to Rome and her visit to the ruins of Rome is symbolic of Dorothea's life with Casaubon, it is just like the ruins. The impact of the 'stupendous fragmentariness' of Rome upon Dorothea is the phase of disenchantment. In her use of ruins George Eliot has given the picture of a mental phase with symbolic realization.

She now finds him dreadful to live with. As Dorothea is a submissive girl she tries to take interest in Casaubon's work. But Casaubon who is aware of his inadequacy feels greatly irritated and all this leads to conflict in her mind regarding her situation and her only help is Ladislaw.

There are some ironical images expressed in the metaphor of water. About the conditions of Dorothea after her marriage the novelist comments:

"Having once embarked on your marital voyage it is impossible not to be aware that you make no way and that the sea is not within sight-that, in fact you are exploring an enclosed basin."¹⁹

Dorothea has at last realized that she will not be able to achieve her ideals through marriage. She feels suffocated in an atmosphere of bondage. An individual's behaviour is affected mainly by two factors-first by the condition of mind and secondly by the environment in which the person lives. It becomes quite clear to Leslie Stephen's opinion seems reasonable:

"Dorothea's mistake was not that she married a man who not read German but that she married a stick instead of a man. The story, more carefully we accept its truthfulness becomes the more of a satire against young ladies who aim at lofty ideals."²⁰

Later on Dorothea is further shocked when she comes to know about Casaubon's heart disease. This leads to an unusual kind of triangular relationship between Casaubon, Dorothea and Ladislav. Casaubon is jealous of Ladislav. There is a sort of jealousy which needs very little fire. Dorothea is unable to understand the reason of Casaubon's jealous dislike of Ladislav. Robert Speaight adds further: "Casaubon's jealousy is seen as the symptom of his spiritual poverty linked with his despair."²¹

Dorothea's portrait is the portrait of George Eliot herself. Dorothea's 'soul hunger,' is perhaps identified with George Eliot's. Speaight quotes F.R. Leavis and says that he is of the view that: "Dorothea is too personal and interested a portrait, that George Eliot is too near to make her real."²²

The novel *Daniel Deronda*, published in 1876, is George Eliot's last novel. The story is about two contrasting characters, one of whom is Daniel Deronda who belongs to a Jewish background and the other is Gwendolen Harleth. Gwendolen is a selfish girl and Daniel Deronda is a true altruist.

Gwendolen like her predecessors Hetty, Maggie, Romola and Dorothea suffers from her own ideals but ultimately attains profound insight in the world. At the initial stage Gwendolen is a narcissist. She gives the impression that she is a poised, quick witted and beautiful woman. But actually she is a young woman suffering from thoughtlessness and selfish giddiness. Since she suffers from fallacious notions about herself. She always keeps herself busy with her small influences of the way in which she could make her life pleasant.

After rejecting Rex, she comes in contact with Grandcourt. For sometimes Gwendolen like Dorothea continues deluding herself with homespun fantasies. The first conflict arises in her father's financial loss. She cannot sleep for the whole night. Before leaving she sits in front of a great difficulty, but she cannot get any answer from the mirror. She has a strong sense of self love. Gwendolen sometimes longs for self-written books to amuse her. At the crucial moment of her family's financial loss, she has to decide between a career in theatre and marriage seems to be the only possible solution to her material discomfort. Though the decision to marry Grandcourt raises a storm of emotional conflict in her, she resolves this conflict through rationalization by telling herself that she is doing this for the sake of her mother. The prospect of marrying Grandcourt seems attractive and alluring to her. Dr. Dalal comments:

"She expects to marry someone who can give her position and at same time appropriate her superiority to let her lead him in everything."²³

Gwendolen's faith in herself like Dorothea's private image of herself is based on misunderstanding of facts and even of her own self.

In reality her consent to marry Grandcourt is only due to her selfish love for her socio-economic status in society. All these are the faults of Gwendolen's character and her sufferings start with her marriage, she is Grandcourt. Soon after her marriage she is unable to maintain supremacy over Grandcourt it leads to many emotional problems. Barbara Hardy categorically hints that:

Even in her disenchanted moments she is preoccupied with self.

Very soon Gwendolen becomes aware of her follies and falls a prey to Grandcourt's brutality and this situation leads to marital conflict in her mind, and one day a stage comes in her life when she thinks of the death of Grandcourt. In the boat of an Italian lake, Gwendolen is herself uncertain how for her consenting will makes her responsible for Grandcourt's death. She says: I do not know how it was- he was turning the sail-there was a gust- he was struck- I know nothing-I know that I saw my wish outside me.

This happens when Grandcourt asks his wife to accompany him. While moving in a sailing boat, Grandcourt accidentally falls overboard. And Gwendolen delays a moment in throwing the rope. At the level Gwendolen does not mean to kill her husband. She jumps after him, but finds her husband already dead. Gwendolen is many times partly conscious of her motive. She accuses herself of murdering Grandcourt. In such a stress situation Daniel Deronda is her only hope. But her hope changes to despair when Deronda comes to take leave of her. This despair gradually changes to resignation. Deronda suggests that, 'she should try to care about something in this vast world besides the gratification of small selfish desire.'

Gwendolen is George Eliot's magnificent creation. She is not like Maggie or Dorothea. Gwendolen is cold, calculating; Maggie and Dorothea are warm, impulsive, self-sacrificing to the point of mesochism.

In this novel the image of the child has been used quite often. Gwendolen is often called a child. Images of child carry the same kind of pathos-sometimes ironical, sometimes straight forwardly pathetic.

"The ruined chapel in Abbey in Daniel Deronda is the final and most complex use of ruin symbol in George Eliot's a novel."

George Eliot uses images of 'ruin' to show the disenchantment. Gambling also is used as a symbol of wrong doing.

F.R. Leavis adds:

"...her art in Gwendolen Harleth is at its maturest, and her profound insight into the moral nature of man is essentially that of one whose critical intelligence has been turned intensively on her faith."²⁴

In George Eliot's novel vision of her characters broadens through their experience.

George Eliot in her early novels lays emphasis on repression. In 'The Mill on the Floss Maggie Tulliver's mesochistic self-repression is largely autobiographical. But when her vision broadens less emphasis is laid on repression and more on self sacrifice. When George Eliot's heart and mind matured she came to believe that repression is not the surest road to virtue. Self sacrifice is good because human happiness depends on it.

"The motive for self sacrifice is the happiness of other people and George Eliot composed her fiction in such a way as to set the motive in a clear light."

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