

ISSN 0976-8165

*The Criterion*



# The Criterion

An International Journal in English

Bi-Monthly Refereed & Indexed Open Access eJournal

*December 2013 Vol. 4 Issue-VI*

Editor-in-Chief

Dr. Vishwanath Bite

Managing Editor

Madhuri Bite

[www.the-criterion.com](http://www.the-criterion.com)  
[criterionejournal@gmail.com](mailto:criterionejournal@gmail.com)

## George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*: The Construction of Gender Roles

**Ravinder Kaur**

Research Scholar (PhD.)

Dept. of English

Panjab University, Chandigarh

### Abstract

In this paper an attempt has been made to critically analyze Tom/Maggie relationship in the light of ideas of social conditioning of children as provided in Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. The researcher has provided a detailed analysis of the text to depict that children are conditioned to behave according to the conventional gender roles assigned to them in a particular society. The repercussions of such mental habituation are further analysed by providing appropriate examples from the novel. The protagonist Maggie's attempts to break the shackles of her conservative gender-based society and to challenge the patriarchal cultural setup are also discussed at length.

**Keywords:** Gender, cultural- construct, social conditioning, patriarchy, male-dominance, feminist, de Beauvoir, Eliot.

### Introduction

George Eliot (Mary Ann Evans) is renowned for her revolutionary views on gender issues. She herself experienced gender biases in her life, no wonder; she had to write under male pseudonym. She is considered to be far ahead of her times as she always supported higher education and work rights for women. Her writing made it explicit that she never wanted women to be forced into marriage and to be dependent on men. She struggled constantly for equal rights for women. She believed that rigid class and racial divisions were unfair although she knew it very well that during her lifetime, it cannot be changed. Nevertheless she made an effort to push these boundaries away by writing novels whereby she could exemplify her views on life. As a result we have characters like Maggie, Tom, Philip, Stephen, Hetty, Dorothea and Gwendolen who represent gender inequalities in society. Her aim seemed to make her readers aware of the situation of women so that they can bring a change in society and create a brighter future for generations to come.

Eliot's ability to portray life-like characters explains why there is so much fascination for her works among the readers. She has depicted Maggie and Tom's character in such a manner that people mistook it for her autobiographical work. By delving deeply into the lives of these characters we can examine the impact of social conditioning upon the lives of human beings. The ideas provided in *The Second Sex* regarding the cultural conditioning of children could be easily seen at work in the character portrayal of Tom and Maggie.

The *Second Sex* (1949) was published after *The Mill on the Floss* (1860). This fact explains Eliot's intense concern and awareness of her gender based society. But de Beauvoir did a wonderful job by providing a theoretical account of the gender discrimination in the society. In *The Second Sex*, she takes up this issue and discusses that the gender is not a biological but a cultural construct; it is something which is created by rapid conditioning of children and not just a matter of chance or result of something that happened in the history of human beings. She has also discussed the problems women have to face as a result of it. She delineates number of ways in which a woman can define herself as a free individual being; and rejecting the given identity, making her own choices and getting occupation i.e. economic security are some of them. Maggie seems to be defining herself as an individual when she tries to make choices of her own rather than blindly following her brother or father like rest of the women in the novel do.

### **Analysis:**

By means of compliments and scolding, through images and words, she learns the meaning of pretty and plain, she soon learns that in order to be pleasing she must be 'pretty as a picture'....she compares herself with princess and fairies. (de Beauvoir 306)

This statement depicts the significant role played by society in the mental development of children. A child is complemented when it behaves in a socially acceptable manner but scolded if refuses to follow this mannerism. This attitude gets ripened with the passage of time and a day comes when it becomes the natural behaviour a child. Beauvoir says in *The Second Sex*, that boys are taught to behave in a manner; different from girls and vice versa, for example: "A man doesn't look at himself in mirrors...A man doesn't cry" (298). He is, in a way, convinced to be a "little man" i.e. superior, strong and courageous unlike girls. Similarly, in *The Mill on the Floss* Maggie and Tom receive different treatment from their parents and relatives and consequently adopt conventional gender roles.

There is a set idea of beauty and femininity in every society and a girl is expected to conform it. Maggie is always compared to her cousin Lucy Deane who is seen as an emblem of femininity. She is a passive, submissive and quite child. Maggie on the other hand is wilful, careless, awkward girl who is always scolded by her mother and aunts. She has a dark complexion and straight black hair unlike Lucy. The author compares her to "a rough, dark, overgrown puppy" and Lucy to a "white Kitten". So whenever Lucy visits Tullivers Maggie is compared to her. Her mother holds Lucy up to Maggie as an example of a perfect feminine girl: "And there's Lucy Deane's such a good child - you can set her on a stool and there she'll sit for an hour together, and never offer to get off". This comparison makes Maggie miserable. This notion of passivity is skilfully explained by de Beauvoir. She says that girls are taught to be submissive and obedient. She puts it like this:

The passivity that is considered the essential characteristic of the feminine woman is a trait that develops from her earliest years. No biological datum is responsible for their passivity but it is in fact a destiny imposed upon her by teachers and society. (307)

Lucy is a girl who has passively adopted all these qualities and that is the reason she is praised by all her relatives. On the other hand, Maggie is rebuked by her aunts for being naughty and rebellious child because she is unable to follow the instructions of her elders.

Maggie's defiant nature and her mother's undying efforts to tame her into a docile girl can always be seen at struggle with each other. Her mother makes her wear fashionable dresses with frills and decorations on them but Maggie feels uncomfortable in such dresses. She removes them instantly which make her mother very angry. Secondly, she does not like it when her mother tries to mend her hair because she would like to keep them undone. Once when all her relatives are at home, she cuts her hair out of anger because everyone present there scolds her for being a disorganized child. Her aunts comment adversely about her: "Put your hair behind your ear Maggie..." says aunt Glegg. Aunt Pullet comments, "I think the gell has too much hair. I'd have it thinned and cut shorter sister, if I was you..." and Aunt Deane looks at her with a critical eye. She cuts her hair short although she feels embarrassed afterwards when everyone laughs at her because she looks very funny and like an "idiot". "This kind of behaviour by elders, describes how girls and boys are rewarded or punished explicitly or implicitly according to how successfully they conform to the desired models of heterosexual masculinity and femininity which perpetuate patriarchy" (Tidd 65). So much is expected of a little girl who does not even understand the customs of her society. Beauvoir has rightly commented on the condition of such girls, "She does not like being intimidated by the rules of decency, bothered by her clothes, enslaved to household cares, stopped short in all her flights" (de Beauvoir 323).

The repercussions of such conditioning can be seen in Tom's behaviour towards Maggie when he goes to play with Bob. Tom does not like to take her along. He feels that the kind of games he plays, are not suitable for Maggie. Thus "rat-killing", "beating" and "climbing" trees are kind of games Tom enjoys the most and Maggie is not supposed to do this. She herself does not feel comfortable while playing such games. These incidents convey the primary difference between attitude of both the sexes which are not creations of their own. They are result of the "instructions" given by their elders. As Beauvoir states, a boy:

...contends in hardihood and independence with other boys, he scorns the girls. Climbing trees, fighting with his companions, facing them in rough games, he is aware of his body as a means for dominating nature and as a weapon for fighting...learns from an early age to take blows, to scorn pain, to keep back tears. (307)

Eliot refers that boys do not shed tears in context of Tom. Maggie, on the other hand, relieves herself always by crying out her grief after every fight with people she loves. When she is very upset, she goes to the attic and beats her wooden doll. Tom by contrast feels free to break her

heart. He fights with her, goes out, plays with his friends and forgets that he has offended her. He comes back in the evening without feeling any remorse over his behaviour.

Beauvoir's analysis of women's situation in *The Second Sex* depicts that she does not hold men uniquely responsible for the oppression of women because patriarchal ideology is working only because some women accept inauthentic roles determined for them by patriarchal ideology (Tidd 68). In this situation, mothers or women of the family play a very important role because it is with them that children spend most of the time. The mother works as a medium in conveying children their conventional gender roles. In case of a boy:

[T]he child is persuaded that more is demanded of boys because they are superior; to give him courage for the difficult path he must follow, pride in his manhood is instilled into him. (de Beauvoir 299)

Thus this very idea of masculinity and femininity is instilled in a child by none other than their parents especially mothers. In Maggie's case, the analysis of mother and daughter relationship provided by de Beauvoir is significant. She says:

the mother fully intends to fit her daughter into the feminine world...she saddles her child with her own destiny...so when a child comes under their care, women apply themselves to changing her into a woman like themselves...and even a generous mother, who sincerely seeks her child's welfare, will as a rule think that it is wiser to make a true woman of her, since society will more readily accept her if this is done. (308)

Mrs. Tulliver wants to make Maggie such a girl whom everybody would readily accept and appreciate. Ironically, Maggie turns out to be a very rebellious child. She does not understand why her mother wants her to be a dutiful daughter. Mrs. Tulliver, therefore, feels very aggrieved by her behaviour. As she grows up, Mrs. Tulliver asks her to learn cooking, sewing, embroidery, and housekeeping. But Maggie does not show any interest in these activities; for example she calls patchwork 'foolish work' when she is only nine years' old. Mrs. Tulliver believes that God has punished her by endowing her with such a child.

This conflict between Maggie and her mother has some severe consequences. She feels restricted in her own house because her brother is always given advantage over her. When her mother guides her, she feels suffocated and tries to escape in the attic or by riverside. There she relieves herself by crying out her grief. In this regard, de Beauvoir writes:

Her spontaneous surge towards life, her enjoyment of playing, laughing, and adventure, lead the little girl to view the maternal sphere as narrow and stifling. She would like to escape from her mother's authority...anything the boys have to accept. (321)

Maggie wants to exercise her freedom as Tom does. She wants to enjoy her childhood without restrictions. But her mother has other plans for her. She wants to save her daughter from being

mistreated by others; she does not want people to call her a freak. So she would do everything to make her fit into the given gender role.

The gap between Tom and Maggie widens when different academic levels are decided for them. In Victorian times, education was not considered necessary for girls. Mr. Riley's conversation with Maggie brings to light her intellectual bent of mind which is visible from the kind of books she reads: *The History of the Devil* by Daniel Defoe, *The Pilgrim's Progress* and *Aesop's Fables*. Her father is aware of her intelligence and cleverness but at the same time he feels that "a woman's no business wi' being so clever; it'll turn to trouble..." (Eliot 13). Mr. Tulliver's remark is significant, "It's a pity but what she'd been the lad- she'd ha' been a match for the lawyers, she would" (16). Maggie struggles to learn all through her life but is deprived of her most cherished dream. In this regard, Purkis notes that Maggie Tulliver has a particular place in the history of Feminism as she rebels against her lot which "is the misfortune of being born into the wrong family and into a narrow and unfeeling society. Because she is also born into the wrong sex, she does not get opportunities offered to Tom... Maggie is desperate for education, and succumbs to a variety of books" (105). Judith L. Newton observes the different purposes of educating Tom and Maggie. She indicates that "while Tom's education prepares him for the power of achievement, Maggie's prepares her for a genteel marriage like Mrs. Deane's, a marriage which precludes the achievement that comes with economically significant activity" (142). Beauvoir also writes that marriage was considered the only occupation for a girl: if a girl finds a suitable suitor for herself, her parents feel proud of her. That is considered her only business. She says:

The treasures of feminine virtue are poured into her ears, feminine virtues are urged upon her, she is taught cooking, sewing, housekeeping along with care of her person, charm and modesty...she is told not to act like a would-be-boy, she is forbidden violent exercises, she is not allowed to fight. In brief, she is pressed to become like her elders, a servant and an idol. (de Beauvoir 308)

This education she receives from her elders. Rather than sending her to school, they make her a passive doll who can charm the opposite sex with her beauty and of course, not with brain. As Mr. Tulliver mentions in the novel, most men want to marry a woman who is if not exactly stupid, at least not intelligent enough to challenge them.

Therefore, this mental conditioning by their society makes Tom and Maggie, a man and a woman. As they grow up, they know that they are different from each other and they have some particular roles to play in the society. They are made to believe that they will have to accept these roles if they want to survive. Tom does not take much time to learn that he is a man, superior to women and has the authority to take all the decisions. The author has portrayed him as a very indifferent, practical and dominant figure. He punishes Maggie for every little thing when she fails to follow his instructions. She cries, begs his forgiveness but that does not affect

him much. He carries this attitude all through his life. He becomes the mouthpiece of patriarchal ideology and always becomes a hurdle to Maggie's freedom and subjectivity.

Tom and Maggie fall apart mainly because of the gender roles assigned to them in the society. When Mr. Tulliver loses his property, Tom realizes that he will have to earn to save the family honour. During this time, Maggie sits and frets in the house. She cannot go out and work which will bring disgrace to family. Tom considers himself the authority to rule the house. He feels humiliated when Maggie tries to earn. He tells her to sit in the house until she gets married. He wants to provide her economical security like men in the house do. It is one of the reasons of conflict between Tom and Maggie.

It is not just Maggie's moods, occupation decisions that Tom's tries to control but her personal relationships as well. Maggie has soft feelings for Philip because they share same tastes for music, art and books. When Tom comes to know that his father has lost the lawsuit filed against Philip's father, he stops Maggie from meeting him. Maggie, being a girl, accepts this order without saying anything because he is the authority of her house. But she feels in her heart that she has been wronged by Tom. She becomes aware of one thing that she does not have any free will. But she has the desire to have books to read, music to listen and all the finer sensibilities of life. At one point in the novel she thinks that she wants to learn everything men know. Philip is a man who supports her desire to learn. This is one of the reasons that she gets fascinated towards this relationship. They meet at Red Deeps valley for over a year until Tom comes to know about it and rebukes Maggie. Tom is aware that they live in a society where if a girl meets a boy secretly, it's disgrace for the family. He orders Maggie to not step out of the house and not even to write him without his knowledge. This very incident creates a wide gap in Maggie/Tom relationship.

Maggie cannot accept this forced enslavement to Tom. She tries to assert herself and in the process loses his brother. The boating scene in which Maggie elopes with Stephen, Lucy's suitor, is considered the most significant episode of the novel because Maggie appears as a woman who disturbs the patriarchal structures of society by choosing her love. There are references in the novel that Maggie does not want to elope with him but this is her imaginative nature which makes her forget where she was heading to. But when she comes back into her senses she realizes that it is too late for her to go back. So it is presented in the novel that nature becomes an instrument in making her elopement possible, hence not her conscious decision. But the time when Eliot was writing this novel, women were not given these rights to choose their life partners and elopement was considered a sin; the most disgraceful act on a woman's part. It is probably to present Maggie as a moral character and to save the novel from being controversial, Eliot has chosen this way of representation. Although she returns to the town but her elopement with Stephen signifies her rejection of the age old patriarchal structure designed for the enslavement of women.

Maggie and Tom's relationship becomes bitterer after her elopement with Stephen. Tom denies taking her into the house which legally belongs to the male member of the family. According to Tom, this is the most shameful act by Maggie so he cannot forgive her. Thus they always remain in conflict with each other. This clash seems unavoidable when they are alive and ends in their deaths only. Thus the ending of the novel seems appropriate when she saves his life and he calls her "Magsie" a term of endearment. All through their lives they struggle and their death unites them.

### Conclusion

As we can conclude from the above discussion, Tom represents everything Maggie revolts against. According to R.T. Jones, "Maggie's brother Tom, in particular, comes to represent, or to embody, a set of inflexible obligations laid upon Maggie without her choice" (20). So he always tries to make Maggie fit into the given structure of femininity. Her attempts to relate to other males are dogged by him with unfeeling prohibitions. For her 'sexual misconduct', the elopement with Stephen, she is punished by being driven away as if she has no right to her house (Eliot 107). Tom appeals to the patriarchal sky-god: 'You have disgraced my father's name' and of course not mother's and also as if the honour or dishonour of family lies on her shoulder only. He asks her to stay quietly at home until she is married. She is not allowed to earn her living. He does not like it when she proposes to do a job. He does not tolerate if she tries to choose her friends and if she does he would not let her meet them. de Beauvoir's remark about Tom rightly sums up this argument:

[He] obstinately upholds accepted principles congeal morality in formal rules; but Maggie tries to put the breath of life into them, she upsets them, she goes to the limit of her solitude and emerges as a genuine free being, beyond the sclerosed universe of males. (Beauvoir 385)

### Works Cited:

- de Beauvoir, Simone. *The Second Sex*. Trans. & Ed. H. M. Parshley. London: Penguin, 1972. Print.
- Eliot, George. *The Mill on the Floss*. London: Penguin, 1860. Print.
- Jones, R.T. *George Eliot*. London: Cambridge UP, 1970. 19-30. Print.
- Newton, Judith Lowder. *Women, Power and Subversion: Social Strategies in British Fiction 1778-1860*. NY: U Georgia P, 1981. Google Book Search. Web. 25 Oct. 2012.
- Purkis, John. *A Preface to George Eliot*. London: Longman, 1985. 72. Print.
- Tidd, Urusula. *Simone de Beauvoir*. London: Routledge, 2007. Print.