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## **The Oppressive Word: *Middlemarch* and the Critique of Prejudiced Epistemes**

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### **Abstract:**

This paper offers to study the representation of academic scholarship in Eliot's *Middlemarch*, and the systemic and ethical obstructions which the conduits of emancipatory knowledge were faced with in nineteenth century Britain. George Eliot critiques both the ethnocentric and patriarchal modes of intellectual pursuits in Victorian society allowing one to gauge the moorings of the society at large. Eliot, through her incisive vision, alerts us to the debilitating effects of exclusionary scholarships and their resultant epistemic violence.

**Keywords:** *Middlemarch*, Victorian Society, Patriarchy, Ethnocentrism, Cultural Imperialism.

In the closing paragraph of *Middlemarch*, George Eliot writes- “For there is no creature whose inward being is so strong that it is not greatly determined by what lies outside it” (Eliot 1193). In eight volumes, Eliot reveals how individuals in the provincial town of Middlemarch beget modes of living through modest acts, orchestrated by the ethos of their times. Dorothea is introduced as an ardent woman, not satisfied by the paltry education which Victorian society presented women with. “I must learn everything then” (37), she remarks, yearning to delve into realms of knowledge which was actively kept away from women. The education of women was superficial and scant, allowing women only to form “weak opinions” (9) as they struggled in the “bands of narrow teaching” (37). Casaubon comes to embody the principles of the pedantic English scholar; whose voice is acutely of his times. His ethnocentric pursuit is levered along the lines of acquisitive political sensibilities of Victorian society caught in the exhaustion of performing erudition. The local bourgeoisie tries to keep up the act of refinement, trying to distinguish itself from the working class and emulate the social and ethical lifestyle of the

landed, leisured gentry. This performance of highbrow intellect was in keeping with the rapidly changing social structures in Britain.

Dorothea hopes that in her marriage to Casaubon, she will find “new vistas” (119) of knowledge and experiences open up- she wants to learn Latin and Greek and glean knowledge beyond the petty, performative niceties which constituted female education. She is attracted by the scholarly pursuits of Casaubon and views his writings as a bona fide reflection of his ideals and a glimpse into his “great soul” (25). Eliot criticises the flippant and inadequate nature of female education in Victorian society where women are mere adornments, bolstering the male ego by their single-minded devotedness to those causes which men deemed worthy. The cult of domesticity which marked the nineteenth century Victorian society ascribed limited women within households. They were trained to be suitable mothers, wives and daughters and their education was to that effect. This watertight demarcation between the public and the private for women was adhered to staunchly within the bourgeoisie, testifying to their anxious efforts at positing themselves as beyond labour. Eliot’s heroine, Dorothea, hopes to prise her selfhood out of the “girlish subjection to her own ignorance” (37). That Dorothea is hungry for knowledge is made amply clear by Eliot from the very start of the novel. Through her representation of the chief school in the country, she bares to the readers the compromised nature of female education where a woman’s worth was pinned solely on keeping up with the act of being ‘proper’- “Mrs. Lemon’s school, the chief school in the country, where the teaching included all that was demanded in the accomplished female- even to the extras, such as the getting in and out of a carriage” (135). It is this societal mooring which engenders disastrous marriages as seen in *Middlemarch*. Casaubon regards “ardent self-sacrificing affection” (68) as the principle charm of the female sex while Lydgate wishes Rosamond would sing her song for the “relaxation of his adored wisdom alone” (831). Both these women are the victims of ill-education. Dorothea naively worships Casaubon at the start of the novel, when everything at Lowick House appears “hallowed” to her. She is unable to find an acceptable channel for her deep yearnings of knowledge, and confuses slavish subordination for tutelage. It was difficult for women to imagine scholarship beyond their petty school education without the patronising dictations of men. She soon realises that she is caught within its architecture, doomed to be the “angel of the house”- a superfluous ornament to be moulded to the whims of the master of the house. Lowick House and its library become an extension of Casaubon’s repressive labyrinthine mind. From

Dorothea's aspirational abundance of "large vistas" (278), she finds herself encumbered in the dull, gloomy and wearisome library. She struggles to find a footing for her desires in a male-dominated society and academia. At the onset, she attempts to nurse Casaubon's ego, wonders if his ill-temper was merely a scholar's justified caprice. But the encumbering weight of dullness at Lowick House prods her to think otherwise. Despite her debilitating education, Dorothea is a character who wilfully desires outside the license of Victorian ethos. She pines for an epic life and calibrates her learnings to that end. When the most readily available model for such a life is proffered through the sacrifice of St. Theresa, Dorothea willingly tries to embrace self-effacement. Yet, she struggles to repress her resentment at the paucity of socially sanctioned female selfhoods. Sir James remarks that he envies her power of forming an opinion. Eliot hones Dorothea as an earnest learner- enquiring, listening, and gracious enough to acknowledge her lack, willing to put her knowledge to practical use. There are the qualities which the scholar Casaubon is bereft of. The vague labyrinth of Casaubon's mind is illuminated by "every quality she (Dorothea) herself brought" (30). The development of Dorothea's character is vectored along the lines of her epistemic inquiries concerning the belief systems around her. She is able to discard her romantic illusions and through self-conflict, is able to "learn what everything costs" (1158). In her refusal to allow Casaubon to dictate her academic pursuits even after his death, she salvages her soul from the grip of male authority and authorship.

Some writers have commented on how Casaubon, a loner, was suffering from scholar's block, how Dorothea's "silliness and interference, her pestering for attention, diverted his tremendous project into the sands", that Dorothea's tears unhinged his intellectual command. (Neal Ascherson in *The Independent*) Here again one finds the banal depiction of women as hysterical, their ability to react with feelings painted as an impediment to serious scholarly work. Patriarchal power is embedded in such apprehensions of authorship and learning and has historically been used to actively keep women outside the ambit of literary pursuits. Casaubon attempts to affix Dorothea in the role of a devoted helper- earnestly beginning with the "Synoptical Tabulation" and working towards the erection of a tomb "with his name upon it" (704). Her labour would serve Casaubon's purpose and would be attributed to his intellect. In *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar write-

Since both patriarchy and its texts subordinate and imprison women, before women can even attempt that pen which is so rigorously kept from them they must escape just those

male texts which, defining them as *Cyphers*, deny them the autonomy to formulate alternatives to the authority that has imprisoned them and kept them from attempting the pen. (13)

Dorothea is willed by Casaubon to never marry Will Ladislaw and to spend her scholarly pursuits in the clerical work assigned by Casaubon. His will “sentences” Dorothea to a lifetime of subordination and attempts to compose her life for her-

As a sort of sentence man has spoken, she has herself been ‘sentenced’: fated. Jailed, for he has both ‘indited’ her and ‘indicted’ her. As a thought he has ‘framed’ (enclosed) in his texts, glyphs, graphics, and ‘framed up’ (found guilty, found wanting) in his cosmologies. (13)

It is this guilt, the undertow of which she lastingly feels that Dorothea struggles with. The ghost of Casaubon’s tight-lipped judgement continues to haunt her, as she wonders if the repulsion, she now feels towards her suspicious husband is a damning sin. The repression of her desires and her ill-education had drilled the dictums of self-effacement into her young mind; this struggle between opposing desires was but obvious. Dorothea hoped to find an alternative to the “toy-box history of the world adapted to young ladies” (119) in Casaubon, envisioning her own initiation into higher knowledge under his tutelage. She does emerge as a clear-sighted and pragmatic woman by the end of the novel, but by expressly discarding Casaubon’s authority over her life. Her views on Casaubon’s undertaking also undergo a revision. Casaubon is buried under his books, so mortified at the idea of his work not being accepted within the thoroughfares of academic stations that he hardly makes any real progress, stuck in the mire of authorship.

Casaubon’s magnum opus is his *The Key to All Mythologies* which aims at showing that “all the mythical systems or erratic mythical fragments in the world were corruptions of a tradition originally revealed” (31). The Reverend’s work relies on positing the Bible as the stable origin of all mythologies and relegating all other mythologies of ancient civilisations as mere corruptions and derivatives. This absolutist position, according to Eliot, hindered the true reading and understanding of the Bible, bearing oppressively upon any critical investigations of the Bible. It robbed the Bible of all historicity and made it lose all moorings to the world around it by regarding it as transcendental and other-worldly. Eliot was a realist who keenly observed the world around her and whetted ideas against the contemporary materiality of the world and its formative ideals. Casaubon’s work of “flexible conjectures” (693) not only drained the Bible of

its realistic applicability but also demerit histories of other ancient civilisations as being unoriginal and mere corruptions. Casaubon speaks of how heavily his work relied on the works which came before it, his contribution being the effective of arrangement he brought to prior attempts at such inferences. Lisa Bathazar in her critique of Anglican Biblical scholarship in *Middlemarch* points out Will's comments regarding Casaubon's scholarship scantily taking forward the works of men like Bryant. Jacob Bryant, the mythographer, in his work *A New System or Analysis of Ancient Mythology* compared names and places mentioned in the myths of other ancient civilisations to words from the Genesis, aiming to establish it as the Ur-text. Balthazar calls out this awkward equivalence and writes, "Instead of recognising this blending of materials in both the Bible and other ancient narratives, mythographers such as Bryant and *Middlemarch's* Casaubon consider the Bible all history and other texts all mythology" (Balthazar 51).

In attempting to present the Bible as being absolute and the all-encompassing history, it is emptied of any temporality. This very characterisation deems it beyond any contemporary historical study. Edward Said, in his work *Culture and Imperialism*, speaks of such characterisation by positing it within the idea of culture and says- "it entails not only venerating one's own culture but also thinking of it as somehow divorced from, because, transcending, everyday world" (Said xvi). That this is quarantined from worldly effects is precisely the exaltation Eliot finds dangerous. Said alerts his readers to how the most secular of works were littered with the same structures and feelings which drove the imperial conquests. Casaubon's practice also relegates other ancient civilisations which inscribed in non- Hebrew languages like Greek, Persian or Sanskrit as being corrupt derivatives of the one infallible historical account. In trying to straitjacket foreign histories and the myths they engendered as being mere corruptions, Casaubon represents the nineteenth century European preoccupation with de-mystifying cultures which were exotic to them. The "unbroken tradition" which Said considers the logic behind hierarchical stratification which served as impetus to colonial acquisitions. The fact that these forceful usurpations were justified within the thoroughfares of certain chauvinistic Victorian societies reveals just how influential such scholarships can become. The politics of representation comes to the fore here, as Casaubon attempts to show how incorruptible the "original tradition" was. They did this by condemning every quality which was unintelligible to them as being mere aberrations- semblances of the "civilising mission" which judged every

history by the yardstick made to serve European colonial power. Through her handling of *The Key to All Mythologies*, Eliot not only accords historical validity to othered cultures but also redeems myths and their fertile corruptions as valid and necessary.

Religion is not merely theoretical but expands into praxis for Dorothea. Early on in the novel, the narrator remarks that Casaubon did not care about building cottages- Dorothea's most loved ambition, and that "he quickly diverted the talk to the extremely narrow accommodation which was to be had in the dwellings of the ancient Egyptians" (44). He allows no practical purpose to his scholarship and uses it in a manner so pedantic that texts- religious or otherwise, lose their dialectic with history and the society around it. He truly puts in most of his efforts to affectations- "the balanced sing-song neatness of his speech" (21) is rehearsed and perfectly killed into perfection. Dorothea learns how to break away from such pedagogical limbos. For her, learning is deeply embedded in how it adds to the "growing good of the world" (1192) through ordinary acts and not live in the "pretended admission of rules which were never acted on" (37). She is linked the flexibility of a poem, the abundance of meanings and interpretations which the reinvention of mediums allow. When young and noble impulse struggles against social constrictions, there emerges new Therasas and new Antigones which represent and rage against their times. Roger Travis writes, "As Naumann sees in the visual terms of his art and Ladislav sees in the narrative terms of his writing, she (Dorothea) is the embodiment of myth, the corruption which is paradoxically incorruptible- that one day will like Cleopatra be "not corpse-like, even in death" (Travis 377). The trials and tribulations which Dorothea faces early on in her life including her disastrous marriage are a direct effect of her ambitions and the lack of a vessel for them. Her education lacked any real substance or enterprise. She had to unlearn her education and look beyond performance and affectations it valued to find her footing in the world around her.

Dorothea attempts, beyond the prescriptions of Casaubon, to not "deck herself with knowledge- to wear it loose from the nerves and blood that fed her action" (120). She retains her ardent nature and gains a rational insight. Being the realist that Eliot is, she never lets the character of Dorothea assume the hallowed impeccability of faultlessness. She is shown in her faults and virtues, and in doing so Eliot allows Dorothea to escape the angel-witch dichotomy which laces so much of literary pursuits to this day. Dorothea looks beyond her paltry education to curate her own voice. Casaubon's plans are foiled and his hollow academic pursuits and ethos

are revealed for the reader to see. Eliot presents an incisive critique of rarefied academic pursuits and how the masculinist and ethnocentric standards of excellence are oppressive, leading only to dull impasse.

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