

The Approach of Feminist Critics Towards George Eliot:A Critical Study

Dr. Jayanta Mukherjee

Associate Professor & Head,

Department of English,

Belda College

Belda-721424

West Bengal, India

jayantamukherjee1975@gmail.com

Abstract

The primary aim of this paper is to study the approach of feminist critics towards George Eliot. It is true that her human rather than gender-specific amelioration is widely misunderstood by the feminist critics. There is no question that George Eliot shared the feminist movement's intolerance of the exclusion of women from knowledge and educational opportunities, as well as its resentment at the inequalities between men and women that were inscribed in legal and political institutions. Yet George Eliot's support for reform was as cautious as it was ambivalent. At the height of her fame she still refused to take a radical or ideologically partisan stance on the issue of women's rights, partly on the grounds of its complexity, and partly out of a belief that pronouncements on the woman question did not come well from her. Her reluctance publicly and unequivocally to state her position, or to give active and open support to the campaign for female rights, was apparently in part the result of her compromised social position as the partner of George Henry Lewes and a fear, perhaps, that support from a woman who had lost social respect and reputation would endanger rather than promote the female cause. Yet George Eliot's agnosticism on the 'woman question' and her aloofness from the woman's movement seems more squarely to find its basis in her sense of the specificity of female talents. In *Woman in France* she attempted to define the special qualities she believed women of all ages and cultures to possess by virtue of their distinctively feminine condition. Her resistance to female suffrage

and to thorough-going equality for men and women stems from a belief in sexual difference founded on biology, maternity and domesticity, whose contribution was not confined to the domestic sphere, but which extended in its social and moral benefits across an entire culture.

Key Words: *Criticism, Feminist, Woman, Gender, Victorian.*

Commenting on George Eliot's concern about the predicament of women, Camilla Nelson writes in her article *The Woman called George Eliot* : 'Dorothea's quest for a substantial and meaningful life has resonated with the successive generations of feminists'.(Nelson Camilla, *The Woman called George Eliot*, *The Statesman*, 08 December,2019).Studying George Eliot's novels from the perspective of the role of gender is a recent critical phenomenon. For a long while feminist critics had relegated her work to the realm of a woman who writes like a man. Critics have often described George Eliot as the best example of a nineteenth-century woman writer's ability to combine a male intellect with a female heart. This appears to indicate a gender bias in the assumption that intellect is a male prerogative while the heart is the female domain. It is encouraging that feminist critics have now felt the need to redress such imbalances of attitude and have turned a searching eye on George Eliot's novels leading to a fresh appraisal of her work with a focus on gender issues. By mid-nineteenth century the condition of women question had emerged with a considerable amount of emphasis coinciding with a phenomenal rise in the number of women writers. Most of these novelists shared the common anxiety of a woman writer attempting to enter a securely guarded male preserve. It was recognized that independent means were essential for woman to achieve a certain amount of freedom and self-expression. Education and a well-developed mind were thought to be necessary qualifications if woman was to rise above her prescribed lot to have any authority over her self. The mid-Victorian women writers were thus, concerned with the definition of feminine role-models and their specific function in society. Elaine Showalter points to the fact that women beginning their writing careers in the mid-nineteenth century found themselves in a double-bind: first, the need to establish their professional identities as writers and second, to define fictional ideals which would be acceptable to a society undergoing changes in several major spheres. Such changes were daily providing new icons, new shapes for the self, new sources of belief with regard to women in the nineteenth century.

The anxiety is clearly epitomized in the male pseudonym Mary Anne Evans adopted as a writer. Yet, given the fact that by the early nineteenth century Jane Austen, the Bronte sisters and Elizabeth Gaskell were recognized novelists in their own right, it is difficult to accept the need for a male pseudonym for Mary Anne Evans. Was it because she was one of the earliest female authors to enter a well-guarded male domain by joining the *Westminster Review* as an assistant editor? In fact Gordon Height claimed that she writes like a man.

In *Sexual Politics* - Kate Millett's early comment Dorothea's predicament in *Middlemarch* is an eloquent plea that a fine, mind be allowed an occupation; but it goes no further than petition' (Millett, Page 139, 1970), foreshadows later criticisms of George Eliot's work made, for example, by Elaine Showalter. who, in drawing a comparison between Charlotte Bronte's rebellious Jane Eyre and George Eliot's self-destructive Maggie Tulliver, notes that 'Maggie is the progenitor of a heroine who identifies passivity and renunciation with womanhood, who finds it easier, more natural, and in a mystical way more satisfying, to destroy herself than to live in a world without opium or fantasy, where she must fight to survive' (Showalter 1977: 131). On closer analysis, the sense of unease felt by feminist critics in relation to George Eliot is not perhaps as surprising as it might first appear: although Marian Evans was prepared to challenge the moral assumptions of ultimately patriarchal Victorian orthodoxy in her private life, in her capacity as a writer of fiction for which she, very significantly adopted a masculine pseudonym, she pursued a moral agenda of a conservative kind. Even the most dynamic and independent-minded of her heroines end up either, like Dinah Morris or Dorothea Brooke, as happy wives and mothers, giving up their public roles and focusing instead on their domestic responsibilities, or, like Janet Dempster or Romola, adopting sexless quasi maternal roles in a spirit of penitence or voluntary self-sacrifice, while at the same time those of George Eliot's women who are prepared to rebel, or at least to assert their independence, are inevitably punished, either literally, like Hetty Sorrel and, in a different way. Maggie Tulliver or metaphorically, like Armgart or Alcharisi. It was not until the publication of Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's seminal book *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination* (1980), that feminist critics began to uncover the tensions underlying this seemingly complacent arrangement: as Gilbert and Gubar argue, George Eliot's fascination with the theme of (self) destruction is associated precisely with her inability to articulate in her fiction, in a direct way, the tension between her rational and her emotional sides: 'For, as an agnostic setting out

to write about the virtues of clerical life, a fallen woman praising the wife's service, a childless writer celebrating motherhood, an intellectual writing what she called experiments in life in celebration of womanly feeling, Eliot becomes entangled in contradictions that she can only resolve through acts of vengeance against her own characters, violent retributions that become more prominent when contrasted with her professed purposes as a novelist. (Gilbert and Gubar 1979: 479)

The first full-length study of George Eliot to adopt an explicitly feminist stance was Gillian Beer's 1986 volume in the Key Women Writers series. Not surprisingly, given an earlier feminist critics skepticism about George Eliot's feminist credentials, the book is an attempt to redress the critical balance by demonstrating that her work 'helped in some measure to bring into question assumptions about male/female polarizations, about women, and about the awkwardly pre-emptive forms "womanly" and "womanhood" ' (Beer 1986: Page 1), and that 'her presence at the centre of literary culture in the past hundred years is of immense worth to other women, and her achievement can be belittled only at our own cost' (Beer 1986: Page 1). As befits the first major study to deal with George Eliot specifically as a woman writer, Beer's book does not restrict its focus to the interpretation of the novels but considers the broader context within which they were written: some of the most valuable parts of this study are those devoted to the discussion of Marian Evans's response to the mid-to late-nineteenth-century debate about the woman question (Beer 1986: 152-84) and to the position she took on the literary works of her women contemporaries (Beer 1986: 30-51). Though accepting that the novelist was not a feminist in the modern sense of the term, Beer underlines Marian Evans's familiarity with the objectives and methods of the Victorian women's movement as well as the fact that she shared her feminist friends concern about the lack of educational and professional opportunities for women, a view expressed most explicitly in *Middlemarch*. It is also in that novel that George Eliot enters most forcefully into ideological debate with her female contemporaries, rejecting both the concept of the renunciation of sexual love as an acceptable price to be paid for the achievement of social independence and the kind of simplistic determinism involved in the concept of natural law and idea of biological motherhood as a defining aspect of womanhood.

Jenny Uglow's study of *George Eliot* (1987) usefully combines biography and criticism: it opens with a more or less traditional account of Marian Evans's childhood and youth but, as

it reaches the moment of the emergence of George Eliot the novelist, the focus shifts to the analysis of her works. The biographical chapters trace the tensions and contradictions involved in the future writer's pursuit of her intellectual ambitions against the background of the conservative environment in which she grew up and about which she remained, throughout her life, deeply nostalgic. They also recognise the complexity of her position as, on the one hand, a leading female thinker and writer prepared to rebel against the social conventions of her time and, on the other hand, a profoundly vulnerable individual in desperate need of support and reassurance from others. The book's feminist slant becomes prominent in the chapter on "George Eliot" and the Woman Question in the 1850s, in which Uglow discusses Marian Evans's periodical essays. (Works, pp. 91-3) as signaling her developing interest in some of the issues that will become the central concern of her works of fiction, the *women's* (italics mine) difficulty of achieving independence without losing the possibility of sexual passion and family life. (Uglow 1987: Page 80)

These themes are then discussed in relation to the novels and stories; Uglow demonstrates how, as George Eliot's career progresses, her interests in women's possibilities expand to include issues such as the nature of motherhood and its social and psychological implications. The book offers some unexpected insights and evaluations: thus, for example, *Rotnola* is praised as 'Eliot's', most striking exposition of the role of women' (Uglow 1987: Page 161). (Uglow 1987: 174) Uglow concludes her describing George Eliot's developing perception of the role of women in modern society and of the relationship between the sexes in the following terms:

'It is because of her exploration of the complementary nature of masculine and feminine qualities (within individuals of both sexes as well as within societies), and her subtle reworking of the images of the good daughter, sister, wife and mother, that her novels remain so suggestive and disturbing, particularly to women readers/She uses the metaphors of separate spheres, not to justify women's restriction to the realm of 'reeling' and domesticity, but to argue that the sympathy and sense of responsibility for others traditionally associated with 'maternity', and the passion and intuitive vision associated with 'female irrationality' should be brought to bear in the 'masculine' spheres of action and judgment. While women will be better able to achieve their full potential if they are given access to good education and to professional work, so men will grow ti they are free to nurture and care - like Silas, Rufus Lyon and Daniel Deronda. If this could be achieved, society might replace a

repressive, rule-bound ethic with one that is flexible, imaginative, and able to cater for humanity in its infinite variety, (Uglow, 1987, 250).

Dorothea Barrett's Study of Vocation and Desire' George Eliot's Heroines (1989) attempts to bring together biographical, feministic chronological analytical approaches to the study of George Eliot's fiction. Barrett takes issue with the conventional perception of the writer as a Victorian symbol and sets out to demonstrate, through her analysis of the novels' central women characters, how their creator's complex and passionate personality comes across in the narrator's treatment of the female protagonists. This book stresses the ambivalent, polyphonic nature of the discourse of George Eliot's novels, stressing that 'the divisions between the radical and the conservative, the passionate and the intellectual unconsciously betrayed and the consciously contrived in George Eliot's work are not static but dynamic' (Barrett 1989: 32), and that 'their constant struggle, their mark of ultimate resolution, is itself a victory for the radical, passionate, and unconscious' (Barrett 1989: 32-33).

As pointed out by Jan Jedrzejewski that the focus of Kristin Brady's *Monograph* (1992) in the Women Writers series (Jan Jedrzejewski, p.133). The focus of the book is consist of the gender politics: Brady discusses the various ways in which the patriarchal structures of social, economic and cultural life of Victorian Britain influenced the writer's life, how they are reflected - and, importantly, undermined - in her works and how they continue to influence the perception of her achievement in the modern world. Brady opens her discussion with an account of the way in which patriarchal presuppositions about gender characteristics and consequent gender roles influence biographical interpretations of George Eliot. Infact Jan Jedrzejewski in his book *George Eliot* chronologically studies the feminist criticism of George Eliot works and explains that how the perspectives of feminist critics have evolved over the years.

Sheila Lahiri Chowdhury rightly points out in her article '*The Reclining Ariadne : A Gender Reading of Gorge Eliot's Middlemarch*' that feminist critics overlook Eliot's deep concern for women's position and roll in society. The reference to 'Christian Antigone' in the prelude of *Middlemarch* is perfectly valid since in the *Prelude* to the novel George Eliot provides a female role-model of martyrdom in Saint Theresa of Avila. She was the founder of a convent where she pursued an extreme form of meditation- and ultimately embraced martyrdom.

Thereafter Eliot poses the problem with reference to the later born Theresas, who are helped by no coherent social faith and order to dedicate their resources. Thus, Dorothea finds herself in the male dominated society of a provincial town entirely bereft of any cause to which she can devote herself. A nature as ardent and passionate as Dorothea's will always lack the congenial atmosphere in which her latent qualities can flower. Nina Auerbach argues, 'The Victorian woman, when presented in her most exalted state was also a victim'. 'Auerbach Nina, *Women and Demon : The Life of a Victorian Myth*, Cambridge, Mass., 1982, p.15)'. Thus, Eliot appears to make a conscious effort to indicate the painful lack of opportunities and the constricted circumstances within which women had to operate during the nineteenth century.

In the *Finale* of the novel, Eliot's reference to Antigone is suggestive of another role-model, the female rebel figure in defiance against authority. Apparently, Dorothea Brooke's role in Middlemarch society is to be explored within the parameters set by these two female figures. Ironically, Eliot selects the two female icons who became sacrificial victims of patriarchal religious and social norms; one a willing martyr to her faith and the other to the principle of justice. Feminists naturally complain of the negative choices offered by George Eliot to her heroines. Such a conclusion, however, fails to take into account the subtle female discourse which presents the tragedy of women entrapped in a position of no choice, precisely the situation the author has set out to explore in *Middlemarch*.

The Ariadne passage read differently provides an alternative role-model. According to Greek legend Ariadne was the Minoan princess who fell in love with Theseus and helped him to find his way out of the labyrinth after his killing of the Minotaur. Thus, Ariadne in the mythic sense plays the role of a preserver, one who provides the way out of a maze and saves the life of the hero. Characteristically the means she uses to help the male hero to escape from the labyrinth is the thread traditionally employed by women to weave fabric. There are two alternative conclusions to the Ariadne legend: one, Theseus takes her away from Crete but abandons her on the island of Naxos where she dies of sorrow during childbirth; the other legend recounts her being found and saved through marriage by Dionysus. Dorothea appears to play out both the versions in her life - first when she attempts to help Casaubon to find his way out of the maze of his *Key to Mythologies* but is thereafter abandoned by him; then when

she is rescued by Will Ladislaw, the outsider who marries her and finally carries her away from Middlemarch.

George Eliot's emphasis on wide, and human rather than gender specific amelioration is present in the dual narrative of Dorothea and Lydgate: 'It might be pointed out to those who ... see in *Middlemarch* chiefly the drama of a woman's failure that the novel is concerned almost equally [in Lydgate] with the thwarting of a man's efforts' (Ashton, 1983, 71).

Eliot wanted wider opportunities for women, but believed firmly in innate gender differences and had some reservations on this score concerning higher education for women, feeling that there lies just that kernel of truth in the vulgar alarm of men lest women should be 'unsexed' : 'We can no more afford to part with that exquisite type of gentleness, tenderness, possible maternity suffusing a woman's being with affectionateness, which makes what we mean by the feminine character, than we can afford to part with the human love, the mutual subjection of soul between a man and a woman'. (G.S. Haight (ed.), *The George Eliot's Letters*, Vol – IV, New Haven, 1956, p.468).

Many of Eliot's friends supported the movement pressing for female suffrage in the 1860s but she did not sign the petition. In a letter to John Morley, a supporter of this movement, she wrote in 1867:

'As a fact of mere zoological evolution, woman seems to me to have the worse share in existence. But for that very reason I would the more contend that in the moral evolution we have 'an art which does mend nature'. It is the function of love in the largest sense, to mitigate the harshness of all fatalities. And in the thorough recognition of that worse share, I think there is a basis for a sublimer resignation in women and a more regenerating tenderness in man' (ibid, p. 364).

By the end of the novel Esther seems to embody this 'feminine character' (Eliot, George. *Felix Holt*, The Radical. Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Edition Limited, 1997, p.VIII) and Felix shows 'a more regenerating tenderness' (ibid, p. VIII). Thus while reading her nobles minutely we find that perhaps the feminist critics were quite unsympathetic towards George Eliot. It is not true that George Eliot was not concerned about women's development.

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