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Key Themes Explored Through A Feminist Lens In A Selection Of George Eliot's Books

Dr. Reetu Khurana (Sardana)

Assistant Professor, Dept. of English, Dayanand College, Hisar (Haryana), India

ABSTRACT : The following is a brief examination of the status of women in English society throughout the nineteenth century, using Mary Anne Evans's "Middlemarch" as a basis. George Eliot was the pen name of author Mary Anne Evans (1819–1880). One of the most important works by Eliot on the subject is Middlemarch. The essential concerns of Mary Anne's life—a woman who refused to accept gender limitations—can be better understood by drawing parallels to Dorothea Brooke, the protagonist of the book. She was unable to portray her characters as liberated from societal limitations since her life was consumed with the relentless pursuit of freedom and gender equality, despite the immense agony she endured. The female protagonists in George Eliot's works are often portrayed as helpless victims of patriarchy, which has led some of her and our contemporary writers to accuse her of being anti-feminist. This article provides a concise evaluation and commentary on George Eliot's female characters and her own experiences as a woman.

KEYWORDS: English literature, 19th century, George Eliot, women's position, social constraints, emancipation, patriarchal society, Middlemarch novel, Dorothea Brooke

One of the most prominent British women writers of literary realist fiction in the nineteenth century was George Eliot, whose given name was Mary Anne (Marian) Evans. At its core, "Middlemarch" is a masterwork of the new novelist genre, showcasing her talent as a writer and, more importantly, her ability to set her moral ambitions against a crucial historical backdrop. The events of "Middlemarch" take place in England between 1828 and 1830, just before the Reform Act of 1832, according to Eliot. The married journalist George Henry Lewes, who aspired to be recognized as a genuine scientist, lived with Eliot, inspired her to write most of her works, and she inherited his name, George. It is well-known that George Eliot was the pen name under which Mary Anne's writings were published. After Lewes passed away, she became engaged to John Cross, a younger man, and they were married. Marian Evans Cross was her new name when she had it legally changed.

Although Eliot was a trailblazing feminist who defied societal norms in her personal life, she rejected the idea of female protagonists in her writing. The fictional women in her works would never dare to do what she did in real life. She expresses her notion about the position of women in "Middlemarch" via the character of Dorothea Brooke by skillfully and strongly using the characteristics of the realism novel in Britain. In an imperfect social situation, this character's convictions, tremendous faith, and illusions are shown in a sarcastic light. In both the Prelude and the Finale, she is shown as a more devout woman, similar to Saint Theresa. This thesis argues that Eliot intended for Dorothea to be shown as someone who had a decent heart and a desire to have a positive impact on the people around her. She will be shown as a supportive wife and mother at the conclusion of the book.

Considering the historical context and the expansion of the British Empire after the Reform Act, a strong feeling of national identity fueled by a belief in global supremacy was increasingly prevalent. The status of the society was also poised to undergo some major changes. The middle class had more influence in the nineteenth century than in the previous era. Pam Morris (2003) states that "the Reform Act extended the parliamentary democracy to the middle class and a large number of working-class men in 1867" (2004: chap.4). Various characters, including Mr. Brooke, who aspires to join parliament, exhibit the same sociopolitical traits in Eliot's work. Rosamond Vincy is another case in point; she hopes to assimilate by marrying Tertius Lydgate, who belongs to a higher socioeconomic stratum.

Not only that, but George Eliot's goal in writing "Middlemarch, A Study of Provincial Life"—the very subtitle—is to reveal the intricate interior lives of each individual. George Eliot's female characters "never take part in

politics as their attempts would be futile as subsumed in their responsibilities to men" (2001:139-140), according to Nancy Henry in George Levine (2001), therefore the changes did not account for women's political roles. Dorothea Brooke, the protagonist, will be the primary subject of this article.

One young lady who is wealthy is Dorothea Brooke. "Dorothea, with all her eagerness to know the truths of life, retained very childlike ideas about marriage.[...] The delightful marriage must be that where your husband was a sort of father and could teach you even Hebrew if you wished it" (2003:10), as seen in Eliot's advice to the reader about Dorothea's character in the novel's early pages regarding marriage. Dorothea, in contrast to her sister Celia, who is preoccupied with worldly possessions like jewellery, wants nothing more than to devote herself fully to her studies (a theme that runs throughout the novel). Such traits are indicative of an omniscient narrator's point of view, which allows them to comment on characters and address the reader directly. Eliot takes a sarcastic stance in this section because, as readers will see throughout the book, Dorothea's marriage to Mr. Casaubon ends up being a failure of her marriage plan. Dorothea spends much of her honeymoon in Rome by herself. Due to his lack of faith in her abilities, her spouse excludes her from his job. As the story progresses, it seems as if Dorothea's life intersects with Lydgate's. The scientist who seemed to despise the locals of Middlemarch, Lydgate, arrived to the town for research purposes. In addition to his involvement in politics and medical work, he marries Rosamond Vincy, a class-obsessed, shallow lady. But then why did Eliot start writing about Lydgate instead of Dorothea? For starters, as George Levine points out (2001), her multiplot work offers a variety of people new lenses through which to see the world.

"[...] represents George Eliot's recognition that no single perspective can encompass reality and that for realism to do its job, it must allow for its incompleteness and disallow the possibility that any single person - the narrator included - can authoritatively interpret reality" (2001:15).

Because of this, Eliot demonstrates her mastery of narrative style and the authority she grants her narratives in describing reality once again. No one perspective can do justice to the breadth and depth of the reforms' impact on English culture. The political differences are connected to Lydgate's character, according to Eliot. Keep in mind that Eliot originally intended for Lydgate to be the protagonist of this work, but that Mrs. Brooke eventually took centre stage. In this excerpt from Eliot's novels (1871 and 1872), the reader encounters Tertius Lydgate in Book 2.

"There are few things better worth the pains in a provincial town like this, said Lydgate. A fine fever hospital in addition to the old infirmary might be the nucleus of a medical school here, when once we get our medical reforms; and what would do more for medical education than the spread of such schools over the country?" (2003:124).

Here Lydgate lays forth his goals for his study endeavour and explains why he came to Middlemarch to complete it. Because of his flawed nature, he will fail and be accused of murder. First and foremost, Eliot wanted to use this figure to paint a picture of his inner life and actions within the context of his time. Lydgate hopes that science will eventually uncover the building blocks of life. Because successful novelists rely on their expertise, Eliot connected Lydgate to her own life and extensive involvement with modern scientific thought¹. To paraphrase Diana Postlethwaite, "[...]The inhabitants of Middlemarch [...] will be viewed by the microscopic eye of a "scientific" novelist who... cares to know the history of man, and how the mysterious mixture behaves under the varying experiments of Time" (2001:103), referring to George Levine (2001) and Eliot's perspective. Besides everything else, it will drag Lydgate into politics, which is another opportunity for the reader to see Eliot's perspective on the role of women and men in politics. She stays out of politics because of the accusations of adultery levelled against her by the married man Lewes. Rosamond, who was formerly married to Lydgate, does not assist him in escaping from the political quagmire; Dorothea, on the other hand, works on repairing cottages with her uncle but avoids becoming involved in politics. It is worth noting what Nancy Henry had to say on Eliot's use of politics in the book in George Levine's (2001) analysis:

"George Eliot viewed politics in the narrow sense as merely an integral part of the larger social tableau. The historical conditions in which Lydgate, Tito and Felix move are drawn with such care to show us that politics, whether local or national, call forth and test moral character" (2001:139).

In addition, Nancy Henry elaborates on the next page, stating that the female characters in Eliot's work are united by their duties to males, as she views them as superior to political actors. In light of this sentence, it is clear that Eliot elevates Dorothea above Lydgate, despite the fact that the writer views Lydgate as a central character in the work. Dorothea will assist Lydgate in transforming his intricate financial situation, so he crosses him with her. The novel's moral dilemma and Eliot's intended message about women's dominance in that historical context are both centred on Dorothea and her position in the plot. George Levine (2001) cites Kate Flint as saying that

"[...] despite women's yearnings to be someone, or to do something which reaches beyond the circumstances in which they find themselves, she is continually aware that her responsibility is to portray them – and men – in the "imperfect social state" (M, "Finale":784) in which they actually lived" (2001:161-2).

This is a crucial phrase since it clarifies Eliot's perspective and the characteristics that she uses to characterize Dorothea throughout the book. At the beginning of the book, Dorothea's personality, attractiveness, style of dress, goals, and aspirations are described in great detail. The following is an excerpt from Eliot (1871–1872),

"Miss Brooke had that kind of beauty which seems to be thrown into relief by poor dress. Her hand and wrist were so finely formed that she could wear sleeves not less bare of style than those in which the Blessed Virgin appeared to Italian painters; and her profile as well as her stature and bearing seemed to gain the more dignity from her plain garments, which by the side of the provincial fashion gave her the impressiveness of a fine quotation from the Bible, - or from one of our elder poets, - in a paragraph of to-day's newspaper." (2003:7).

Right from the start, the author zeroes in on the novel's central theme and walks the reader through it. It is a hallmark of realism literature and narrative conventions. "But how is the character effect achieved? Barthes ascribes this function to the semic code which he also calls the voice of the person" (2004: chap. 5), according to Pam Morris's (2003) definition of "the character effect" based on arguments from Barthes and the semiotic code of storytelling. Morris argues that the manner in which Eliot began her narrative by establishing Dorothea Brooke's true name was, taken as a whole, a significant addition to the protagonist. Morris adds, quoting Barthes once again, that "[...] is pre-eminently the Proper Name that functions ideologically to sustain belief in human identity as unique, coherent and individual" (2004: chap. 5). Because of Eliot's deft use of the aforementioned characteristics, the reader is drawn straight into Mrs. Brooke's persona. Another excerpt from the novel's opening pages where Eliot informs the reader that Dorothea is different from the other female characters due to her education is this one: Eliot (1871-2),

"Dorothea knew many passages of Pascal's Pensées and of Jeremy Taylor by hear; and to her the destinies of mankind, seen by the light of Christianity. [...] she, the elder of the sisters, was not yet twenty, and they had both been educated, since they were about twelve years old and had lost their parents, on plans at once narrow and promiscuous, first in an English family and afterwards in a Swiss family at Lausanne, their bachelor uncle and guardian trying in this way to remedy the disadvantages of their orphaned condition." (2003:8).

It is important to note that Mary Anne Evans really accomplished this in her own life. Here is the correct way to mention her. Dorothea ought to have gotten a degree and done her homework as well. An "amalgam of the multiple facets of a knowledgeable and troubled woman: the avant-garde intellectual, the learned, ironic, witty, and also a translator" is how George Eliot is described by George Levine (2001:5). According to Kate Flint in George Levine (2001:162), Eliot gives Dorothea the same insatiable need for knowledge as her only discernible female concern: education. The point of Eliot's work is not to make a political statement about women's roles in society or to glorify Dorothea as a heroine; rather, it is to teach us that women did not have the freedom to speak their minds in the past. Rosemary Ashton (1994) states in her Introduction to "Middlemarch" that she could not endorse women's freedom in general since "she had freed herself from the usual constraints in her real life" (2003: xvii).

Religion is also closely associated with the woman as a figure. "Her women are in search of a vision, of a faith that might sustain and give their lives purpose" (2001:119), according to Barry Qualls in George Levine (2001), quoting Eliot's works, which reveal that the author lived a life outside from Christianity. Dorothea is like the Virgin Mary in that she strives to aid everyone around her; some say that this makes her feel more connected to God. When

discussing Eliot's role in George Levine's (2001) work, Barry Qualls emphasized that "[...] she needed the poet's sanctification of human love as a religion. This sanctification was also the work of her novels" (2001:120). In one scene, Caleb Garth is going to be describing to Mrs. Garth how Dorothea's comments in Eliot(1871-2) reflect God's kindness and compassion.

"[...]You would like to hear her speak, Susan. She speaks in such plain words, and a voice like music. Bless me! It reminds me of bits in the Messiah – and straightway there appeared a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying" (2003:552).

Eliot gives "power" to her work by depicting religious symbols. According to George Levine (2001), Barry Qualls quotes a line in the novel where Lydgate describes Dorothea as having a heart big enough to accommodate the Virgin Mary. He goes on to say that Dorothea saves him, even if it's from a life of unfulfilled dreams spent with Rosamond Vincy (2001:127). Lydgate gets himself into a lot of debt throughout the story. Lydgate has lofty goals in life and is terrified of losing Rosamond, his wife. Eliot, the author, portrays the middle class as a new social category, fraught with complexity and hardship, during the Reform Bill years by highlighting Lydgate's dread of not succeeding in life's ambitions and as a spouse. But now Eliot is back on track and concentrating on the woman's part; Dorothea is going to assist Lydgate in paying off his obligations.

First, irony is a hallmark of both Eliot's story and the Victorian era's literary canon. Returning to the plot, Eliot (1871-2) expertly conveyed Dorothea's point of view in a pivotal paragraph about her playing and her desire to aid the Lydgates:

"It is true that a woman may venture on some efforts of sympathy which would hardly succeed if we men undertook them, said Mr Farebrother. [...] Surely, a woman is bound to be cautious and listen to those who know the world better than she does, said Sir James. [...] Yes, yes, my dear, said Mr Brooke. It is easy to go too far, you know. You must not let your ideas run away with you. And as to being in a hurry to put money into schemes – it won't do, you know" (2003:735).

By narrating the story in a way that draws the reader in, Eliot condemns a society undergoing change without elevating women's status, as told via Mr. Farebrother, Sir James, and Mr. Brooke. Additionally, Eliot juxtaposes her protagonist Dorothea with her sister Celia on the next page of the book (Eliot 1871-2 [2003:736]). Despite the fact that her husband is behaving inappropriately, Celia confronts the kind of woman who submits to her husband's authority. Dorothea, on the other hand, is adamantly opposed to the concept; she claims she surrendered to her husband out of sympathy for him, but that the death of her spouse really gave her the freedom she so much needed. Here we see Eliot's stance against the patriarchal culture that forbids women to live independently. As a matter of fact, Marian faced cultural rejection in her personal life after marrying John Cross.

Also, Eliot can't flesh out the concept of contrasting two female characters in a same work. She draws parallels between Rosamond Vincy's and Dorothea's female characters. While Tertius Lydgate's wife Rosamond is unable to aid him, Dorothea realizes that her husband really does not want her to. Eliot first presents Rosamond as an attractive young woman in his works (1871 and 1872),

"Only a few children in Middlemarch looked blonde by the side of Rosamond, and the slim figure displayed by her riding-habit had delicate undulations. In fact, most men in Middlemarch, except her brothers held that Miss Vincy was the best girl in the world, and some called her an angel" (2003:112).

The reader learns that Rosamond is a shallow girl who adheres to the notion of a woman being as weak and insignificant as she would become in the view of her first husband, Lydgate, as a lady who is unable to provide too much when it comes to her outlook on life. In her "Finale" (1871-2), Eliot said that Lydgate had once referred to her as "his basil plant"; the basil plant thrived only on the brains of a man who had been slain. "Each of them lived in their separate lives" (George Levine, 2001:164), according to Kate Flint, who claims that Lydgate and Rosamond's marriage would fail because Lydgate blames himself for blending his private and public lives, therefore he never shared his life with Rosamond. After Lydgate dies of diphtheria, Rosamond has a second shot at a "quiet life" via her marriage to an

old doctor who cared for her and her kids. So, up until the very end of the book, Rosamond's character doesn't change. Both Eliot's opinion on that character and Lydgate's declaration of admiration for Dorothea remain unchanged.

"She seems to have what I never saw in any woman before - a fountain of friendship towards men [...]" (Eliot 1871-2 [2003:769]), Lydgate says of Dorothea, a lovely and caring lady who promises to aid him financially. Dorothea have a power that other women lack; yet, author Eliot does not want her to play the role of heroine and instead claims that she is merely trying to assist Lydgate's family. As a result, Lydgate holds Dorothea in high esteem. Let us now turn to Dorothea's married life and how Eliot's persona stands in stark contrast to all that she describes about her time with Mr. Casaubon. Dorothea fell in love with Mr. Casaubon's knowledge and speech style, and they were married. Her ideal life is that of a happy woman who supports her spouse by making the most of her talents and abilities. In Eliot's (1871-2) lyrical mastery, Dorothea describes Mr. Casaubon as the most fascinating guy she has ever encountered.

"Here was a man who could understand the higher inward life, and with whom there could be some spiritual communion; nay, who could illuminate principle with the widest knowledge: a man whose learning almost amounted to a proof whatever he believed" (2003:22).

While humorously presenting the reader with the image of Mr. Casaubon—who never loved the young Dorothea—she also conveys Dorothea's inner ideas on helping others. According to Kate Flint in George Levine (2001:164), Mr. Casaubon saw their marriage as "a born of convention" since they were both from the same social class, had strong moral character, and understood one other well. Once again, Eliot is subtly incorporating social rank traditions into the story. While on their Rome honeymoon, Dorothea realizes that Mr. Casaubon would never accept her as she is. While Mr. Casaubon is preoccupied with his job, he pays little attention to how his wife feels. By having Mr. Casaubon die, Eliot "saves" Dorothea and demonstrates that she will find happiness at last. But Dorothea has another obstacle to overcome before she can marry Will: the fact that she has to deal with the loss of the property her husband left her.

"Dorothea is going to be married again [...] Dorothea is quite determined - it is no use opposing. I put it strongly to her. [...] she can act as she likes, you know" (2003:815)—the words of Mr. Brooke, Dorothea's uncle who reared her and her sister Celia—that Eliot uses to highlight Dorothea's character. That "Dorothea did not want to have possessions but wanted to act" is shown by Kate Flint's comment in George Levine (2001:165). Since she had no desire for social status or financial wealth, she marries Will and has no regrets about the decision because of their deep love for one another. As Dorothea reunites with Will, Eliot paints a vivid picture of her in a passage from the novel. No matter how much he loves Dorothea, Will cannot marry her because of his poverty. "Oh, I cannot bear it - my heart will break, [...] the tears rising and falling in an instant: 'I don't mind about poverty - I hate my wealth.'" (2003:811) is Dorothea's last statement. "I want so little - no new clothes" is another way Eliot paints a picture of her personality. Dorothea is willing to marry Will Ladislaw despite his financial situation since she has given up the estate that Mr. Casaubon gave to her before he died. Because of their love, a child will be born.

Will Ladislaw is only addressed towards the conclusion of the piece since only Dorothea could be happy with him. She subtly reveals her own character while serving her spouse with the utmost devotion. It should be noted, however, that in keeping with Eliot's intention, Dorothea was ultimately associated with societal norms, just as women in real life behaved. Eliot was cognizant of the challenges women faced at that period as she had worked for their independence. This article reports, describes, and cites the works in the bibliography to demonstrate how Dorothea Brooke's character exemplifies the constraints of functioning in a flawed social system where women were limited to the roles of wife and mother. No, Dorothea Brooke will not be a heroine; Eliot's words bury all the efforts to have a revolutionary woman break free of societal norms. Eliot says in "Finale" that Dorothea was a lady whose presence had an incalculably diffusive impact on everybody around her (1871-2, 2003:838).

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