LITERATURE AND ETHICS: GEORGE ELIOT’S THE MILL ON THE FLOSS

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ABSTRACT

Literary artists carry the beacon in their hands to guide the society at large throwing light on the ethical, moral and philosophical standards of their native society. Literature is a throw of the dice, an irresponsibility of the author that carries a grave weight of responsibility. Ethics are an intrinsic part of literary art; literature attends to the interaction among the ethical dimensions of the telling and those of the told as well as to the ethical positions the literary artist wishes the readers to adopt and those readers bring with them. Accepting the philosophical and methodological challenges presented by authors from Aristotle to Jakobson and Derrida, this paper explores a theoretical framework for thinking about the enmeshment of literature and ethics, drawing especially on George Eliot’s The Mill on the Floss. Since British novels achieve the magnificent achievements because of its intense realistic critique significance and human caring particularly, George Eliot has laid certain foundations for establishing moral standards in her work. The Mill on the Floss becomes a part of the moral traditions that the paradigm of moral narration of Eliot’s novel forms.

KEYWORDS: ethical trends, transcend, amalgamate, social responsibility.

INTRODUCTION

Literary artists play a vital role in shaping the public opinion, as truth transcends time, trends and space. The impact of writer’s ideas cannot fail to influence masses at large. Thus the writers shoulder social responsibility in building the opinion of the society. Through their writings, they exhibit the moral, the religious and the ethical trends which purposely lay sound foundations of any society. Some artists play with words, some scatter themselves to blur out a stream of consciousness, and some artists agonize over every word as if it is a tooth to give up. But if we take a mature view, we shall mostly wield words like an expert to accomplish a greater task.
NIETZSCHE AND ETHICS IN LITERATURE

Ethics and literature are mutually interdependent as we take the views of Nietzsche in this context. “Nietzsche subordinates the ethics to the aesthetic, humanity to the dream of a something higher. Since Nietzsche has no sense whatsoever of what will succeed man, this is no more than the ambition for his own writings, the fortunes of his own name. It is a throw of the dice, an irresponsibility that carries a grave weight of responsibility. ------Nietzsche thus pledges himself to whatever is said or done in his name. His signature (in other words, the contract he establishes with his texts and readership) thus differs from Rushdie’s, in that he holds himself accountable for whatever (mis)readings are made of his work. ‘How lightly’, he says, ‘one takes the burden of an excuse of oneself so long as one is, accountable for nothing, but I am accountable. In this sense, he admitted that his irresponsibility, yet signed his name to that irresponsibility, made an ethically responsible acknowledgement of an ethically irresponsible act. Nietzsche courted this risk. Like Blake’s Isaiah he cared not for consequences, but wrote, said joyous yes to whatever might visit or intrude upon his legacy. He called himself to his own tribunal, wished as much to answer to the future as he would have the future answer to him.’

ETHICS IN GEORGE ELIOT’S MILL ON THE FLOSS

Almost all Victorian novelists appear to be motivated by two things: a strong intellectual tendency to analyze the problems of life, and a need to teach, that is, to explain the method by which these problems may be solved. The novels of the age are not concerned with artistic ideal of writing and in fact, they aim at moral instructions. In George Eliot, both these tendencies amalgamate. She is more consciously preacher and moralizer than any of contemporaries. All her works establish the ethics, the moral law as the basis of human society. In depicting her portraits in her novels, she conforms to the moral code of the society. She minutely explains the motives of her characters and the moral lessons to be learned from them.

What interests George Eliot is the development of the soul, its growth or decline as we come to know it more and more. Her portraits grow from weakness to strength or go from strength to weakness influenced by what they think and act. In Romola, for example, Tito degenerates steadily because he follows his selfish impulses, while Romola rows into beauty and strength with every act of self-renunciation. ‘In these two characters, Tito and Romola, we have an epitome of George Eliot’s moral teaching. The principle of law was much in the air the Victorian Era.’

‘With George Eliot law is like fate; it overwhelms personal freedom and inclination. Moral law was to her as inevitable, as automatic, as gravitation. Tito’s degeneration, and the sad failure of Dorothea and Lydgate in Middlemarch, may be explained as simply as the fall of an apple, or as a bruised knee when a man loses his balance. A certain ac produces a definite moral effect on the individual; and character is the added sum of all the acts of a man’s life. Te matter of rewards and punishment, therefore, needs no final judge or judgment, since these things take care of themselves automatically in a world of inviolable moral law.’

‘The Mill on the Floss has a larger personal interest, because it reflects much of George Eliot’s history and the scenes and friends of early life. The lack of proportion in this story, which
gives rather too much space to the girl-and-boy experiences, is naturally explained by the tendency in every man and woman to linger over early memories.’ (4)

The novel, The Mill on the Floss, presents a typical scene: for example, two people rowing a boat adjust their motions relative to the other so that they pull at the same time. Though we cannot judge a criminal morally wrong, we judge him to be a threat to social stability to the stability of our conventions---and incarcerate him. If moral judgments are but feelings, this conclusion is nonsensical. There are several objections to which the emotivist may reply, but Harman’s rejection will stand upon a fundamental flaw within the theory. Thus it appears we must conclude that the theory of social convention is flawed. Harman argues that emotivism is not a sufficient theory. Morality provides reasons to act and not to act. The assumption of uniformity within humanity then allows conclusion of moral truth. First, it accounts for the irresolvable, often volatile nature of certain moral disputes. The principles that apply to the individual are not simply those of the surrounding group. We may then offer reasons to explain the origins of our feelings. The third major objection rises with regard to retrospection of moral judgments. It does not appear that Harman’s theory offers a sufficient account of our perception of morality as truth. Emotivism does not seem to be a sufficient theory.

MORAL THEMES IN THE MILL ON THE FLOSS

The Mill on the Floss describes a bit misfortune of the Tulliver (the miller) family and its daughter, Maggie’s mental journey in the background of British countryside. Maggie, an intelligent girl, earnestly seeks freedom and knowledge and has rich sympathy, but her ideas are incompatible with traditional ones, even her brother, Tom ridicules her free instinct, considering that she is impractical. Afterward Mr. Tulliver goes bankrupt because of a lawsuit, henceforth Tom is busy with repaying debts, and Maggie loses her father’s love and former happy days. Her two love experiences also encounter hindrance of social morals. It can be said that Britain’s Industrial Revolution, new thoughts and ideas in the 19th century urged awakening of female consciousness, which intensified conflicts in morals fields—between intrinsic individual and external social ethics.

There is main emphasis on the moral doctrines in three aspects ——love-marriage ethics, family ethics and religious ethics. There has been a moral tradition in British literature. Britain novels achieve the magnificent achievements because of its intense realistic critique significance and human caring particularly. British moral tradition in novels has laid certain foundation for establishing moral subjects of Eliot’s The Mill on the Floss. Simultaneously, it becomes a part of this moral tradition that the paradigm of Eliot novel’s moral narration. In the 19th century, Britain was in a mass machinery production. Although females were sacrificial victims under male social repression, Britain's Industrial Revolution made more females receive more educations, enable females under stratum like Eliot to have the rights to write, and pander their own destinies.

The Mill on the Floss amply details the life of the heroine, Maggie Tulliver from familial, social and psychological viewpoints. Maggie’s love life, reflects intense conflicts between sense and sensibility, and shows her emotional ethics, namely: the more powerful method of
controlling emotions is religious beliefs and doctrines, rather than emotions. She uses a word “responsibility” to cover this kind of emotional moral ethics, which reflects that Eliot’s emotional thoughts are more complicated than rational connotation. George Eliot presents dual love-marriage moral ethics, as Maggie’s remarks about Philip shows her love:

“Yes Lucy, I world chooses to marry him. I think it would be the best and highest lot for me –to make his life happy. He loved me first. No one else could be quit what he is to me. But I can’t divide myself from my brother for life. I must go away and wait-Pray, don’t speak to me again about it.”

Maggie entertains both types of conflicts: the internal struggle in the mind of Maggie and the external struggle between the various conflicting interests. The two conflicts of course are intermingled and integrated. They influence each other and determine each other. The external conflict is embodied, first by Philip on the one side and Tom and Mr. Tulliver on the other. And then, we see by Stephen on one side, and Philip, Tom and Lucy on the other. The incidents connected with Maggie’s effort to keep out of Philip’s and then of Stephen’s way constitute the story. The inner conflict consists in the pulls of family devotion and loyalty on the one hand and loves on the other. Her conflicts reflect in these lives:

“Let me go! She said, in an agitated tone, flashing an indignant look at him, and trying to get her hands free. You have wanted to deprive of any choice .you knew we were come too far you have dared to take advantage of my thoughtlessness. It is commonly to bring me into such a position.” (The Mill on the Floss, p. 416-417)

Once again her pity for Philip revives and she tells him that there is nothing, but bad feeling between Tom and Wakem family, to prevent their marriage. She tells Philip: “it was for my father’s sake, Philip; said Maggie, imploringly Tom threatens to tell my father and he couldn’t bear it: I have promised I have vowed solemnly that we will not have any intercourse without my brother’s knowledge.” (The Mill on the Floss, p.310) But this traditional strength as well as rational summons is so formidable that she thinks it is noticeable and unable to disobey. Therefore, the character has, here, dual moral ethics both to rebel against social rationalities and never to forget responsibilities.

George Eliot takes up family ethics as well as religious ethics in portraying her heroine in The Mill on the Floss. Thus she, not only describes dear ones, but has added moral contents. She reviews each relationship in the family from moral angle. Therefore, one of the main contents is how to define families, especially describing dear ones in the family - sentiments between father and daughter, brother and sister, and relatives; as well as dealing with contradictions among families ethically. And to define what kind of family relationship is harmonious Eliot writes beautifully on religion and morality in the following words:

“Your prompting to go to your nearest friends to remain where all the ties of your life have been formed is a true discipline responds opening its arms to the penitent watching over its children on the last never abandoning them until they are hopelessly reprobate. And the church ought to represent the feeling of community so that every parish should be a family knit together by Christian brotherhood under a spiritual father.” (The Mill on the Floss, p.443)
George Eliot, further, discusses family ethics. Family ethics concern in the following lines.

“Sister Pullet; said Mrs. Glegg, severely; if understand right, we’ve come together this morning to advise and consult about what’s to be done in this disgrace as has fallen up on the family and not to talk o’ people as don’t belong to us.” (The Mill on the Floss, p.186)

Eliot expounds her own moral ideal of ‘Religion of Humanity’ from two aspects in her work. Initially, according to the relationships between Eliot and religious beliefs, Eliot proposes her own ideal religious morals—‘Religion of Humanity’ when the society is undergoing reforms and its values are changing.

Aside from characteristic theme of the adjustment of our individual needs to the dire necessity of our lot, Maggie’s story is also the tale of suffering. Maggie’s tragedy is that of the free spirit caught in a materialistic world. It is a world ruled over entirely by the sense of property; by self-regard and by pride in family. George Eliot’s description of Dodson ladies shows how family itself is valued as vehicle for the preservation and transmission of property.

Maggie’s relation to public opinion is different because the society in which she lives is at a premier stage. The novel, The Mill on the Floss, suggests the power of public opinion and the need to develop it to a higher level of social structure. All aspects of the theme of unity are to be turned in three of Maggie’s moments of choice: her interview with Philip Wakem in the Red Deeps, her raving party with Stephen Guest and her refusal to stay with Stephen after they arrive at Mudport. The earlier two choices show that Maggie has not achieved that personal unity which is essential to moral being. Nor has Maggie achieved this by the time she meets Stephen Guest. What Maggie does with Stephen is determined by a past in which egotism and personal wiffulness keep her from moral integrity. Actually Maggie’s desperate need to be admired and loved is one of the main causes of her fall. Since Maggie succumbs at the second moment of her choice with Stephen, she is faced with a dilemma. Her decision cannot be passive now: it depends on her understanding of the situation and cannot be governed by conventions. She cannot even decide on the basis of the likely consequences of her actions as the damage has been done and pain would be the consequence of either choice.

Thus, in making the third choice, Maggie achieves the highest level of consciousness of which a St. Ogg’s citizen is capable. She accepts both the irrevocability of her act and the fact that it ‘must blot her life’ and brings sorrow into lives that were ‘knit up with hers by trust and love’. Recognizing this loss and its dangers, Maggie attempts to turn to the past and inherited traditions.

‘If the past is not to bind us’, she says to Stephen, ‘where can duty lie: We have not law but the inclination of the moment.’ (The Mill on the Floss, p.386)

Through the past she attempts to overcome the disintegration of the self which has left her vulnerable to the past’s uncomprehended forces.
MORALITY AND CHARACTERIZATION IN THE MILL ON THE FLOSS

Not only can literary works reflect people’s emotion and culture in real life but also express their moral behavior and concept. Literary works of different ages can express people’s moral behavior and concepts of different times. The Mill on the Floss is George Eliot’s highly autobiographical novel. The memory of her childhood is clearly reflected in the novel. The bright point of the novel is an exquisite depiction of the inner world of characters. The heroine’s hard and short life constitutes the main plot of the novel while the other minor common people around here are also depicted elaborately. They have no profound thoughts or great intelligence, yet they are endowed with distinct characters. Their behavior implies simple life philosophy.

The unique feature of The Mill on the Floss is good combination of Eliot’s own outlook of philosophical ethics and morality with the characterization of the novel. Although Eliot never claims she is a moralizer, yet undoubtedly her morality affects her depiction of characters and plots in her novels. How Eliot conveys her gender morality on the depiction of Maggie’s rebellion and self-denial; Maggie’s self-denial becomes morally injurious to her because she is denying herself the very intellectual and artistic experiences that world help her understand her own plight and have pity for the plight of others.

‘Oh yes’ father’ hi’s been very good to bring me home’, said Maggie ‘Avery kind, good man.’ (The Mill on the Floss, p.101) And how she expresses her religious morality on the description of dual personality of the minor characters and Maggie’s death for harmony; and then how she incorporates her marriage morality on the portrayal of Maggie’s moral choice at love crossroads.

“George Eliot’s moral beliefs chimed with what appeared to be the findings of the contemporary science, particularly heredity, which appeared as scientific- and scientifically proved- determinism. This gave her fiction great authority in its day; later it was to make it seem dated; now when she is again seen as a great novelist, we realize how much of her strength is derived from the very intransigence of her view of human beings. It was a view too mechanistic to allow her to write tragedy. But, by placing the responsibility for a man’s life and fate firmly on the individual and his moral choices, she changed the nature of English novel.” (5)

CONCLUSION

George Eliot successfully reveals the inner struggles of Maggie Tulliver and confirms the rationality of the plot of the novel. The novelist has taken the moral ethics in her mind in portraying the character of Maggie. Since British novels achieve the magnificent achievements because of its intense realistic critique significance and human caring particularly, George Eliot has laid certain foundations for establishing moral standards in her work. The Mill on the Floss becomes a part of the moral traditions that the paradigm of moral narration of Eliot’s novel forms.
NOTES AND REFERENCES


3. Ibid. P.510.

4. Ibid. P.510-511
