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MAGGIE TULLIVER AS A NEW WOMAN IN GEORGE ELIOT'S THE MILL ON THE FLOSS¹

George Eliot'un *The Mill on the Floss* Adlı Eserinde Yeni Kadın Olarak Maggie Tulliver

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Abstract

Recently, there has been much attention to George Eliot as a feminist writer, yet there are not many detailed studies concerning this aspect in her works. Critics have generally given scattered critical views about how Eliot represented the rights and position of women in the late Victorian English society. These critical views are historical and sociological. This study focuses on historical and sociological aspects of society in terms of women in the Victorian society, because these aspects are closely linked to individual lives in any society. This study also examines the issues of women in a different way in *The Mill on the Floss* through representation of Maggie Tulliver's life. This study is different because it deals with how culture and ideology play important roles in constructing Maggie's female gender identity in the Victorian patriarchal society.

Keywords: Maggie Tulliver, Woman, Morality, Marriage

Öz

Son zamanlarda, feminist bir yazar olarak George Eliot çok dikkat çekmiş olmasına karşın, eserlerinde bu yönüyle ilgili çok detaylı çalışma bulunmamaktadır. Eleştirmenler genellikle Viktorya döneminin sonlarına doğru İngiliz toplumunda kadın haklarını ve durumunu Eliot'un nasıl işlediği hakkında dağınık eleştirel görüşler ileri sürmüşlerdir. Bu eleştirel görüşler genelde tarihsel ve sosyolojik içeriklidir. Bu çalışma Viktorya dönemi toplumunda kadınların durumları açısından toplumun tarihsel ve sosyolojik özellikleri üzerinde yoğunlaşmaktadır. Bununla beraber diğer çalışmalarla karşılaştırıldığında, bu çalışma *The Mill on the Floss* adlı eserde Maggie Tulliver'in hayatını yansıtarak farklı bir açıdan kadın meselesini ele almaktadır. Bu çalışma, Viktorya dönemi ataerkil toplumunda Maggie'nin kadın cinsiyet kimliğinin oluşturulmasında kültür ve ideolojinin ne kadar önemli bir rol oynadığının ele alınması bakımından farklıdır

Anahtar Kelimeler: Maggie Tulliver, Kadın, Ahlak, Evlilik

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the Victorian period it can be said that society was sharply divided into two spheres as public and domestic. These two spheres were shared by men and women. Domestic sphere comprised a very restricted circle only related to household, motherhood and the duties of women as housewives, while public referred to everything outside the house. Domestic was closely associated with women, on the other hand public was remarkably associated with males.

In the Victorian society, women were imprisoned inside their houses: “From early childhood, women were trained to accept a system which divided society into male and female spheres, with appropriate roles for each, and which allocated public power exclusively to the male sphere” (Millet, 1970: 26). They were intentionally excluded from the public world, which was reserved only for men. Men were very pleased with these privileges and they were not eager to share their public places with women. Furthermore, many women had played their roles for centuries in order not to attract reactions and they had to act in an approved manner so as to be respected by society.

Women were expected to be affectionate, obedient, responsive, cheerful, kind and friendly to their husbands in those days. (Güngör, 2005: 27). If they had not accepted these restrictions and opposed so-called roles they would have been accepted as abnormal, because “for female, ‘normal’ meant passive, while for male, it meant active” (Eisenstein, 1984: 8). Moreover, they were supposed to teach other female members of the family these values, because society was not interested in how women were, but in how they should be. In patriarchal society, “social pressure kept women conforming to the expressive role expected of them, a role that dictate conformity and obedience” (Eisenstein, 1984: 8).

2. VICTORIAN WOMEN

“Angel in the house” is a symbol of the Victorian women, and this symbol was not new for the Victorian people. In the previous centuries the women were always encouraged to be virtuous. The writers in the eighteenth century like Samuel Richardson gave examples how to become a virtuous woman in his works. For the society in the previous centuries virtue and chastity were the jewels of the women as emphasised by Pamela’s father in Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela* (1740), through which he thinks a girl rewards his husband (Richardson, 1984: 46). In *Pamela*, Pamela’s father wants her to protect her virtue carefully. Pamela’s parents warn their daughter against the

advance of Mr. B., since chastity and moral purity are of vital importance for a girl. This strong belief in marriage, chastity and virtue continued very effectively, and it was very dominant even more than a century later in the Victorian Age. It was very important for a girl to make a prestigious marriage. From a feminist point of view, this view of virtue and chastity limits a woman's life and her freedom of movement. Patriarchal society uses these values as means and excuses to exclude woman from the mainstream activities of life in the public space. Therefore, women are unable to get a proper education to participate in the professional life and play multiple roles in the outside world.

Victorian girls were traditionally expected to have good marriages and be good wives, and they were trained in accordance with these expectations. The girls were raised and educated to become good wives and mothers. There was an important reason for their choice of such a way. They were not financially and educationally sufficient people, and they always needed protection and security. Through making good marriages, women wanted to be provided with protection and security in society. In their childhood, the girls obtained protection and security from their fathers and their elder brothers. After getting married, they began to look for protection from their husbands. (Güngör, 2005: 35)

Women were left alone in caring for and training children without having any assistance from her husband or relatives. Father did not help or get involved in any activities at home, such as child-care and housework. Father was a breadwinner and responsible for earning money, so he did not spend much time with his family, and thus the whole responsibility for breeding and educating children were shouldered by mother.

3. GEORGE ELIOT AS A REVOLUTIONARY FIGURE IN THE VICTORIAN AGE

There were two reasons why Mary Anne Evans used a male pseudonym instead of using her actual name. The first reason was her illegal relationship with a legally married man, George Lewes. Gordon Haight states George Lewes' relationships with her wife as follows:

"About eight years into the marriage, Agnes began an affair with Lewes' close friend Thornton Hunt. Both Lewes and Agnes were believers in "free love" and felt that feelings were stronger than legal bonds. So, when Agnes gave birth to Hunt's son, Lewes claimed the illegitimate child as his own" (Haight, 1968: 131).

It is striking to see that society did not accuse Agnes of her relationship and illegal sexual relation with her husband's closest friend. On the contrary, Eliot's social circle accused her of having relationships with George Lewes, and they were found guilty.

The second reason why she chose a man's name was that she did not want her books to be prejudged as the work of a woman, but judged on their own merits as the work of a man, because in the Victorian period, the writings of female writers were not given the rightful importance. Their works were not estimated as greatly as the works written by male writers who wrote in those years. She proved that a female writer could be also successful in writing novels with her valuable works. Thus, she used a male pseudonym to divert the public attention. So, she disguised herself under the name of a man, Eliot, while writing her works. Cynthia Grenier states how Mary Ann Evans began to use a male pseudonym as follows:

"Without George Henry Lewes there could have been no Eliot. Not only did Lewes give her his own name – he also obtained a publisher while not revealing her true gender. Years later she told John Cross that they had selected the name Eliot because George was Mr. Lewes' Christian name, and Eliot was a good mouth-filling, easily pronounced word" (Grenier, 2003: 250).

She encouraged and opened up the ways for the woman writers in the twentieth century such as Virginia Woolf, Katherine Mansfield and so on. In the Victorian period, there were very few people who supported women's rights and reacted against the pre-existing role. George Eliot was one of these people, who dared to react against these views about women. Therefore, she had to overcome many troubles and obstacles in her own life. The most important revolt by Eliot was her living with a married man whom she loved and wanted to get married to. Despite the great pressure of her social circle, she decided to live with her lover challenging against the reactions from both her family and friends. She encouraged other women to live their lives to the full. Eventually, her struggles and opposing views of life made her different from other Victorian women.

Eliot suffered from many obstacles in her life like other Victorian women throughout her life. Victorian society was dominantly patriarchal, and being a woman by itself was the most oppressive obstacle for women. Although she tried to lead an independent life, she could not live since she was severely criticized by everybody in the society. Therefore, her life was

full of struggles for improving her own way of thinking and living. She knew the problems of the Victorian women who had to take an obedient and submissive role in the public and private life, but she was not willing to submit her fate. She never gave up struggling against the injustices that were imposed by male dominant society upon her.

4. MAGGIE AS A NEW WOMAN IN THE MILL ON THE FLOSS

In *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), Eliot represents Maggie as a new woman different from other woman characters who do not refuse the traditional role of women, because Maggie is not satisfied with her status as a woman in society and longs for a different life. In the novel, as a revolutionist woman writer, Eliot advocated the women who were considered as abnormal and unusual in the society, because she was also considered abnormal because of her opposing world views and life style. Maggie is such a revolutionist woman character who is always looking for her independence, love and protection, and never gives up her struggle against Victorian rules and restrictions like George Eliot herself and faces many restrictions, prejudices and obstacles in her hometown, St. Ogg's.

As in real life, Eliot divided the world into two parts in the novel: public and private. In *The Mill on the Floss*, the world is also gendered: Male characters, such as Mr. Tulliver, her uncles, Tom and other men, carry out public duties with female characters, such as the Dodson sister and other female characters, have to concern domestic or private duties. While men are free, active, ruler and combatant, the women are passive, submissive and obedient, except Maggie Tulliver. Men deal with more serious and influential activities, and many times they have the right to determine the female characters and their children's fates. The majority of the female characters reflect this passive and obedient attitude. The Dodson sisters are typical Victorian women, and they are traditional women who unconditionally accept what the men dictate them in their lives. Therefore, they are considered normal and appreciated by the social norms. They are not aware of the oppressive approach imposed by the society, because they consider their duties which are imposed by the society normal and natural.

In the novel, Bessy Dodson, Maggie's mother, may be considered a perfect and ideal mother figure in the novel. Bessy represents the shallowness and passivity of the Victorian women. According to Susan Rowland Tush, "Mrs. Tulliver explains a woman's first duty is to follow the simple, primeval law of obedience" (Tush, 1993: 64). Bessy is always proud

of coming from the Dodsons and living like them has direct relation to being and living like a traditional Victorian woman. She always has strong ties with her sisters, and never breaks off her connections with them after marriage. Bessy Tulliver “was thankful to have been a Dodson, and to have one child who look after her own family, at least in his features and complexion, in liking salt and in eating beans, which a Tulliver never did” (Eliot, 1975: 56).

Her indifference to public activities and shallowness can be seen in her statement when Mr. Tulliver tries to explain that he wishes to prepare her only son Tom, for his further education. His plan was to send Tom to a boarding school to prepare him for his future public sphere. Since her concern is completely different for his husband, she is far from expressing her own views about her son’s education. She merely states that “Well, Mr. Tulliver, you know the best: I have no objections” (Eliot, 1975: 13).

She prefers being submissive and obedient instead of stating her own views about Tom’s education, because her only concern is domestic affairs such as throwing parties and decorating her house. Her responsibilities as a mother and wife are at home, and she is not concerned with the events outside. Therefore, she leaves this field to his husband and other men in her household. She does not have anything to say related to his son’s education, but as a mother she states her concern as follows: “Howiver, if Tom’s to go to a new school, I should like him to go where I can wash him and mend him ... I could send the lad a cake, or a pork-pie, or an apple; for he can do with an extry bit” (Eliot, 1975: 13).

She is happy to state that she is pleased not to make any objections to any men, and when Mr. Tulliver has some legal problems with the lawyer, Mr. Wakeem, she eagerly states that “when did I iver make objections to a man” (Eliot, 1975: 15). She can only advise her husband to choose her only solution: being submissive, obeying and not reacting against the stronger ones, and being passive in the deeds. Her only responsibility “rests not only the care for the daily needs of food, clothing and the like of her children, but what is even more important, their moral training” (McKnight, 1997: 4).

As a mother her responsibility is to bring up her children in accordance with the Victorian moral values. In performing their motherly duties, the women are not supposed to do any wrong, if they did not want to be blamed by society. In the Victorian period, the training of daughters was more important for women, because their daughters would become future housewives and mothers should not have neglected this most vital duty. If

they could not properly train their daughters, they were blamed by other women because of their negligence: "Mid-Victorian mothers often suffer because of their attempts and failures to live up to the maternal ideal" (McKnight, 1997: 4). Mothers shape their daughters' intellect and soul, and nobody could be blamed, because they were the only individual at home who had to look after the children. Whenever Mrs. Tulliver's children do something bad, she simply says: "They'll think I've done summat wicked" (Eliot, 1975: 36).

She knows that if any deficiencies occur in the training and behaviours of the children, it is the mother, not anyone else, to be blamed, because her principal duty is to train their children appropriately in accordance with the general principles and rules in society. Furthermore, as Sarah states "from the duties of a mother there is then no escape; and hence it follows, that if ever, in the whole course of women's life, she is called upon to think seriously it is when she first becomes a parent" (Ellis, 1844: 9). Hence, Bessy Tulliver feels herself wretched whenever her daughter makes mistakes: "people would think she had done something wicked to deserve her maternal troubles" (Eliot, 1975: 125).

Mrs. Bessy Tulliver's niece, Lucy, has a similar complexion with the Dodsons and that is why Mrs. Tulliver loves her most as her own child, Maggie looks after her father's family, the Tullivers. Lucy, like Bessy, is a typical female character who was trained according to the traditional rules. As a child, Lucy is quite an opposite figure to Maggie. While Lucy is depicted as being light and ideal daughter, Maggie is a dark and docile girl who is completely isolated and criticized by other older women. "It was like the contrast between a rough, dark, overgrown puppy and a white kitten" (Eliot, 1975: 76). The difference in their complexion and physical appearances show the differences in their manners and attitudes.

Lucy and Maggie are completely different from one another, as it is stated in the novel: "the contrast between the cousins was conspicuous, and to superficial eyes, was very much to the disadvantage of Maggie" (Eliot, 1975: 76). Lucy has the Dodsons' blood in her, so "everything about her was neat" (Eliot, 1975: 76). While Maggie is considered abnormal and unnatural, Lucy is publicly considered normal and natural. The narrator states that "as for Lucy, she was a pretty and neat as she had been yesterday; no accidents ever happened to her clothes, and she was never uncomfortable in them" (Eliot, 1975: 106).

However, Maggie represents a new view of woman. She sometimes

silently and sometimes loudly rejects and opposes what patriarchal society in general and her mother in particular decides for her. She finds other female characters' way of life useless and invalid for herself, because their views of life bring about submission, obedience and restraint in life. In this respect, Maggie's view of life suggests a new perception of woman different from the traditional view of women in *The Mill on the Floss*. With her opposing manners, Maggie rejects all types of roles that dictate conformity and obedience, when she is only a little child. She is not afraid of being criticized or blamed by others. On the contrary, "Maggie hated blame: she had been blamed all her life" (Eliot, 1975: 250). In order to depict a new woman who is completely different from the traditional obedient and submissive woman, Eliot uses Maggie as an opposing character in the novel. Maggie opposes all kinds of trivial activities that Victorian women carry out. When her mother instructs her to do her patchwork, she rejects, and says, "I don't want to do my patchwork" (Eliot, 1975: 19). In fact, she not only rejects to do patchwork, but she also rejects to do all kinds of trivial activities that women have got involved in for ages.

According to Maggie, all these activities are not suitable to her view of life, because she does not want to be like an ordinary woman, and she does not want to be regarded as a respected traditional woman. Therefore, Maggie refuses what she is ordered by her aunts and mother as she utters, "I don't want to do anything for my aunt Glegg. I don't like her" (Eliot, 1975: 19). With this statement, she refuses to do anything imposed on her by society. This statement can be assumed as a revolt against Victorian cultural and social values.

One of Maggie's early reactions against the restrictive social order can be seen when she is only nine years old. Her mother tries to comb her hair, but she always refuses to have curly hair which can be accepted as a symbol for Victorian womanhood. While Lucy's blond hair curls perfectly, Maggie's dark hair does not. When Mr. Tulliver is proud of Maggie's ability to "read almost as well as parson" (Eliot, 1975: 42), Mrs. Tulliver does not concern about Maggie's intelligence, eagerness and fondness in reading, because Maggie does not need to be an intelligent girl.

On the contrary, Mrs. Tulliver pays attention to her physical appearance, her hair and manners. She worries about that Maggie's dark hair that would never curl. In fact, this is a kind of foreshadowing that shows Maggie will never be a traditional Victorian woman in the future. Whenever Mrs. Tulliver tries to brush her hair, she manages to escape and dips her head in a basin of water standing near her. Thus, she gives no more chance

of curls that day. Her untidy hair is a symbol for her revolting personality. She does not want her opposing personality to be controlled and put into order by any other restrictive power. Maggie completely isolates herself from her mother and her society in general. Therefore, Mrs. Tulliver states that, "Lucy takes more after me nor my own child does" (Eliot, 1975: 19) feeling sorry for not being a proper mother for Maggie and not being able to train her daughter as her sisters did in line with the wishes of society.

Since Maggie feels isolated because there is no freedom and peace in such a world, she tries to escape from that boring family environment as soon as possible in order to find a more peaceful and suitable shelter for herself. She decides to live with the gypsies, when she is only a little girl. As a result of great pressures upon her, she tries to escape from this gloomy atmosphere. Her main aim is to get rid of all kinds of restrictions. Her desire to attain love and independence may be connected with her runaway. Maggie prefers running away from her own family "to seek any kind of solace" (Tush, 1993: 68). According to her parents, because of her complexion and manners, "She's more like neither gipsy nor iver. It's very bad luck, sister, as the gell should be so brown – the boy's fair enough. I doubt it'll stand in her way i' life to be so brown" (Eliot, 1975: 84).

She was like a gypsy, not a real Dodson. Maggie cannot conform to the generally accepted circle prepared by her aunts and mother. Therefore, Maggie runs away from her family: "No! she would run away and go to the gypsies, and Tom should never see her any more ... She had been so often told her she was like a gypsy and 'half wild'" (Eliot, 1975: 45). That is why, a gypsy camp is the most suitable place for her to keep her ideals alive and spend the rest of her life more independently. Her resemblance must have great influence in choosing Maggie's runaway from the traditional Victorian circle. When she is asked in gypsy camp where she comes from, she says "I'm come from home because I'm unhappy, and I mean to be a gipsy. I'll live with you if you like, and I can teach you a great many things" (Eliot, 1975: 46). She wants to introduce herself as a girl who looks for happiness and love that she has not had since she was born.

5. CONCLUSION

Women were imprisoned in the boundary of the family life where she received so-called respect not because of her achieved gender identity in her life, but because of her role of guardianship of her husband's house and children while he, as a man, was away on business and professional tour. This role of woman suggests a sense of passivity and submission due to the

fact that it does not give the women any opportunities to have any kinds of qualifications and knowledge, yet they are culturally and ideologically taught and prepared for this role from their birth onward in a patriarchal society. The roles and difficulties they faced in the Victorian society were obviously linked to patriarchal culture and ideology so as to limit and control women's life in the sheltered domestic environment as "other".

Eliot suffered from many obstacles in her life, like many other Victorian women, because it was the basic characteristic of this period. There was gender discrimination in society and women had to face a lot of obstacles in that patriarchal society. She also had a dependent life and her relationships were harshly criticized by others. However, she was different from other women, because she was among the few women who dared to struggle against society and social restrictions to form her own identity as a woman. That is why her life was full of struggles for improving both her and other women's situation in society. She decided not to be submissive and obedient and attacked the roles which were given by Victorian society. *The Mill on the Floss* does not only tell the story and struggles of Maggie Tulliver, but also mentions the restrictions, prejudices and obstacles. In fact, Maggie Tulliver is George Eliot herself. She created this character as a role model for the other women, and encouraged them to live their lives to the full without any boundaries and restrictions created by a male dominated society.

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