

George Eliot'un *The Mill on the Floss* Romanında 'Kadın Konusu'na Bakışı

George Eliot's Attitude to 'Woman Question' in *The Mill on the Floss*

Semra SARAÇOĞLU

G.Ü. Gazi Eğitim Fakültesi, Yabancı Diller Eğitimi Bölümü, Ankara-TÜRKİYE

ÖZET

Bu çalışmanın amacı 19. yüzyıl Viktorya Döneminde akıllı ve duyarlı kadınların toplumda karşılaştıkları sorunlara işaret etmektir. Dönemin önemli kadın yazarlarından George Eliot, bu makalenin de ana konusu olan The Mill on the Floss romanının kahramanı Maggie Tulliver'in tipik bir Viktorya kadını olarak duyduğu sevilme ve kendini gerçekleştirme ihtiyacı arasında yaşadığı daimi ikilem ve çektiği sıkıntılar üzerinde durmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: erkeklerin dünyası, kadınların dünyası, cinsiyet farklılıkları, birey olarak kadınlar, çevre, sevgi ihtiyacı, kendini gerçekleştirme.

ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to point out some difficulties faced by intelligent and sensitive women in the Victorian Age. George Eliot, one of the leading figures of the Age, studies the influence of the society on women who have been thought to be quick and shallow and have weak opinions. Maggie Tulliver, the chief concern in this article, is a representative of Victorian women who experience the dilemma between the need for love and the need for an opportunity or occupation which could satisfy her spiritual and intellectual hunger.

Key Words: men's sphere, women's sphere, gender difference, women as individuals, environment, the need for love, self-fulfilment.

Romantic love is an illusion, life in society, beyond the influence of the family, is artificial and corrupt, and the true happiness lies in the quiet performance of domestic duty.

(in Calder 1976: 12-13)

This very basic morality that Tolstoy sets before us is the Victorian view of the social position of women.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, “Woman Question” has been introduced into the literature of the time. The abuses women have been subjected to within the social values of a changing England have found expression in the literary works of the age. Before the “Rights of Women” in the eighties and nineties, the legal and social rights and attitudes in English society have been determined according to the gender. Women as the inferior sex have been expected to submit to men. Women’s inferior position to men in social life has been supported by laws through legal inequity. This could be seen even in their marital lives. The wife could not have any claims on her own property, for it becomes her husband’s after the marriage. Divorce was impossible until 1857. After it became possible, the conditions were against women. Adultery for men was enough cause to divorce, but it was not for women and in all conditions children were always given to the fathers.

For Victorian young ladies, marriage was the only vocation and concern in their lives. In this age, the education of women were not insisted on, while their brothers were urged forward. Since “all good fathers wish to provide for their daughters; all good husbands think it their bounden duty to keep their wives” (Parkes 1865: 74, 77). Girls were doomed to be dependent during their lives, either in the parental home or when possessed by a husband (Calder 1976: 17). The conventional type of education provided for girls by visiting governesses or at boarding schools was limited only with the knowledge of needlework, painting, music, or poetry because men’s sphere and women’s sphere were completely different. Men were out in the world of commerce, women were indoors. Moreover, there was a common belief that women were “fragile” and incapable of doing anything in the world outside; for this reason, women expected

the men – first fathers then the husbands - to provide for them. In return, their duty was devoting themselves to their husbands, children and charity work.

The Victorian “Ideal” woman was loving, affectionate, and virtuous at the same time. She was the “Womanly Woman”. In this age, neither the boys nor the girls could obtain a healthy sexual knowledge within the family. In girls’ case, if they did not want to be social outcasts - sinful “demons”, forbidding themselves from sexual fulfilment their duty was to retain their sexual - “angel-like” innocence. The age’s preoccupation was that marriage was the only means of independence for young ladies. It should be, for this reason, functioning as “a protest against marriage” in many Victorian novels, “emphasis [is] on romantic and wedded love”. It seems to be “a revolt of the heart against a system which denied its impulses, and which, in the absence of love, was a source of personal distress and social evil” (Houghton 1957: 381). In the Victorian Age, while “male power was affirmed through an egoistic, aggressive, even violent sexuality”, “female sexuality was passive and self-denying” (Moglen 1976: 30). Having been denied wider educational and employment opportunities, women all the time experienced the inevitable dilemma between the need for love and self-fulfilment.

George Eliot (1821-1881), one of the leading Victorian novelists, focused on the difficulties faced by intelligent and sensitive women in her novels. *The Mill on the Floss* (1869) is Eliot’s most autobiographical novel. Eliot became emotionally involved in this novel, and it was to such an extent that she cried when she was writing the ending. One may wonder whether Eliot lives her own life through her main character Maggie, who is the chief concern of this article because Maggie’s life and the conflicts she experiences with the social norms are said to bear close resemblance to the authoress herself.

Maggie is not portrayed as being “perfect”, and yet, much of the readers’ interest in Maggie stems from the conflict in her - between aspirations of spiritual beauty and the desire for earthly happiness. However, it is difficult for the reader to judge how harshly Eliot criticizes her heroine. This is due to Eliot’s own wider interest in society and relationships rather than simply in one individual.

Maggie is the only intellectual character in the novel, apart from Philip Wakem. She also possesses a rich, passionate inner life that no one except Philip is capable of possessing. It is this rich inner life – which no one understands or appreciates - causes the heroine's difficulties.

Throughout the book we see certain aspects of Maggie's character that do not change; her intellectual distinction, her ardent nature and her capacity for feeling. Unfortunately, for Maggie, she is only given an education considered appropriate for a young lady and therefore her potential development is stunted.

From the beginning of the novel, we recognise that Maggie is exceptional: She has great sensitivity and is given a great imagination. Furthermore, her appearance is not "right", and this is shown with constant references to her "brown skin" and likeness as a gypsy child. For example, her impulsive action in cutting her hair only leads to more misfortune, and as Aunt Pullet says, "she's more like a gypsy nor ever" (Eliot 1979: 125).

"Poor Maggie" is always treated as guilty when a child – even when her acts are unwittingly committed. Interesting to note here is that water imagery reflects a dangerous "undercurrent" in Maggie. Her nature is visibly reflected in the Floss – being impetuous, dark, lively, passionate, sensitive, and changeable.

There are various contradictions in Maggie's character first, since she is clever, there is no place for her in the society; secondly, she is brown and dark and finally, she is witch-like and fated to drown. Everything to do with her seems unnatural. This is illustrated by her father and mother's early discussion in the book - about their family genes, and also by Maggie's attraction to wicked characters such as the devil. It does seem that even her appearance is related to her reading. For example, in the "mud scene" with Tom and Lucy, "Maggie lingered at a distance looking like a Medusa with her snakes cropped" (Eliot 1979: 161). Although witches were believed to float and innocent women drown - so is Eliot suggesting that Maggie is innocent but wrongly treated like a witch.

With “destructive” incidents, Eliot does appear to sympathise and retain the readers’ sympathy for Maggie. This is because we became very intimate with her heroine from the very beginning of the book.

When we see Maggie and Tom together, we can recognise Maggie’s faults, but in turn, also see the external circumstances that affect her. Unlike her brother, she does have great sensitivity and imagination. She makes up numerous stories, such as the spiders in the Mill (Eliot 1979: 80) and the Earwigs too – in comparison Tom is very literal minded. We can easily see Maggie’s early frustrations and understand the expression of her feelings with her violence against her doll. Eliot gives us a very full picture of why Maggie acts as she does. It is often accidental as in the example of rabbits (Eliot 1979: 82).

The strong outburst which comes from Maggie occurs during “The Downfall” when she shouts at her relatives. We admire Maggie here and do not condemn such impulsiveness. She is naive in the sense that she thought their outburst of honesty would actually bring them to their senses, but it is not beneficial - she is merely frowned upon once again.

Is it possible to see any criticism of Maggie from Eliot? She certainly does not make Maggie appear “perfect”, but just how far does she criticise her in her work? An “inbuilt” example might be where, “The keenest of all dread with her was, lest her father should add to his present misfortune the wretchedness of doing something irretrievably disgraceful” (Eliot 1979: 373). Here we recognise Maggie’s own self-interest keenly. However, Eliot does not condemn Maggie to understand her feeling of acute loneliness and sympathise readily. With the exaggerated description, we sympathise too with “the poor child” and her state of total deprivation – which was not her fault. For example; “Maggie’s sense of loneliness and utter privation of joy had deepened with the brightness of advancing spring...There was no music for her any more – no piano, no harmonised voices, no delicious stringed instruments with their passionate cries...” (Eliot 1979: 378). Although Eliot seems to be too emotionally

involved here, she steers a fine course between making Maggie too self-absorbed and too self-sacrificing.

Eliot keeps Maggie for a child much longer than other heroines - for a large proportion of the book Maggie is under thirteen years of age. We might deduce from this that the only real criticism seems to be of Tulliver parents and the provincial society who are incompetent and feckless: totally inadequate for Maggie.

In the “Valley of Humiliation”, Eliot actually criticises Maggie’s pride and impetuosity; “From what you know of her, you will not be surprised that she threw some exaggeration and wilfulness, some pride and impetuosity even into her self-renunciation: her own life was still a drama for her...She often lost the spirit of humility” (Eliot 1979: 386). However, Eliot, once having criticised her heroine, then explains the reasons for Maggie’s behaviour and her excuses to retain our sympathy.

It is perhaps her confidant Philip’s criticism that is most strongly felt by Maggie and the reader. We understand that she should not be cramping her nature; “you are shutting yourself up in a narrow self-delusive fanaticism which is only a way of escaping pain by starving into dullness all the highest powers of your nature” (Eliot 1979: 427). Furthermore, it is Philip who accurately predicts her future: “You will be thrown into the world some day, and then every rational satisfaction of your nature that you deny now, will assault you like a savage appetite” (Eliot 1979: 429). It is Philip’s task to explain Maggie to herself and the reader in order to put her behaviour into perspective.

It is worth considering the Stephen Guest “Elopement” scene – is Maggie criticised for her behaviour? Certainly she is misjudged by the society of St. Oggs: noticeable is the conflict between the individual and his environment. The outcome does seem predictable, the reader is given here that Maggie wants revenge against fair women, and we cannot blame her for finding Lucy’s offered life-style attractive. We see that this scene wakes her up to adult responsibility. She is loyal to her family and is guided by the ties of her past. However, generally we are dissatisfied with the scene because though we understand Maggie, we do not feel with her for Stephen. Stephen’s

recognition of her exceptional nature is interesting – coming from a character who is himself rather commonplace and like so many other idle young men in that town. It is also significant that Maggie has no female role model outside books: only the negative examples of her conventional aunts and the overburdened Mrs Moss. She admires Lucy, but does not want to emulate her. It is in this scene that we also recognise Maggie’s derive to be loved by men is very dangerous. She herself recognises this, “I was never satisfied with a little of anything” (Eliot 1979: 428) – but we can see too that she always judges herself harshly.

Eliot does not completely idealize Maggie or attack her heroine and her feelings. She was against judgements of a general kind. Although our sympathy rests with Maggie, we notice the criticisms from the other characters - particularly from her brother Tom; “at one time you take pleasure in a sort of perverse self-denial, and at another, you have not resolution to resist a thing that you know to be wrong” (Eliot 1979: 504); and also Philip – as well as those “inbuilt” few from Eliot herself.

It is obvious that *The Mill on the Floss* is not a simple fairy tale; the Ugly Duckling does not find a place in society. Although she starts her life in a narrow, cramped society, she does make choices but finds herself unable to escape her destiny “like the cause of an unmapped river” (Eliot 1979: 514). It is interesting to note that the early scenes set up the pattern of behaviour that Maggie employs in the rest of the novel; childhood is obviously dominant in the structure of the book.

Pearson and Pope argue that Maggie is somewhere between an “intelligent man” and a “perfect woman”. She feels inferior to her brother because he is much more tolerated and is sent to school though she herself does better than him intellectually; in the same way, she feels inferior to her cousin Lucy as she is always negatively compared with her because of the latter’s passivity about good manners. Thus the two critics argue that “the message she gets is very clear. By virtue of being female, she is inferior to her brother and by virtue of personal defects she is inferior to the ideal woman represented by her cousin”. In their view Maggie is depicted by Eliot as a victim “sacrificed on the twin altars of ideal womanhood and male supremacy” (Pearson and Pope 1981: 28).

Maggie cannot make a sensible choice between these two as the latter contradicts her gender and the former her characteristics. It is self-denial that she chooses when she has to. Pearson and Pope say that the teaching of “male superiority and female inferiority causes self-doubt, or in many cases even self-hatred, and leads women to commit themselves to the self-denying myths of virginity, romantic love, and maternal sacrifice” (1981:23). In Maggie’s case, however, it appears as a desire to acquire men’s knowledge or to live like men, as she thinks being a female is what makes one disconnected or unhappy; first she wants men’s knowledge, then she wants to make a world without love or affection in it “as men do”. But the subsequent events make it clear that her problem does not originate from being a female but also from the unique aspects of her personality.

We might agree that Eliot’s aim was not to idealize her heroine, but to try to broaden the reader’s sympathy and see that, “the tragedy of our lives is not created entirely from within” (Eliot 1979: 514). Eliot seems to have felt that the fundamental role of man was a more practical, active one, “that man should be “engaged in a dustier, noisier warfare, grappling with more substantial obstacles, and gaining more definite conquests” (Eliot 1979: 405). While a woman’s struggles might be “almost entirely within her own soul, one shadowy army fighting another, and the slain shadows for ever rising again” (Eliot 1979: 405). The heroines suffer because of their restricted sphere of thought and action. None of them is satisfied with the woman’s narrow world or viewpoint.

Eliot pictures the suppression of women’s intellectual and imaginative qualities and attacks the egotism of men and their complacency. Maggie in *The Mill on the Floss*, the imaginative, sensitive girl, who idolises her older brother and envies his involvement in worldly affairs, is easy to identify with the young Mary Evans. An appetite for learning and a great need to be loved were common to both author and heroine, and the same impulsive discretion can be seen in both. Unconventional women like Maggie and Eliot herself are vulnerable in the face of public opinion and the pressure of convention. Their wishes and imaginations of a better way of life usually meet with frustration and sometimes disaster. What Eliot proposes in her novels and particularly in *The Mill on*

the Floss is that women should be understood; and that women should have a sufficient education to judge for themselves and to achieve their goals.

References

- Calder Jennie. *Women and Marriage in Victorian Fiction*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1976.
- Eliot, George. *The Mill on the Floss*. London: Penguin books, 1979.
- Houghton, Walter E. *The Victorian Frame of Mind*. U.S.A.: Yale University Press, 1957.
- Moglen, Helene. *Charlotte Bronte: The Self-Conceived*. New York: W W Norton Company Inc., 1976.
- Parkes, Bessie Rayner. *Essays on Woman's Work*. London: Alexander Strahan, 1865.
- Pearson, Carol and K. Pope. *The Female Hero in American and British Literature*. Hong Kong: The Macmillan Press, 1981.