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### *The Females' Representation of Males' Image of Women in George Eliot's Works*

**Keywords:** *female; other; male; image; nature; psychoanalysis; feminism.*

**Abstract:** *The article focuses on man's treatment of women in the literary works of George Eliot. In the Victorian patriarchal society, for the "English" novels, as well as for the "Italian" novel, man is considered as the decision-making person, to whom everything is subjected, including woman and nature. However, although it happens rarely, in the Eliotean novels there are several instances when either woman or nature plays a decisive role in the plot, surmounting the male characters' dominant status. Several theoretical approaches have been used in the attempt to demonstrate that the woman in Eliotean novels is considered the Other. I employ the concepts of "intermental thought" (Palmer), "consciousness" (Young), "mirror stage" (Lacan), Hatten's viewpoint on woman's social lot in high Victorian patriarchal society, and Henson's use of feminine attributes of Nature. The relations between the sexes are crucial to Victorian literature as they reveal the social and political frames of the British society portrayed in George Eliot's novels. The theoretical framework and the practical approaches to several novels of George Eliot's assist me in my attempt to demonstrate that Eliotean male characters consider their counterparts the Other.*

In this article I intend to underline men's treatment of women in George Eliot's works. In my demonstration, I employ several theoretical approaches as frame of Eliot's male characters' conduct towards their female counterparts. In George Eliot's works the male voice is not present only as individual appearances but also as collective ones under the protection of patriarchal Victorian society. Among women Victorian writers, George Eliot occupies the first place with regard to the realist program that she introduced in *Adam Bede*, chapter 17 where she mentions the Dutch paintings which portray scenes portraying real life. However, Eliot was not the only woman writer to depict the life of the Victorian woman; Elizabeth Gaskell did it too. But, the latter did not concentrate her fiction as much on the realist program.

Otherness may be defined from racial, cultural and ideological points of view (Ioana Iacob). Regarding racial otherness, the most evident distinction that astonishes the readers is the manner in which the lives of British and Jewish women are described (Hatten, Young). Although they are all prohibited from obtaining any positions superior to their current one, Jewish women are discriminated against

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twice, first from within and then from the outside. Ideologically, the British community clashes with the Jewish one as the former is set in a nation of its own controlling the Empire, while the latter consists of so-called refugees who hope to set a nation of their own. Therefore, there is a racial other and a social other. The social other is represented by women, in this case, who do not obey the social norms and resist the imposed behaviour upon women in general. Otherness may also be viewed from the perspective of nature as part of man's and woman's lives. Nature has unlimited power over humans' lives that it can cause serious changes in the plot in favour of or against female characters.

Social otherness is as ubiquitous as the racial one, but, nonetheless, equally destructive. George Eliot experienced and witnessed social otherness. Mary Anne Evans, George Eliot's real name, was known more for her intellectual abilities than for her beautiful features. In addition to this, she received good education at different schools in Nuneaton and Coventry. Thus, being an unattractive young woman allowed her to become familiar with being the other. For George Eliot it was her education that saved her from being the other her entire life. This is the reason why she considered education to be essential in a woman's life if a woman ever wanted to have any chance of gaining her independence. Education is the central theme of one of George Eliot's well-known essays "Silly Novels by lady Novelists" (1856) in which she criticizes women writers' superficial education and feeling of self-importance. She considers that in order to acquire a social status equal to that of men, the "lady novelists" attempted to copy the male authors' writing style, but they only succeeded in ridiculing their characters and themselves as writers. Women writers, in the Victorian age, were considered inferior to male ones, similar to their literature. Thus, women writers could be rightfully considered the Other as they aspired to a public position that was not meant for them.

The Other may have two meanings: a sociological one and a psychological one. In Eliotean novels it is the latter that is most common since George Eliot was keen on humans' consciousness. Her lay religious humanism supported the idea that humans could help one another provided they do not focus all their attention to their own affairs. There are several instances in which Eliotean characters, both female and male, dedicate their time and actions to helping others. In *Romola*, the female protagonist changes her mind and returns home to help the needy even though she has been betrayed by her husband. In *Daniel Deronda*, Daniel helps Mirah Lapidoth after she attempted to commit suicide and guides her in a world unknown to her where she meets her lost brother. In *Adam Bede*, Dinah Morris assists Hetty in her effort to find forgiveness after having abandoned her newborn baby.

The issue of consciousness is tackled by Alan Palmer in his article "Intermental thought in the novel: the *Middlemarch* mind", too. Palmer researches the manners in which the consciousness of a group influences its members. He emphasizes the role the community has in the lives of individuals. He chooses George Eliot's *Middlemarch* to demonstrate that community bears authority upon its members not only in its social life, but also in its moral life. Palmer builds his arguments on Antonio Damasio's statement: "the study of human consciousness requires both internal and external views" (quoted in Palmer 3). Palmer introduces not only intermental thought, but also intermental units and minds. He defines the

intermental thought as being the necessary tool of a conversation between individuals who are not fairly acquainted with each other. He considers the units as groups that, similarly to the individuals, make use of the intermental thought in their relations. He continues with the categorization of minds that he defines as set intermental units. Palmer considers that the opening of the novel transmits strong suggestions about the lives of its characters. That is why, he argues that “[t]he *Middlemarch* mind is complex, interesting, clearly visible to a close reader of the text, and vitally important to an understanding of the novel because it explains a good deal of the motivation behind the actions of the other main characters” (1).

Women’s lives, in Eliotean novels, are under the microscope of the Victorian society, regarding aspects of their social and moral lives. The novel that Palmer chose for his analysis presents in its opening the two sisters, Celia and Dorothea Brooke, drawing a comparison between them; with the result that Celia was an “amiable and innocent-looking” young lady, while Dorothea with her “large eyes” was “too unusual and striking” (*Middlemarch* 7). The narrator underlines the woman’s status in high Victorian age following Dorothea’s introduction: “Women were expected to have weak opinions; but the great safeguard of society and of domestic life was, that opinions were not acted on. Sane people did what their neighbours did, so that if any lunatics were at large, one might know and avoid them” (*Middlemarch* 7). Dorothea is perceived as “bewitching when she was on horseback”. Julia Kristeva considers woman as “singular” and as having been attributed the image of a “witch” by patriarchal philosophy (*Powers of Horror*). Her “singularity” is different from the patriarchal one that is the reason why she is “demonic”. Kristeva considers that the symbolic order that philosophy created should be transformed together with the double-standardised manner of viewing man and woman (*About Chinese Women*). Hence, equal opportunities for man and woman may arise again. The novel’s denouement presents Dorothea Brooke as a happily married woman who has become a mother. However, although the narrator portrays her family life as being a joyful one, her brother-in-law’s disapproving thoughts are presented in the epilogue. Dorothea's action may be interpreted as the narrator's involvement in the plot, because when the novel was published, “the Woman’s question” was intensely debated. It may also represent Eliot's disapproval of women's suffrage movement, which she refused to support.

George Eliot’s male protagonists embody different types of personalities; nonetheless they all desire to control their female counterparts’ lives. They take women for granted along with their maternal and educator roles. In their relationship with the female characters, male protagonists observe women through their own self. Young argues that Eliot focuses on her characters’ consciousness regarding the manner in which they perceive the others:

[f]or Eliot, looking to “see” the consciousness of another as a means of knowing another means seeing the other through the lens of the self. Seeing involves a negotiation between image and its analysis, an analysis based on the seer’s past knowledge or experiences or desires. To see the other means always to know a “negotiated” other, or reflection of the self. (Young 76-7)

George Eliot's male characters make use of their background education, which in the high Victorian age meant that they were accustomed to being thought of as superior in physical strength and intellect, in order to observe the others. They employ it to build corresponding images for their female partners and analyse the result through their own filter. However, Eliot, as Young informs us, considers human consciousness above the imposed and predicted roles and images woman should have in Victorian society. George Eliot's interest in consciousness dates back to her translations of *Life of Jesus* (Strauss) and *The Essence of Christianity* (Feuerbach), along with her interest in positivism, a philosophical movement introduced by Auguste Comte. Translating and reading these works influenced Eliot's writing as she became estranged from her family and refused to go to church with her father. These works inspired her to write about a lay religion of humanism, which should guide us in our lives having in mind that one should help his/her like.

In *Daniel Deronda*, the female protagonist, Gwendolen Harleth, meets two different men, Daniel Deronda and Henleigh Grandcourt. The former is supposed to be the son of Hugh Mallinger and the latter is his nephew. She is intrigued by the first one as the narrator presents us the state of affairs: "[i]t had been Gwendolen's habit to think of the persons around her as stale books, too familiar to be interesting. Deronda had lit up her attention with a sense of novelty: not by words only, but by *Imagined facts*, his influence had entered into the current of that self-suspicion and self-blame which awakens a new consciousness" (*Daniel Deronda*, 319). However the two are not romantically involved. The second male figure enters the plot and makes her believe that she could be the subject and not the object of the relationship. In addition to this, her family's financial situation devolves toward a gloomy outcome, as they become bankrupt. Thus, Gwendolen becomes engaged to a man she believes is subject to her charms, but it is an illusion as Grandcourt's mistress is introduced in the plot. Gwendolen has to choose between becoming a governess and marrying Grandcourt. She also has to surpass her anxiety on sexual intercourse. The male character who assists her along the novel is Deronda who teaches her to comport herself and to control her anxiety: "[t]urn your fear into a safeguard. Keep your dread fixed on the idea of increasing that remorse which is so bitter to you. ... Try to take hold of your sensibility, and use it as if it were a faculty like vision" (*Daniel Deronda* 452). At the end of the novel Gwendolen transmits her gratitude in a letter to Deronda stating that: "I have remembered your words – that I may live to be one of the best of women, who make others glad that they were born. I do not yet see how that can be, but you know better than I. If it ever comes true, it will be because you helped me" (*Daniel Deronda* 810). The images that the two male characters form about Gwendolen facilitate the reader's understanding of her state of mind. Deronda is the one that supports her through the tyrannical marriage she voluntarily enters. Grandcourt embodies the dominant, controlling man who imposes his wife to wear the pearl necklace that belonged to his mistress. He perceives his wife as his object that he can use in whichever ways he considers suitable. He is not the only to think this. Gwendolen's uncle, Mr Gascoigne who is satisfied with his niece's suitor as women like her are rarely selected to become wives of such important and powerful men as Grandcourt: "[I]et us be thankful, Fanny. She is in a position well suited to her, and beyond what I should have dared

to hope for. And few women can have been chosen more entirely for their own sake. You should feel yourself a happy mother” (263)

Woman, in George Eliot’s novels, is viewed as the Other from a sexual point of view; that is, she is subjected to male characters’ drives as Jacques Lacan claims the following:

With regard to the agency of sexuality, all subjects are equal, from the child to the adult ... they deal only with that part of sexuality that passes into the networks of the constitution of the subject, into the networks of the signifier ... sexuality is realized only through the operation of the drives in so far as they are partial drives, partial with regard to the biological finality of sexuality. (Lacan 176-177)

The equality Lacan refers to relates to the fact that humans are sexual beings, irrespective of their age. Sexuality itself includes subjects and objects. The female is considered weaker, since she lacks the Phallus. The male or subject is, thus, superior to the female or object. The subject, possessing the Phallus, determines the object’s lack as “the subject, in order to constitute itself, has separated itself off as organ. This serves as a symbol of the lack, that is to say of the phallus, not as much, but insofar as it is lacking. It must, therefore, be an object that is, firstly separable, and secondly, that has some relation to the lack” (Lacan 103).

Kay Young presents Eliot’s epistemological quest, which Young argues appears in her narrative as a manner of knowing the subject. Young claims that George Eliot’s novels are, in fact, ‘biographical fictions’ as they are named after their main protagonists. The novels mainly focus on the characters’ quest for knowledge, “as a means of coming to self-knowledge” (71). Female characters’ search of knowledge does not involve only the issue of education, but also their need and capability to know more than how to sew, draw, paint or play the piano. As regards education, George Eliot considered it paramount in the life of a woman living in the high Victorian age, even more important than the right to vote. Eliotean female characters tend to perceive knowledge from an exterior perspective unlike other Victorian female protagonists. Her male characters are concerned with knowledge; however, they are not interested in knowing the other even though they do not seem to have identity issues. An important theme that emerges while reading is marriage which could be considered as the result of courtship built on image. Hence, in *Daniel Deronda*, Sir Hugo Mallinger presents his opinion to Daniel about matrimony:

In general, one may be sure that whenever a marriage of any mark takes place, male acquaintances are likely to pity the bride, female acquaintances the bridegroom: each, it is thought, might have done better, and especially where the bride is charming, young gentlemen on the scene are apt to conclude that she can have no real attachment to a fellow so uninteresting to themselves as her husband, but has married him on other grounds. (*Daniel Deronda* 334)

Marriage is based on the image of the other, and, as in the high Victorian age it was men who asked women in matrimony, women were simply on the

marketplace, where the best-looking one could achieve the best ‘deal’. However, even if they held the power of decision-making, they would still become subjected to men after marrying them. In the same novel, in the opening, the female protagonist, Gwendolen Harleth, is portrayed as a “sylph” (5), which designates a graceful, female figure or an imaginary being. Thus, Gwendolen acquires an aura of otherness, and the plot confirms that she is an ‘untamed’ young lady living in an era of domesticity.

George Eliot’s male characters’ perception of their female counterparts appears to focus on the dominant axis of their relationships. The males’ dominance is not only physical or intellectual, but also sexual. However, there are some exceptions. In *Middlemarch* Reverend Edward Casaubon and his wife strive to have a baby as early as their honeymoon but they are unsuccessful. The narrator subtly suggests that Dorothea is expected to become pregnant but readers learn that Mr Casaubon is ill and shortly after, he succumbs. Casaubon reveals his jealousy when Dorothea meets his cousin, Will Ladislaw, who, due to his youth and interest in art, captivates Dorothea. Therefore, he adds a codicil to his will which forbids Dorothea to marry Will Ladislaw in case she wants to remarry. In Casaubon’s opinion, his wife should be obedient and helpful regarding his project of writing *Key to All Mythologies*. He demands Dorothea to continue working on his book, which he has not even started writing, but she intends to refuse him when she finds him dead. However, his dominance is put to an end the moment she marries Will.

The Eliotean narrative is focused on woman’s “alienation from family life” situated at the core of feminine experience and subjectivity, as Charles Hatten argues. Males’ image of female characters, although rarely if not clearly stated, may be grasped from the subtle narrative hints or from the male characters’ actions (184). In *Daniel Deronda*, woman’s alienation is the central theme of the novel as several female characters are victims of males’ tyrannical dominance: Gwendolen Harleth, who marries Henleigh Mallinger Grandcourt; Lydia Glasher, Grandcourt’s former mistress; Mirah Lapidoth, whose father intended to make profit on her musical talent and sell her; and Princess Alcharisi, whose father forced her to marry despite her being an artist.

If this white-handed man with the perpendicular profile had been sent to govern a difficult colony, he might have won reputation among his contemporaries. He had certainly ability, would have understood that it was safer to examine than to cajole superseded proprietors, and would not have flinched from making things in that way. (*Daniel Deronda* 594)

Hatten claims that women are not only the victims of males’ dominance but also of the imperial market: “[i]f women are victims of the power of the market, in her representation of Victorian Jews as a people face potential dehumanization by their enmeshment in the market place. While a Jew such as Mirah is an unwilling victim of the marketplace, Eliot’s development of the theme also suggests that many Jews (such as Mirah’s father) use the market to victimize others [...]” (199).

In *Felix Holt, the Radical*, Harold Transome’s standpoint concerning British wives is clear right from the beginning: “‘Would you have had me wait for a

consumptive lackadaisical Englishwoman, who would have hung all her relations round my neck? I hate English wives; they want to give their opinion about everything. They interfere with a man's life. I shall not marry again.” (20) His coming back from the Orient changes his perspective on marriage as he has already been married to an Oriental woman. His viewpoint is distorted as he perceives British women as the Other, unlike the Oriental ones. The main male character of the novel, Felix Holt, meets Esther Lyon whose father seems to listen to her: “‘Ho, ho!’ thought Felix, ‘her father is frightened at her. How came he to have such a nice-stepping, long-necked peacock for his daughter? But she shall see that I am not frightened.’ Then he said aloud, ‘I should like to know how you will justify your admiration for such a writer, Miss Lyon’” (62).

Controlling the other is not only a literary concept, but also a psychoanalytic one. Sigmund Freud's theory of gender difference presented in his 1925 essay “Some Psychological Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction between the Sexes” states that gender differentiation is based on the psychological effects of the existence or lack of the penis. This is the reason why women think differently than men: “I cannot evade the notion (though I hesitate to give it expression) that for women the level of what is ethically normal is different from what is in men. Their super-ego is never so inexorable, so impersonal, so independent of its emotional origins, as we require it to be in men” (1925, quoted in Weedon 78). Although Freud's theory is outdated, whether supported or dismantled, still is the starting point of the feminist criticism and psychoanalytic analysis. Jacques Lacan, a French psychoanalyst who considers language and its relation to subjectivity paramount in the understanding of one's psychic, introduces the concept of “mirror stage” which represents “an identification ... the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image” (quoted in Weedon: 81). Eliotean female characters' evolution from the state of single to married women is a process that may prove to be difficult to achieve. For instance, in *Daniel Deronda*, Gwendolen cannot restrain herself from rebelling against Grandcourt but she becomes, at least towards the end of his existence, submissive in his presence although wishing his death. The “mirror stage” that Gwendolen experiences takes place when in chapter 3, Book 1, her mother, Mrs Davilow informs her that “marriage is the only happy state for women, as I trust you will prove” (33). However, Gwendolen does not feel “the desire for the phallus” like her mother does as she asks her why she needed to remarry. Thus, in her case, wifehood is not Gwendolen's ideal image.

Jacques Lacan presents woman's/ mother's lust for the phallus as being fulfilled by the child who would like to satisfy her mother:

The demand for love can only suffer from a desire whose signifier is foreign to it. If the mother's desire *is* for the phallus, the child wants to be the phallus in order to satisfy her desire. Thus the division immanent in desire already makes itself felt by virtue of being experienced in the Other's desire, in that this division already stands in the way of the subject being satisfied with presenting to the Other the real [organ] he may *have* that corresponds to the phallus; for what he has is no better than what he does not have, from the point of view of his demand for love, which would like him to be the phallus. (582)

Gwendolen satisfies her mother, not out of satisfaction for her mother, but out of serving her family as their only financial saviour.

Another psychoanalytic theory is Lacan's general theory of society and culture according to which male authority guides patriarchal society. Man has the advantage of meaning and subjectivity which are structured in relation to a primary signifier, the Phallus, which governs the symbolic order of society and culture. The control of the phallus equals the control of the laws and meaning in society. This is the position assumed by the Other, who in Lacan's theory is God. Consequently, following Lacan's interpretation, in Eliot's novels we can detect the existence of an over powerful being who watches characters' actions and determines whether they were right or wrong. For instance, in *Adam Bede* Hetty Sorrel is punished for her deeds, but her redemption helps her in acquiring a second chance by being exiled.

George Eliot's novels present nature as the silent character which regulates the characters' lives so that they correspond to the norm enforced by the Victorian society. In *The Mill on the Floss*, the ending is a dramatic one as nature takes its gain in the lives of Maggie and Tom Tulliver. Steven Earnshaw comments upon the flood, which "is symbolic in different ways and so is the rather elevated manner of the final image we have of them. Eliot then submerges their fates back into the vicissitudes of natural cycles, just as the flood is part of nature" (120). In *Daniel Deronda*, Grandcourt 'surprisingly' drowns as though Gwendolen's wish was accomplished by nature. Nature is the female characters' witness in all their actions – Maggie meets Philip Wakem in a hidden and private place away from their families' surveillance; Hetty and Arthur Donnithorne have secret romantic meetings and Gwendolen meets her future husband's former mistress in a hidden place away from any intruding eyes and ears in order to find out that she should not marry Grandcourt.

The use of nature in Victorian literature is researched by Eithne Henson in her book *Landscape and Gender in the Novels of Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot and Thomas Hardy*. Henson states that almost all of George Eliot's novels, except two, are set in the English Midlands. She employs the OED to define Nature, with capital "n", as "more or less definitely personified as a female being" and considers that "the idea of Nature as gendered is complementary to the idea of Woman as Nature". In support of his opinion he quotes Gillian Rose's statement regarding the common features of Nature and women:

The femininity of Nature invoked both the passive and nurturing Mother Nature of organic theories of the self and cosmos, as well as the tempestuous and uncontrollable wild Nature of storms, pestilence and wilderness; both Woman's fecundity and her evil lust placed her closer to Nature than men, and both characterised Nature itself. (Rose, quoted in Henson 10)

The feminine attributes of Nature resemble the attributes of woman, such as passivity, motherhood, emotional, if not, hysterical, and wild. In *Romola*, the fury of Nature coincides with Romola's – the flood that inundates Florence is similar to the rage Romola experiences when her late father's library is sold by her husband. The end of the novel presents the two women together, taking care of the two children

Tessa and Tito had. With Tito dead, they can perform as mothers as Nature offered them this quality. Nature, at the end of the novel, seems to resume its tranquility in the aftermath of the flood.

The issue of alterity, although it is a more modern concept, can successfully be employed in literary analyses of Victorian novels. In order to demonstrate the fact that Eliotean plot is built on the inequality of chances between sexes, several theoretical approaches from different fields have been used along with feminist interpretations of Eliotean novels and the implication of nature's cycles and natural disasters.

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