

# Family and women in the mill on the floss

[Sociology](#), [Women](#)



The current work attempts to describe the presence of family and women in *The Mill on the Floss* by George Eliot. By examining the portrayal and treatment of women under the light of feminism, it attempts to study the patriarchal stereotypes being reaffirmed through the institution of Family within the text.

In this research essay, my intention is to observe the impact of Family on female characters and how the impact varies from male characters in the novel *The Mill on the Floss*, and to note how the structure of Family is ultimately sexist in nature. Accordingly, the mainline of my research essay is: Family is a toxic institution for women in *The Mill on the Floss*.

*The Mill on the Floss* (1860) is a novel written by George Eliot and published by William Blackwood. Set in late 1820s or early 1830s, the novel is greatly acclaimed in the literary world because of the extraordinary representation of its subject matter; Conflict between inward and outward self and an intellectual woman's place in family and society.

#### ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION:

Feminist theory sheds light on how women are represented in a literary text. It interprets how women are affected by gender as a result of social values reflected in a work. Traditional literary canon mostly overlooks or ignores female authors or female narratives within a text. Hence, women adhere to traditional gender roles determined by male dominant society/patriarchy, the institution of family enforces the idea of unpaid emotional and physical labor on women.

The relationships in families work as tools to legitimize that patriarchy within the households which effects women's mental and emotional health. Thus, women are often portrayed in the light of sexist remarks, endorsing the gender based typecasts and stereotypes propagated by male perception.

" Sexism" implies those cultural assumptions that make women be regarded, unjustly, in different ways. They are often considered inferior to men socially, intellectually and morally. This notion of women being inferior gets constantly reaffirmed by how the main character Maggie Tulliver is treated throughout the text.

To understand the toxic effect of Family on women and the way Eliot portrays it, we must take into consideration the cultural framework and societal situation of the author in which the novel was written. Rohan Maitzen discusses in his article, As Eliot was only too aware from her own experience, a girl's journey to adulthood especially if she aspired to anything beyond a typically domestic female role was likely to be less a triumphant journey than a series of collisions with society's restrictions. (Maitzen, ' The Mill on the Floss as bildungsroman').

According to critic Karen P, Men were able to shape the world and were dominative while women possessed emotion and motherly love. These qualities are enough to make women submissive. (Karen 5) Due to this authoritarian social construct woman in The Mill on the Floss are positioned lower than men.

To maintain this system, women are prohibited to attain the positions of power, knowledge and authority of any kind. They are not able to exercise their maximum potential because of social and domestic restrictions which turns into a constant struggle of inner and external personality.

The Mill on the Floss highlights the suffering experienced by women in a male-dominated society in detail; and brings out the absurdity of rituals and customs which help to propagate the myth of the patriarchal society.

The novel actually includes the holistic story of the plight of Maggie Tulliver who is a victim of gross gender discrimination that prevails in her family.

Maggie suffers intensely both as a child and as a grown up. Victorian ideology of the rational man's superiority over woman emotional inferiority, was the conflict Victorian female characters of considerable mental capacity faced.

As a woman who is logical, philosophical and scientific, she departs from a normal woman in her physical and mental characteristics. Eliot presents Maggie as more imaginative and interesting than the rest of her family and, sympathetically, in need of more love as well. From the very beginning of the novel, we observe how Maggie is rebellious in nature, she reacts to her mother's orders by refusing to do her patch work as "it's a foolish work".

She is sick of "tearing things to sew them together again" (Eliot 7). Gender roles are being reaffirmed through the character of Mrs. Tulliver who is gravely invested in making Maggie a lady, "Oh dear, oh, dear Maggie, what are you thinkin' of, to throw your bonnet down there... do, for shame,

an'come an' go on with your patch work like a little lady" (Eliot 7) Patch work serves as a symbol of domesticity and her refusal to it reflects her desire to do something greater than the assigned chores.

Mr. Tulliver's self-righteousness and typical approach shows a total disregard of Maggie's intelligence and considers Maggie's craving for studies as a sign of her impracticality and irrationality. His utter indifference of Maggie's studious nature truly asserts itself when Tom is sent off to school and Maggie stays home despite her intelligence and love for reading.

Whenever she tries to display her knowledge, she is sent off by saying that she has too much intelligence for a girl which leaves a deep effect on her mental and emotional health. Mr. Tulliver completely insults her by saying, "shut up the book, and let's hear no more o' such talk. It is as I thought—the child 'ull learn more mischief nor good wi'the books. Go, go and see after your mother."(Eliot 12)

She is repetitively reminded of her inferior status of being a woman by her brother Tom which is evident throughout the novel,

*" Well, you'll be a woman someday," said Tom, " so you needn't talk."*

*" But I shall be a clever woman," said Maggie, with a toss.*

*" Oh, I dare say, and a nasty conceited thing. Everybody'll hate you." (Eliot 131)*

Small incidents show the supremacy of patriarchal order and how after every small incident Maggie drives into doubting herself again and again. The self-

righteousness of all the male characters in the novel make it impossible for women to assert any kind of superiority in terms of knowledge or intellect.

According to Victorian society, if a woman fails to please men's aesthetics, she fails herself as a woman. Maggie's physical appearance is not beautiful in conventional sense of the word. She has dark eyes and dark hair which makes her unattractive according to the Victorian beauty standards.

Her demeanor is often described as demonic, and she is often referred to as a 'Wench' because of the dark hair she possesses, her unattractiveness is established from the outset of the novel where her mother constantly wails about her hair, let your hair be brushed, an' put your other pinafore on, an' change your shoes, do, for shame. (Eliot 7) and it becomes the whole family's concerns as Tom mentions, " Put your hair behind your ears, Maggie, and keep your frock on your shoulder." (Eliot 47)

It directly reflects how women were deprived of their own even on their own bodies by their families. They were policed about their appearances and choices, " Fie, for shame!" said aunt Glegg, in her loudest, severest tone of reproof. " Little gells as cut their own hair should be whipped and fed on bread and water, —not come and sit down with their aunts and uncles." (Eliot 58)

Maggie then, remains conflicted between conforming to the gender roles given by the society to please her family and doing things she actually loves to please herself. George Eliot's work *The Mill on the Floss* presents the idea that how a female passes through trials and tribulations to establish her

individuality. Maggie made painstaking efforts to obtain her rights and please her family at the same time just in search of salvation.

The impact of family's disapproval can be seen throughout in the text, Tom left poor Maggie to that bitter sense of the irrevocable which was almost an every-day experience of her small soul. (Eliot 47) Patriarchy in the form of her father and then her brother takes active part in order to limit her abilities.

Even her mother and her aunts are the stereotypes who are in conformity with tradition. Mrs. Tulliver's mind works in small circles—she focuses mainly on tactile objects like the linens and the china, she is portrayed as a very domesticated woman who adheres to the assigned gender role. Lucy Deane is genuinely good-hearted character, thinking often of the happiness of others, and she pays heed to social conventions rather than her own heart conforming to societal criteria of beauty and morality.

Women are bound to their families in more than one ways, they are forbidden to pursue any kind of romantic love if the family disapproves of it. In the novel, Maggie represses her desires for the men her brother disapproves of. Her inner turmoil of passion and emotion is unmanageable but she suppresses herself for the sake of approval from her family. Tom and her family emotionally abuses her into thinking lowly of herself. She feels ashamed of wanting things like affection and books and friendship.

Maggie is treated like an outcast and a fallen woman after she returns to Saint Oggs without marrying Stephen Guest. Maggie considered immoral

according to Christian beliefs. She tries to stand against the so-called values but suffers from mental trials and tribulations, especially by her family as Tom refuses to keep her in the house. Only death comes to rescue her and brings salvation to her in the form of the swelling waters of Floss.

#### CONCLUSION:

The family is the basic social institution in society. It functions as the basic unit which produces future generations and provides love and affection to the children. It is the responsibility of the family to not only provide economically but to take care of a child's emotional needs too.

Maggie's family and the environment is materialistic and aesthetically barren. They fail to provide her a suitable environment that meets with her mental and emotional needs. She is passionate but spiritually bound to her family who is in utter disregard of her intellect, her intelligence does not find her environment suitable because it is not compatible with her aesthetic needs. The mutual incompatibility of Maggie and her family is the reason for Maggie's mental and emotional plight; it is the main reason her family becomes toxic for her inner self.