

## Estrangement and Endearment in The Novels of George Eliot

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George Eliot occupies an important place in the history of English fiction. Though counted among the Victorians, she is the first modern novelist. The modern age which witnesses the literary activities of Henry James, D.H. Lawrence and Virginia Woolf, begin with George Eliot. She does not break away from the old tradition but adds something new to it. The vivid setting of her novels, well constructed plots, their entertaining quality along with the criticism of life remind one of the Victorian authors like Dickens, Mrs. Gaskell and Thackeray. But none of them saw the complexity of human drama as she did. Her emphasis on the inner life of her characters, her use of flashback and open endings in her novels, her intellectual power and deep concern with moral issues make her a deserving predecessor of Conrad, Arnold Bennett and D.H. Lawrence. Baker writes in The History of the English Novel that George Eliot was “the first great novelist to explore the dimmer regions of consciousness, to trace the inner phenomena of which character and deeds are the outward manifestation....” He adds that the “novel of ideas” was her creation.<sup>1</sup> David Daiches gives her the credit for adding new scope and “dignity” to the English novel and making it “intellectually respectable.”<sup>2</sup> It should not be presumed that George Eliot was not aware of contemporary problems or did not write about them; but her mind was more occupied by those

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serious problems of human life and destiny which are present in all ages.

George Eliot's vision of life, her philosophy and moral sensibility find expression through the relationships in her novels. Thus, while Arthur-Hetty relationship illustrates her belief in free-will, Tito – Baldassarre episode highlights her belief in a man's duty to follow the right path. Her conviction that life is just, finds expression through Silas –Eppie relationship, while Gwendolen's marriage and redemption illuminate another belief that suffering enlarges the soul. George Eliot writes about men and women living and working together in a society, coming into contact with one another, forming relationships and breaking them. It is through this ever – changing, ever – expanding network of relationships which may well be said to be the “microcosm of man in the world,”<sup>3</sup> that the ultimate moral meaning emerges. The perception of this network which is in no way simple, is the end of George Eliot's novels. For her, as for Feuerbach whose “The Essence of Christianity” she translated, religion consists not in abstract principles but in human relationships, social and personal. Life can be unbearable without a communion of human feelings like love, sympathy and admiration.

George Eliot also believed in the interdependence of human beings. So, the good or bad act of a man influence the lives of all those who live around him accordingly: all share in the blessings which are a result of his goodness, similarly all have to bear the disgrace if he commits a crime. Arthur Donnithorne in Adam Bede wrongly supposed that he alone would have to suffer the consequences of his actions which eventually altered the lives of Adam, Hetty, Mr and Mrs Poyser, and other relatives and friends. George Eliot's canvas is crowded with people who belong to different class and professions. There are scientists, doctors, preachers, landlords, weavers, labourers,

lawyers, politicians and housewives. Their lives often criss – cross and intersect forming a tangled web – like pattern of relationships. Middlemarch is the best illustration of this in which almost all the principal characters are linked with a continuous chain of relationships by blood or marriage. Thus Dorothea is a niece to Arthur Brooke, sister to Celia, wife to Casaubon and then, to Ladislav; Bulstrode is the step – grandfather to Ladislav, husband to Harriet, brother- in- law to Mr. Vincy and uncle – by – marriage to Fred and Rosamond; Fred is son to Mr. Vincy, brother to Rosamond, husband to Mary, nephew to Mrs.Bulstrode, nephew – by – marriage to Featherstone and to Bulstrode and brother – in – law to Lydgate, who is an outsider in Middlemarch, becomes a part of its society by his marriage to Rosamond. Interaction between these characters gives birth to numerous relationships some of which run parallel to one another or present a contrast to other relationships. For instance, Dorothea – Casaubon marriage illuminates and is illuminated by Lydgate – Rosamond marriage; and the Garth family highlights the short – comings of the Vincy family. An understanding of one helps in the understanding of another. Dorothea –Ladislav, Ladislav –Rosamond, Lydgate –Dorothea, Ladislav –Casaubon, Fred –Mary, Mary –Fred brother – all these relationships touch one another somewhere. This is true of other novels also. In The Mill on the Floss, the relations of Hetty –Arthur, Hetty – Adam, Dineh –Hetty, etc. are further complicated by the existence of minor characters such as Lisbeth Bede, Seth, Mrs. Poyser etc. These similarities and dissimilarities are to be found not only within one novel but also between two or more novels. Caterina’s passion for Wybrow in Scenes of Clerical Life resembles Hetty’s love for Arthur in Adam Bede. Philip’s admiration for Maggie in The Mill on the Floss looks like a better version of Gilfil’s devotion to Caterina. Eppie’s love and loyalty

to her foster-father Silas Marner in the novel of the same name, makes it easy for the readers to condemn Tito for denying his foster-father in Romola.

Jenni Calder has praised George Eliot for describing so well the hostilities, jealousies and petty quarrels of family life – “Parents and children, brothers and sisters, husbands and wives, live together, simultaneously linked and separate, aware of natural ties and resentful of them, submitting their individuality and protecting it.”<sup>1</sup> This points out another important feature of the depiction of relationships in George Eliot’s novels—they are constantly changing, for better or for worse. Thus it is either “estrangement” or “endearment” that she is always portraying. Hence, The Mill on the Floss depicts the gradual loss of love between Maggie and her brother Tom; Silas Marner is about the growth of love between Silas and his daughter Eppie; Romola shows how Tito and Romola come closer and then are slowly alienated from each other; Daniel Deronda captures the estrangement of Gwendolen from her husband; and Middlemarch records both the processes – estrangement and endearment. This is true about all of her novels. Arnold Kettle aptly observes that “no novelist before her had so consciously and conscientiously tried to convey the inter-relatedness of social life or the changing nature of individuals and their relationships.”<sup>2</sup> Here, it would not be irrelevant to point out that in her personal life also George Eliot gave much importance to relationships. Whenever she was attached to anyone, she devoted her whole being to make that person happy. Some of the best years of her life were spent in carling for her aging father. When he died, George Eliot was twenty-nine years old. A few hours before his death she had written to her friends: “What shall I do without my father? It will seem as if part of my moral nature were gone.”<sup>1</sup> Her irregular union with Lewes in 1854, invited much

social criticism. It was not possible for Lewes to get divorce because he had condoned his wife's adultery by accepting her children from Thornton Hunt. Throughout his life, Lewes supported these children and after his death, George Eliot continued to do so. Lewes gave her the emotional stability she needed so much. Without him, Marian Evans could never have become George Eliot, the novelist. She once wrote that nothing in her life had been more serious than her relationship with Lewes, and insisted on being addressed as Mrs. Lewes. They lived together in a union of trust, loyalty and devotion till the death of Lewes in 1878. After his death, she said, "I had thought that my life was ended, and that, so to speak, my coffin was ready for me in the next room".<sup>2</sup> Her brother Isaac whom she loved very much, had severed his connections with her when she started living with Lewes. It was one of the most painful experiences of her life. When, on her marriage with J.W. Cross, she received a letter of her brother congratulating her, she felt very happy.

Throughout her life George Eliot needed someone on whom she could shower all her love and affection. But she hated "light and easily-broken ties" more than anything else. She believed that human happiness depends on mutual love and sacrifice. Her novels are also based on these views and beliefs.

#### (Footnotes)

<sup>1</sup> E.A. Baker, The History of the English Novel (London: H.F. & G. Witherby Ltd., 1942), VIII, 250

<sup>2</sup> David Daiches, A Critical History of English Literature (London: Secker & Warbury Ltd., 1960), II, 1067.

<sup>3</sup> David Daiches, A Critical History of English Literature, II, 1071.

<sup>1</sup> Jenni Calder, Women and Marriage in Victorian Fiction (London : Themes and Hudson Ltd., 1976), p. 131

<sup>2</sup> Arnold Kettle, An Introduction to the English Novel

(rpt. New York and Evanston : Harper & Row, 1960), I, 190.

<sup>1</sup>George Eliot quoted by Walter Allen, George Eliot (London : Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1965), p. 51.

<sup>2</sup>George Eliot quoted by Marjory A. Bald, Women Writers of the Nineteenth Century (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1923), p. 179.