

**Review**

# Satire on Female Intellectual Capabilities in George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* (1860)

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**Abstract:** The oppression of women by men in patriarchal societies is based on the belief that women do not have the same physical and intellectual capacity as men. Because of this belief, women do not enjoy the same opportunities as men when it comes to education in life. This study analyses the various literary devices used by George Eliot to denounce the denial of women's rights to education. It documents the violation of female character's rights to education in George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*. The liberal feminist theory developed by Mary Wollstonecraft who advocates mixed education for gender equality is used in this study. How the novelist develops a literary irony on female intellectual capabilities to study the same subjects as men is highlighted in this study. The literary irony is used to denounce the violation of women's rights to education. It has revealed how the novelist promotes a genderless education for the benefit of both women and men in order to reach a social progress in the world.

**Key words:** Oppression-Education-Rights-Women-Intellectual-Capability-Satire

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## INTRODUCTION

The oppression of women in patriarchal societies is experienced from the cradle to the grave across the world. The issue about the inequality between men and women in terms of gender is rooted in the form of education that is given to girls and boys at their tender age up to the time they grow up to become adult citizens in society. Patriarchy understood "as the economic, political, sexual and ideological domination of women by men" (Murray, 1995/2005:26) does not favour women's emancipation in any form whatsoever. This social injustice provoked movements demanding reforms. Many movements and agitations in the Victorian society arose

as a result of this aristocratic and patriarchal oppressive rule which was not in favour of women's emancipation. Women were not entitled to enjoy the same rights as men. The fact of denying women the right to have the same privileges as men constitutes oppression against them and a violation of their rights to emancipation.

Ellen Rooney explains this issue by saying that "Any agitation on behalf of women's rights involves some sort of critique of the dominant order, some kind of "theory" of women's oppression in a patriarchal society" (Rooney, 2006: 73). For example, Anne Brontë in *Agnes Grey* (1847) and George Eliot in her second novel *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) to name only these, are illustrations of this preoccupation of writers in favour of gender equality.

Jill I Matus remarks this peculiarity about George Eliot by saying that “Her stature in the field of English novelists rests on in no small measure on the way her novels show the scope and complexity of her views about society, religion, gender, history, ethics and morality” (Matus, 2009: 227). George Eliot in *The Mill on the Floss* has developed a critique of the patriarchal oppressive order which is not in favour of women’s emancipation.

The aim of this study is to analyse the various literary devices used by George Eliot to denounce the denial of the rights of women to education in order to secure the same educational opportunity for both men and women beyond gender barriers. It shows that there is a violation of women’s rights to education. This violation constitutes a disempowerment of women. The process of disempowerment is conducted through an imbalanced attitude of men towards gender equality in relationship with the education of girls and indirectly the education of women in general. The study examines how George Eliot delineates this thorny issue of discrimination against women in terms of their rights to education through the use of satire. Further, the study looks at how George Eliot uses irony in the construction of the plot in the story in order to express in an artistic way the patriarchal disbeliefs in the female’s intellectual capabilities to study the same the subjects as men. It looks at how George Eliot denounces the patriarchal disempowerment of women from their tender age through an imbalanced system of education put in place in the novel.

This study is conducted under the lenses of the liberal feminist theory developed by Mary Wollstonecraft who advocates mixed education for gender equality in education to take place. This mixed education is the corner stone for women’s emancipation because they will benefit from the same education as men. With the mixed education, there is no discrimination against women in terms of their rights to have the same privileges as men in terms of educational opportunities and later in terms of employment opportunities. This liberal feminist theory promotes women’s rights to enjoy the same privileges as men right from their tender age. This can be done only through education of boys and girls under the same system of values that are beneficial to both of them.

A focus on the patriarchal world view on female education will be followed by the study of how the writer develops a literary irony on female intellectual capabilities to read the same subjects as men. The last aspect will be based on the perspective developed by the writer to promote a genderless education in the novel under study.

### **Patriarchal World View on Female Education in *The Mill on the Floss***

Literature is “an artful arrangement of language.” (Cavanagh, *et al.*: 2010; 4) This artful use of language serves as a mirror of society. As such, it is used to reveal

to the readers what goes on in society with a creative perspective. The mirror, through what the readers make of the texts they read, focuses most of the time on what goes on wrong in society for them to develop a consciousness and a desire for a better society. This can be justified by the fact that writers use their geniuses to create new societies that are different from the ones in which they live or the ones they observe in their daily lives. In the context of the Victorian society as it is the case in many other societies across the world today, patriarchy was identified as being what provoked things to go wrong in that society in terms of gender equality.

George Eliot in *The Mill on the Floss* provides a realistic description of the social behaviour of characters under a patriarchal system with the use of satire in the novel in terms of their attitude in front of gender inequality and the future of the youth. In the novel, female characters who represent women of the Victorian society are portrayed as being oppressed by male characters who stand for men within the family unit of the said society. This oppression of women serves the purpose of men’s patriarchal interests and their desire to wield power over women with the ultimate aim of subjugating them. The patriarchal world view of Mr Tulliver does not open ways for him to have discussions with the female members of the family. The fact is that, Bessy his wife has no power to object to his decisions. She simply wanted her husband to invite her aunts like Sister Glegg and Sister Pullet for them to have their say about the education of their children. To prove that the Victorian society was dominated by the patriarchal world view, it is easy to notice that Mrs Tulliver herself had no idea about the education of her children. She did not have idea about any good school where to send her children, especially her daughter Maggie.

The patriarchal interests are featured in the behaviour of Mr Tulliver in the novel. The world view of Mr Tulliver on education is motivated by the preservation and the perpetuation of privileges to benefit men only. His system of beliefs and values are guided by patriarchal motives. For instance, Mr Tulliver decided alone to give a sound education to his son Tom. The narrator lets the reader know that Mr Tulliver made his resolution public when he was speaking to his wife Bessy. Being a male character in a patriarchal setting, he took singlehandedly this decision without consulting his wife. The latter was later merely informed about the decision he made about his son’s education. He did not consul this wife simply because she is a woman. From the liberal feminist perspective, women’s opinion does not matter in men’s world view and in their decision making process.

The main motivation of Mr Tulliver to send Tom to a good school is based on the fact that he himself had not had the chance to benefit from any good education when he was a young man. So he sees himself in Tom and wants him to have the best in terms of education that can be found on earth. He wants to perpetuate men’s

patriarchal power over women through the education he wants for his son Tom to the detriment of his daughter Maggie who was also at the schooling age. Mr Tulliver's preference for his son Tom to become highly educated betrays his gender bias. This is what he tells his wife:

I want Tom to be such a sort of man like Mr Riley, you know – as can talk pretty nigh as well as if it was all wrote out for him, and knows a good lot o' words as don't mean much, so as you can't lay hold of 'them in law; and a good solid knowledge o' business too (Eliot, 1860/1995:5).

Meanwhile Mr Tulliver himself knows very well that his son is not as smart as such. He casts doubt on his intellectual capability. The belief of Mr Tulliver is that Tom being a boy, he must be sent to a good school despite the fact that he is little a bit slow in life. He rightly told this to his wife Bessy about his son. "Tom hasn't got the right sort o'brain for a smart fellow. I doubt he's a bit slowish. He takes after your family, Bessy." (Eliot, 1860/1995:5)

In addition, Mrs Tulliver is also under the influence of patriarchal ideology in the sense that she believes her daughter Maggie is not intelligent. Mrs Tulliver has a negative world view about her daughter Maggie. This is what she tells her husband:

but I'm sure the child's half an idiot i'somethings; for if I send her up-stairs to fetch anything, she forgets what she's gone for; an' perhaps ' sit down on the floor i' the sunshine an' 'plait her hair an' sing to herself like a Beddlamcreatur', all the while I'm waiting for her down-stair(Eliot, 1860/1995:6).

The world view of Mrs Tulliver is dominated by patriarchy which is based on "the system of relations that presumes the superiority of men." (Harris, 2010: 108) This presumed superiority of men over women has a great impact on the mind set of women like Mrs Tulliver. This ideology is illustrated in the behaviour of Mrs Tulliver. She has the same negative perception about women as the one of her husband whose patriarchal world view is basically negative about women.

In terms of education, Mrs Tulliver does not want her daughter Maggie to go to school. She wants her to remain at home to become a house wife later in life in the same way as her husband also wants Maggie to stay at home preferring to send Tom only to school. This patriarchal world view of Mrs Tulliver is shown in what she wants her daughter to do as work at home. This work is the patchwork. But her mother thinks this is the best work she can do in life. Maggie finds that it is a foolish work to do the patchwork at home. She tells her mother that "It's foolish work"... "tearing things to pieces to sew 'em together again. And I don't want to do anything for my aunt Glegg- I don't like her" (Eliot, 1860/1995:7). At

the same time, Mrs. Tulliver accuses her husband of encouraging Maggie in naughtiness. This is an evidence that both parents want their daughter to become a house wife to remain in the private and in the domestic spheres all her life.

The main preoccupation of Mr Tulliver is to give a good education to his son Tom. At the same time, he says nothing about the education of his daughter Maggie. He wants his son Tom to become a great scholar. He opines that:

You see, I want to put him to a new school at Midsummer ...he's comin' away from the academy at lady day, an' I shall let him loose for a quarter, but after that I want to send him to a downright good school, where they'll make a scholar of him (Eliot, 1860/1995:9).

To further highlight his ambition for the education of Tom, Mr Tulliver explains that he does not want his son Tom to become a miller and a farmer like him. He does not wish to find himself in a situation in which he will be challenged by his own son for the questions of inheriting his land or his mill. But he wants his daughter Maggie to become a house wife like her mother. This is what Mr Tulliver tells Mr Riley who also believes that the greater advantage Mr Tulliver can give to his son Tom is a good education.

I don't mean Tom to be a miller and farmer. I see no fun i' that: why if I made him a miller an' farmer, he'd be expecting to take the mill an' the land, an' a hinting at me as it was time for me to lay by an' think o'my latter end. Nay, nay, I've seen enough o' that wi' sons. I'll never pull my coat off before I go to bed. I shall give tom an eddication an' put him to a business, as he may make a nest for himself, an' not want to push me out o' mine. Pretty well if he gets it when I'm dead and gone. I shan't be put off wi' spoon-meat afore I've lost my teeth (Eliot, 1860/1995:9).

The analysis of the behaviour and the view of both Mrs Tulliver and Mr Tulliver reveals that they did not plan anything for Maggie to get a sound education like the one they have planned for Tom. For Mr Tulliver "a woman's no business wi' being so clever. It will turn to trouble, I doubt" (Eliot, 1860/1995:10). To his surprise Maggie was overhearing the conversation between her parents and Mr Riley. This brought her to react vigorously to the information that her father had been looking for a good school for her brother Tom whereas nothing was being planned for her except her mother's project meant for her to learn the trade of patchwork which she did not like in her life because, according to her, it was below her intellectual capacity. Clearly, the reaction of Maggie in relationship with her parents 'decision to give preference

to the education of Tom, the boy, proves that they did not want her to go to any school at all. Mr Tulliver's attitude is gender biased. He has no educational project for his daughter. All his attention is focused on Tom. He wants him to get good education and become a lawyer later in his life. His declaration about Tom is very clear to the point:

You see, I've made up my mind not to bring Tom up to my own business. I've had my thoughts about it all day long, and made up my mind by what I saw with Garnett and his son. I mean to put him to some business, as he can go into without capital, and I want to give him an education as he'll be even with lawyers and folks and put me up to a notion now and then (Eliot, 1860/1995:58).

Every idea that Mr Tulliver develops about education is for Tom, the boy and nothing for the girl, Maggie. Because of the patriarchal power, Mrs Tulliver cannot object to the decision made by husband. Both parents have no project for Maggie. Their attitude towards her shows that they denied her the right to go to a good school. They made this decision without having a clear knowledge of the intellectual capacities of Maggie. They have developed a prejudice about Maggie simply because she is girl. For them, girls or women have no intellectual capacity to reckon with. This prejudice is in fact misleading when one considers the real intellectual capabilities of Maggie in the novel under study. The novelist shows how intelligent Maggie is through the use of irony.

### **Literary Irony on Female Intellectual Capabilities in *The Mill on the Floss***

In literature, irony, whether it is verbal, dramatic or situational, is used to express the contrary of what is meant, intended or expected in order to add a taste to the use of the language or to create a suspense or a humour in the development of the plot in a story for the reader to have an aesthetic appreciation of the text he reads in terms of the message put across by the writer (Arp & Johnson, 1970/2003: 760). In the context of this study, it is relevant to recall that "In dramatic irony the contrast is between what a character says or thinks and what the reader knows to be true. The value of this kind of irony lies in the truth it conveys about the character or the character's expectations" (Arp & Johnson, 1970/2003: 335). In *The Mill on the Floss* the delineation of the behaviour of Maggie in her interaction with Tom reveals an illustration of a dramatic irony.

In fact, all the characters around Maggie, whether it is Tom her brother, Bessy her mother, Mr Tulliver her father, or her aunts, believe that she has no intellectual

capability to go to school or to even read the same subjects as Tom who is a boy and is at school. The reader knows the truth about all the characters around Maggie and the truth about Maggie herself in terms of her intellectual capability. The fact is that Tom himself told her on many occasions and in a severe tone. This is what he told her: "you are a naughty girl" (Eliot, 1860/1995:27). In another discussion between Tom and Maggie who proposed to help him in case he forgets some aspects of his lesson, Tom once again told her "you are a silly girl-but I never do forget things, I don't (idem). Tom was of the opinion that Maggie is a silly little thing and all girls are silly.

The contrast is that, the patriarchal prejudices cast a veil of doubt on the reality about Maggie's intellectual capabilities simply because she is a girl. These patriarchal prejudices make the characters in the novel believe that women have no intellectual capacity to develop their intellectual potentiality to become through education competent citizens outside the domestic sphere. The truth the reader knows is that the intellectual capability of Maggie is established through the way she reacted to questions related to education. Her father had refused to send her to school to become a prominent person when she grows up simply because she is a girl. Mr Tulliver believes that girls are not made for education of a higher level. For her parents, what women need is the bare minimum in education. By refusing to send Maggie to school despite her brilliant intellectual capabilities, her right to education is denied to her by her parents. This is where the disempowerment of women begins, that is at their tender age. Patriarchy through the process of education favours the disempowerment of women. This disempowerment creates an incapacity in women and people tend to believe that all these incapacities are innate. On the contrary this incapacity is acquired. The disempowerment of women follows a constructivist process. It is rather a social construct. It must not be misunderstood as being essentialist in origin. Mary Astell (1694/2002) explains that women's incapacity is acquired in the process of education. The case of Maggie Tulliver constitutes a clear example how women can be rendered incapable right from their tender age if they denied their right to education.

The incapacity, if there be any, is acquired not natural; and none of their Follies are so necessary, but that they might avoid them if they pleas'd themselves. Some disadvantages indeed they labour under, and what these are we shall see by and by and endeavour to surmount; but Women need not take up with mean things, since (if they are not wanting to themselves) they are capable of the best (Astell, 1694/2002: 59).

The attitude of Mr Tulliver is illustrative of the attitude of men under the influence of patriarchy. Men believe

women do not need a sound education in same way as men. Mary Wollstonecraft (1792), one century before the publication of *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) denounced this misconception of education by men in the following terms:

Into this error men have, probably, been led by viewing education in a false light; not considering it as the first step to form a being advancing gradually towards perfection; but only as a preparation for life. On this sensual error, for I must call it so, has the false system of female manners been reared, which robs the whole sex of its dignity, and classes the brown and fair with the smiling flowers that only adorn the land (Wollstonecraft, 1792/1992: 59).

Meanwhile, education is a process of economic and social empowerment of human beings. Education helps learners, especially women to build on their dignity and capability. The empowerment of females and males follows the guidelines laid down by the patriarchal prejudices in many societies which aims at the perpetuation of patriarchal interests. Patriarchy is at the source of many social and economic inequalities in many societies across the world. Terrell Carver (1991) records that under patriarchy these imbalances are recorded in the form of the oppression of women within the family unit. The case in point is the oppression of women through an imbalanced education system as well as the organisation of labour. He states that:

The family is, in particular, the major unit for the organization of consumption in the private domain. In all these ways, women are oppressed within the family, both directly by the men present there and less directly through the structural lack of power of the family in relation to capital (Carver, 1991: 232)

The Victorian society depicted in the Nineteenth century realist novels like *The Mill on the Floss* by George Eliot, reflects this gender imbalance in terms of educational opportunities offered to girls and boys at their early age. The novel exhibits the preference of parents to boys to the detriment of girls when it comes to their education.

The paradox that the writer used to create the irony in the story is that when Mr Tulliver was trying to find a good school to his son Tom in order to give him a good education, Maggie who was left out, was far ahead of Tom in terms of her capability to read and write. Even her father had to ultimately testify that:

She understands what on's talking about so as never was. And you should hear her read – straight off, as if she knowed it all before hand. And alleys

at her book! But it' bad – it's bad' Mr Tulliver added, sadly, by checking this blameable exultation (Eliot, 1860/1995:10).

Instead of being happy that his daughter is clever at reading, Mr Tulliver rather regrets that she has developed a precocious ability at reading and writing as if it were a sin for a girl of her age to know how to read and write. Mr Tulliver went further to add that “she'll read the books and understand'em better non half the folks as are growed up (Eliot, 1860/1995:10). To check the fact that Maggie has a great intellectual capability to read and write, Mr Riley asked her to interpret the pictures in her book, and she did it perfectly. It petrified Mr Tulliver who had listened to this exposition of Maggie's with marvellous wonders. Mr Tulliver was amazed to discover that Maggie was able to interpret Daniel Defoe's *The History of the Devil*. On his part, Mr Riley the teacher, comments that this book of Defoe is “not quite the right book for a little girl” before asking Mr Tulliver “how come it's among your books” (Eliot, 1860/1995:11). It is clear that Maggie's intellectual capabilities are far beyond her age and beyond that of Tom, her brother.

As it can be expected from a clever girl like Maggie, she looked hurt and was discouraged about the remark made by Mr Riley about the books of her father. Instead of acknowledging the intellectual capability of Maggie to read and write, Mr Tulliver, together with Mr Riley rather developed a false judgement about the ability of Tom to be good at school, but whom the readers know he is stupid indeed. George Eliot develops this situational irony in her novel as a satire on the biased gender education that produces a satirical effect on readers. Patrick Parrindar (2006) rightly explains that:

The novel is famously the product of middle classes, describing the pomp and privilege of office for satirical effect but glorifying its protagonists' ability to stand on their own feet and rise on their merit (Parrindar, 2006:12).

The satire on Tom's real capability is further exhibited in the novel when Mr Tulliver decided to go and visit Tom at the school to which he finally sent him. Tom to whom all is given in terms of opportunities to have a good education, rather told his father that he is sick. Tom cannot stand on his feet and rise to his merit at school. He pretended to be sick because he is very weak at mathematics. He told his father that he does not like mathematics arguing that it gives the toothache. This is how the narrator reveals the weaknesses of Tom at school in mathematics and in Latin. ‘I don't think I am well, father, said Tom. ‘I wish you'd ask Mr Stelling not to let me do Euclid –it brings on the toothache, I think.’ (Eliot, 1860/1995:120) To this request, his father told him that he should learn what his master tells him to learn.

The literary irony in the novel is further revealed to the

reader. The worries and the despair are shown by Tom to prove his difficulties in mathematics. The narrator uses a metonymy related to Euclid, the ancient Greek mathematician who is considered as the father of geometry in mathematics to show the difficulties of Tom in mathematics. Despite the fact that, earlier in the story, Tom treated his sister Maggie as a silly girl, she nonetheless proposed to help him in his lessons in mathematics and in Latin. To do this, the narrator explains that she volunteered by speaking with a little air of patronizing consolation to help him. She told him she would stay with him so long as Mrs Stelling allows her to stay at school. The reaction of Tom came out in a very negative tone and in a high spirit at the proposal made by his sister to help him in his lessons with the intention of confounding her by showing her a page of Euclid. "You help me, you little thing!... I should like to see you doing one of my lessons! Why I learn Latin too! Girls never learn such things. They are too silly" (Eliot, 1860/1995:125). The irony is that Maggie knew much more Latin than Tom. This is what she reveals to Tom in a confident manner: 'I know what Latin is very well!' ...'Latin's a language. There are Latin words in the dictionary. There's bonus, a gift' (Eliot, 1860/1995:125). Following this, the two children discussed the meaning of the word bonus. During this discussion about the word bonus Tom tried to correct Maggie and it is rather Maggie who ended up correcting Tom on the different meanings of the word bonus. This scene is an illustration of the confusion that is in the head of Tom about the lessons he is learning. The paradox is that Tom believes he knows it all, but in reality it is rather Maggie who knows it better than him. This is a mockery on the intellectual capacity of Tom in order to create a satire on the capacity of women like Maggie. In a further comment, Tom told Maggie that she will grow up and become a woman one day, and on this ground she need not talk. But Maggie in a confident manner told him that she shall be a clever woman when she grows up. In the mind of Tom, his sister Maggie will remain a nasty disagreeable thing even when she grows up, and for this reason he will hate her because she is a woman. His mind set is controlled by patriarchy that makes him believe that women are silly, nasty and disagreeable things even if they grow up.

Furthermore, when Tom was trying to learn his lessons on Euclid and on Latin Grammar, Maggie joined him in order to help him, but Tom did everything possible to show her that she is not clever to help him in his lessons. He did this by drawing the book he was reading away and wagging his head at her before telling her: 'You see, you're not so cleverer as you thought you were (Eliot, 1860/1995:127). For Tom, his sister is simply a donkey because she is a girl, and girls or women can never be clever enough to read Latin Grammar. He said this to his sister: 'Oh you know what you've been doing' said Tom 'you've been reading the English at the end. Any donkey can do that.' (Eliot, 1860/1995:128) The

intellectual battle line is now drawn between Maggie and Tom to reveal to the public knowledge who is clever and who is stupid. In this battle, Mr Stelling has a great role to play. In the process, Maggie asked Mr Stelling a nagging question: 'Could I do Euclid, and all Tom's lessons, if you were to teach me instead of Tom? (Eliot, 1860/1995:130) Instead of letting Mr Stelling answer the question of Maggie, Tom, the representative of patriarchy in this battle, rather said this to Mr Stelling 'Girls can't do Euclid. Can they Sir?' (Eliot, 1860/1995:130) The answer of Mr Stelling is clear enough about the female intellectual capability: 'They can pick up a little of everything, I daresay' said Mr Stelling.

'They've a great deal of superficial cleverness; they couldn't go far into anything. They're quick and shallow' (Eliot, 1860/1995: 130). Even Mr Stelling did not give much of the capabilities of Maggie until she proved him the contrary. All of them were overwhelmed by gender stereotypes about women's capabilities. During the Victorian period, women were considered as being inferior to men. This inferiority of women is still in force in various forms because the British society is still a patriarchal dominated society.

This consideration can be traced back to the Middle-Ages. But with the rise of enlightenment and the transformation of British society, women and some men began to publicly fight these stereotypes. Even after the passage of the Great Reform Bill of 1832, the status of women was that of being inferior to men to the point whereby they were denied any form of political right after the passage of such an important bill. By allowing Maggie to play a prominent role on the question of education, George Eliot is suggesting an end of gender biased education system.

### **The Promotion of a Genderless Education in *The Mill on the Floss***

A genderless education is a kind of education that is blind to the sex of the learner. It does not give any privilege or any favour to a girl to the detriment of a boy and vice versa. It is an educational policy based on the principle of equality between men and women in terms of their rights to education and in terms of their capability to learn. Mary Wollstonecraft as a liberal feminist of the eighteenth century was an advocate of mixed education in her time. She is one of the pioneers who published an essay in order to denounce the violation of women's rights to education in the eighteenth century in her book *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). In this essay, she proposed a mixed education. From this type of education she promoted, there is what can be understood today as a genderless education. She clearly stated this idea about genderless education. Wollstonecraft clarified what kind of education girls and boys should receive in order to become enlightened, autonomous and powerful citizens. She declared that boys and girls should be

educated together by stating that:

that to improve both sexes they ought, not only in private families, but in public schools, to be educated together. If marriage be the cement of society, mankind should all be educated after the same model, or the intercourse of the sexes will never deserve the name of fellowship, nor will women ever fulfil the peculiar duties of their sex, till they become enlightened citizens, till they become free by being enabled to earn their own subsistence, independent of men; in the same manner, I mean to prevent misconstruction, as one man is independent of another (Wollstonecraft, 1792/1992: 283)

Wollstonecraft remarkably underlines the necessity to give a genderless education to both boys and girls with the aim of preparing them for a future life in marriage which is understood as being the cement of society in which both men and women live a life of autonomy and independence from each other. According to her, independence and autonomy should be construed as being genderless to create a fellowship between men and women. In other words, she argued that independence and autonomy should not be based on the exclusive rights of men. This life of autonomy and independence is against the enslavement of women. It does not allow women when they gain power to enslave any man whatsoever.

It is relevant to notice that these ideas were not easily accepted in the Victorian society. In front of this resistance to the social and political change, George Eliot took her pen to raise clearly the problem in her novel published one century after Wollstonecraft's book through the use of satire on the supposed intellectual incapacity of women. Eliot expressed her ideas by developing a delineation of a character like Maggie to criticise the supposed intellectual incapacity of women. In fact, the problems of Maggie originate from the fact that her right to receive the same education as men is denied to her and at the same time it is recognised and granted to Tom, her brother. This situation constitutes a case of discrimination against women in terms of their rights to education.

The fact of denying women their rights to have the same opportunities as men in life had generated a lot of agitations and movements in the Victorian society. The struggle for women's liberation from the shackles of men across history in various parts of the world is being led to achieve equality in terms of gender praxis. This is what has brought writers from the Victorian period to take seriously the defence of the necessity for women to have the same rights as men by voicing ideas in favour of women's emancipation. Since then, many efforts are being made to reach a stage where there will be gender equality between men and women in various sectors of

life. These efforts to reach gender equality are still relevant today because patriarchy is still in force in many sectors of society. Andrew Heywood (1994) in this sense declares that "although women have gone a long way to achieving 'formal' equality with men in many modern societies, significant cultural, social and political inequalities nevertheless persist" (Heywood, 1994/2004: 288). George Eliot, through the delineation of the character of Maggie portrays a vision for gender equality between men and women which should start right from their early age. That is to say through a system of education that is genderless. This study on genderless education is still relevant because patriarchy permeates every aspect modern societies.

In many societies, the education in place does not give the same opportunities to boys and girls even if they are in mixed educational system. In many instances, there are discriminations against women in terms of opportunities they should have in life. This constitutes a violation of women's rights to have the same opportunities as men in life. The violation of women's rights takes many forms under different circumstances. Women's rights to education, to employment, to inherit from their parents, to have access to land, to have equal pay as men or to have the right to develop some economic activities, etc., were tempered with in the Victorian society and the situation has not changed as such because of patriarchy that continues to prevail today. The situation has not changed as such in the world at large today. Many conscious efforts to eradicate these forms of discrimination against women in societies that are still dominated by patriarchal rule are made at different levels.

In the Victorian period there were separate schools for boys and girls. In view of this discriminatory system, John Stuart Mill was one of the scholars who suggested the mixed education which is based on the principle of gender blindness or gender equality. George Eliot preceded him by expressing in her novel *The Mill on the Floss* these ideas of gender equality through a satire on the supposed intellectual incapacity of a girl like Maggie Tulliver to receive the same education as Tom her brother. But the reality is different. The reader rather discovers that Maggie's intellectual capability is far higher than that of Tom who is entitled to receive the best education that can exist on earth from his father. In the end both George Eliot and John Stuart Mill are of the same opinion concerning gender equality.

By highlighting the intellectual capability of Maggie Tulliver to develop her potentiality through education, George Eliot in *The Mill on the Floss* promotes the idea of genderless education as a pathway to reach gender equality between men and women. To reach this gender equality, they suggested that the oppressive system of patriarchy must be dismantled in modern societies. In the same sense, Andrew Heywood remarks that "patriarchy is the most pervasive and fundamental form of political

oppression, gender inequality running deeper than class exploitation, racial discrimination and so forth. To call for 'women's liberation' is therefore to demand not just political reform but a social, cultural and personal revolution: the overthrow of patriarchy" (Heywood, 1994/2004: 276). The principle of gender equality promoted by George Eliot must be based on the fight against all forms of cultural, social and political systems that perpetuate inequalities between men and women. In other words, there must be a Marxist revolution to overthrow patriarchy.

George Eliot in *The Mill on the Floss* has given the role of fighting all the institutions like the family unit and the school system that perpetuate gender inequalities to a little girl like Maggie Tulliver in the context of education. George Eliot insinuates that this fight for gender equality must be led through the various systems of education across the world. To do this, Eliot created Maggie and gave her the important role of challenging the patriarchal institutions and practices that subjugate women and prevent them from being emancipated. Andrew Heywood (1994) further explains that the "Feminist political thought has primarily been concerned with two issues. First, it analyses the institutions, processes and practices through which women have been subordinated to men; and second, it explores the most appropriate and effective ways in which this subordination can be challenged" (Heywood, 1994/2004: 62). Through her writing, George Eliot is exploring the effective ways through which the subjugation of women can be challenged. Her description of Maggie Tulliver shows with ample evidence that the little girl is challenging all the institutions like the family unit and the educational system that are biased against women's emancipation. George Eliot was a contemporary of John Stuart Mill. He developed ideas in favour of women's emancipation. George Eliot may have agreed with him when he declared in his book *The Subjection of Women* published in 1869 that:

All women are brought up from the very earliest years in the belief that their ideal of character is the very opposite to that of men; not self-will, and government by self-control, but submission, and yielding to the control of other. All the moralities tell them that it is the duty of women, and all the current sentimentalities that it is their nature, to live for others; to make complete abnegation of themselves, and to have no life but in their affections. (Mill, 1869/2006:17-18)

George Eliot in *The Mill on the Floss* is of the opinion that the subjugation of women is not by nature. She knew clearly that the subjugation of women emanates from culture. Culture is transmitted through education. From a constructivist perspective in relationship with feminist struggle for women's liberation, she decided to attack the roots that perpetuate the subjugation of women by putting the characters in the educational setting. The educational

system in this setting is challenged by Maggie Tulliver at her tender age. She did this by claiming women's rights to equal treatment in terms of education.

## CONCLUSION

The study has explored the issue of discrimination against women in their educational process. The study of George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* has revealed that the majority of the characters are under patriarchal prejudices and do not believe that women should have the same education as men. The Victorian period that the study has substantiated is an illustration of the fact that all of them are under the patriarchal prejudice reaching out to the belief that women should not have the social life dominated by patriarchy. This study has pointed out that the parents of the two children Maggie and Tom have no project for the education of women. Mrs Tulliver and Mr Tulliver are of the same opinion that is dominated by patriarchal considerations. Both parents believe that their daughter Maggie is not intelligent enough to get the same education as their son Tom, which has appeared in the novel context as sheer irony.

The study has thus come to the conclusion that George Eliot has used irony in order to create a satire on the supposed incapacity of women. This satire through the use of irony reveals that it is rather Maggie who is indeed intelligent to read Latin and Mathematics. But initially every character in the novel including the teachers believed that it is Tom who is intelligent and on this basis he is the one to be sent to a good school. The study has shown how George Eliot promotes equal opportunities for both boys and girls during their educational phase. She did this by using satire on female capabilities to advocate women's rights to education. For her this will ultimately lead to the creation of society in which there is a gender equality. Basing on female capabilities and rights to education, the study has documented satire to mock patriarchal despise of women regarding education. It has shown that through *The Mill on the Floss* George Eliot advocates the dismantling of patriarchy.

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