

## Conflicts in Ideology in George Eliot's Middlemarch: A Study

Dr. Md. Firoz Alam

Head, Dept. of English, B.N. College, Bhagalpur, T.M.B.U, (Bihar) India

### Abstract

The main purpose of this research paper is to introduce major critical approaches to Middlemarch and to discuss of "Ideology" in Middlemarch based on writer's position within the conflicting social structures of her time can inform several details of the text. This paper will examine the debates on "Corporate" and individualist ideologies", George Eliot's own ambiguous relation to the "woman Question", and Eliot's creative play with older literary forms such as the "gothic" even as she attempts a "social-realist" narrative.

**Key Words:** conflict, community, complexity, doctrine, ideas, realism

George Eliot is much aware of the conflict and therefore in control of the narrative. As the novel moves in the community create an alternative set of arguments and denouement-not a resolution-in addition, a clever juxtaposition of polyphonous voices in the Community. George Eliot uses some structural devices such as the 'gothic' to bring about a connectedness in the details of the plot.

George Eliot's preference for determinism as an active philosophy for understanding developments in the cognitive world creates several difficulties in our reading of Middlemarch. One can be quite overwhelmed by its size, complexity and dense texture. We must also be aware of the manner in which various characters are deployed to explore the themes but must guard against seeing the people as personifications of ideas. In Middlemarch, we feel, as aid readers, the pressure of an enormous number of human beings, similar and dissimilar, modifying the doctrines of the novelist as well as contributing to them. George Eliot has a simple and not very varied moral scheme but her novels are never schematic or rigid in their generalizations about human

beings. W.J. Harvey's fine "Introduction" to the penguin edition of Middlemarch gives a further explication of several of these categories: viz.; the theme of vocation, Marital compatibility, Money and pecuniary interests, Birth, rank and class, politics, science, religion, and egotism etc. George Eliot like other nineteenth century novelists, Jane Austen, William Thackeray, Charles Dickens and Henry James tends to direct the reader's imagination by presenting vivid descriptions of a character's outward demeanour and inner personality. It is a manner of establishing a contract between the author and the reader with the text as a factor of exchange. The modern day reader is not willing to remain a passive recipient of authorial control. In fact new critical theory privileges the alternate authority of the modern readers. George Eliot's tone in the following passage is highly ironical and sarcastic, though not without a tinge of empathy:

"And how should Dorothea not marry? A girl so handsome and with such prospects? Nothing could hinder her but her love of extremes, and her insistence of regulating life according to notions which

might cause a waryman to hesitate before he made her an offer, or ever might lead her at last to refuse all offers....Dorothea with all her eagerness to know the truths of life, retained very childlike ideas about marriage...."Page-(31-32)

George Eliot's determinism as an active philosophy for better understanding developments in the conscious and intellectual world creates many difficulties in going through the novel *Middlemarch*. One of them is with "ideology" which is a term liable to many definitions but which is best interpreted in the words of the French philosopher, Althusser: "Ideology represents the imaginary relationships of individuals to their real conditions of existence." Terry Eagleton, in a famous essay, "George Eliot: Ideology and Literary form" draws kind attention to the contradictions inherent in the form of *Middlemarch*:-

"The ideological matrix of George Eliot's fiction is set in the increasingly corporate character of Victorian capitalism and its political apparatus. Eliot's work attempts to resolve a structural conflict between two forms of mid-Victorian ideology: between progressively muted Romantic individualism, concerned with the untrammelled evolution of the "free spirit", and certain 'higher', corporate ideological modes. These higher modes seek to identify the immutable social laws to which Romantic individualism, if it is to avoid both ethical anarchy and social disruption, must conform.

The conflict between corporate law and individual impetus can be illustrated with reference to the last contact Dorothea has with Casaubon. (Refer to Book V). On the other hand, the Title, "The Dead hand," has ominous suggestions of eerie, disembodied guidance from a world

beyond. There is no denying the fact that something powerful is determining earthly existence. Casaubon's death is reported in chapter 48, of the novel, the details are held out of sight, as George Eliot had kept away from the readers other scenes of highly potential sentimentalisation, for example, Dorothea's marriage any early days with her husband, Lydgate's words of proposal to Rosamond. But George Eliot is marvelous, Once again, in probing the psychological depths within a character. Dorothea's inner growth from innocence to experience is reflected in several chapters of the section called "The widow and The wife." In a poignant review of her high idealism which has met with severe impediments, she rightly says:-

I used to despise women a little for not shaping their lives more, and doing better things. I was very fond of doing as I liked, but I have almost given up (589).

\Dorothea's many disappointments have left her feeling powerless, ineffectual. These horrible conditions of the women relate *Middlemarch* to the "woman question" and its early history in the nineteenth century. Dorothea is struggling to resolve two questions just before she learns of Casaubon's death. One posed by her husband is asking for her unconditional, blind surrender to his will, whatever that may be. The other is a self questioning whether she can any longer, believe and trust in "The key" and its author that she had considered her duty in marriage, (519) "She felt that she was going to say "yes" to her own doom (522) but she never says it. Casaubon is found dead in the garden. Kate Millet, the author of *sexual politics* (1970) came up with the charge that George Eliot had lived the feminist revolution but had not written about it. In 1976, an article by Zelda

Ansten, "Why feminist critics are angry with George Eliot," Traced the hostility of critics such as Millett to the novelist's "failure to allow her heroines any happy fulfillment other than marriage. The freedom and fame that George Eliot had achieved in life was not, apparently, transmitted to the fictional world.

In principle, the romantic individualism of Dorothea tries to exercise a choice in preserving some independent space for herself, knowing as she does the harsh appropriating nature of Casaubon. The romantic is in conflictual relation with "the immutable Social Laws of mid-Victorian ideology. An over expression of free spirit will cause ethical imbalance and Social disharmony tear the fabric of society upon which the 'Laws' of institutions such as marriage are grounded. The institution gives authority to the husband. Casaubon's will contains a dreadful codicil that casts and ugly shadow upon Dorothea's friendship with Ladislaws. A personal matter is subjected to open scrutiny, an individual joy and innocence turns into public humiliation. The conflict between, 'duty' and freedom finds expression in one of the finest passages in Middlemarch in chapter 50, of the novel, beginning, "Her World was in a state of convulsive change."

Terry Eagleton's criticism of George Eliot is that "a potentially tragic collision between 'corporate' and 'individualist' ideologies is consistently diffused and repressed by the forms of Eliot's fiction. By form, he means the classic realist and the historical, for which traditional critics had praised Middlemarch. Terry Eagleton, in fact finds "an historical vacuum." what is offered instead, he says, is an ambivalent, indeterminate era leading eventually to the "growing good of the world." My own

feeling is that George Eliot has a firm intellectual grasp of the contradictions inherent in a society in transition. We cannot grant that George Eliot is critiquing society by bringing a highly refined analysis to the obvious dichotomy of self and society. She is not trapped in any ideological confusion herself although several anomalies of the time are presented in the novel side by side in touching manner. We may recall, is a romantic individualist who does not subscribe to the higher corporate ideological modes of Victorian society. Many arguments are developed in D.A. Miller's essay, "George Eliot: The Wisdom of Balancing Claims". As his observation is given below :

The main force of pluralism in Middlemarch, however, is to make us aware of perspective itself. What traditional form shows us is no longer exhibited in a spirit of naive realism, as simply what is there to be seen. Instead it must now be taken as a function of a perceiving system with its own desire, disguises, deletions, and disinterest, which might have been organised otherwise.

For D.A. Miller, the balances that George Eliot strives for are a mark of her authorial maturity and wisdom. Attitudes demonstrated by main characters in the novel are subjected to an internal review through other, community based observations. According to Miller, the voice of the community constructs its own narrative balancing the excesses of individual imagination. However, according to Terry Eagleton, there is no such balancing of competing viewpoints, only unresolved ideological tensions.

**Summary:** The realism of Middlemarch is not because it is a slice of history but because psychological realism, as depicted in the fictional world of Middlemarch, exists within and beyond time

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