

## Feminist undertones in The Mill on the Floss and "A Rose for Emily"



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### ABSTRACT

*George Eliot's The Mill on the Floss and William Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily" are two such texts which are written during different times in history but share many feministic ideas. The central characters Maggie and Emily suffer at the hands of patriarchal society. But they try to resist this "sclerosed universe of males" as de Beauvoir puts it and emerge as free individual beings at the end of the story.*

**Key Words:** Patriarchy, Gender, male-domination, feminist, revolt, de Beauvoir.

### Introduction

George Eliot is a British woman writer who has written many novels which revolve around women and The Mill on the Floss is one them. In this novel she depicts Maggie as a feministic figure who surpasses all criticism and prejudices on her way. William Faulkner, on the other hand, is an American male author. The interesting thing about Faulkner's works is that he writes both about blacks and whites, males and females but believes in the equality of gender and race. His short-story "A Rose for Emily" is about a Southern woman who experiences utter discrimination firstly at the hands of her father and then society but emerges as a feminist being by the end of the story. Although the setting of both the stories is different; with The Mill on the Floss being set in nineteenth century Britain and "A Rose for Emily" in early twentieth century America, but a comparison can be drawn between the situations of the central characters of these texts.

### Analysis

#### Emily in "A Rose for Emily"

Emily Grierson is a southern lady who inherits not only the property of her clan but also their mannerism and lifestyle. Hence, she is referred to by the townspeople as a "tradition, a duty and a care." Emily is a victim of patriarchal chauvinism. It is her father who controls her life and his absolute control has clogged her own way of perceiving the world. He stifles Emily with his rules, regulations and demands. It is because of his stifling attitude that Emily is single even at the age of thirty. By separating her completely from the rest of the town, he inculcates in her a way of living that is impossible for her to escape until her death. Though her father thwarts every desire of hers, yet Emily never revolts against him. He restricts her freedom of choice when he does not allow her to date socially or choose her life partner. He does not consider any man good enough to marry his daughter and does not even allow

her to find one herself which results in her estrangement from her father and her society.

Even people of the town sympathize with her because they have seen that her life is controlled by her father. That is why, after his death, she refuses to accept his death and does not allow the townspeople to take away his dead body. This makes the townspeople comment; "We remembered all the young men her father had driven away, and we knew that with nothing left, she would have to cling to that which had robbed her, as people will." Several critics like Irving Marlin, Norman Holland, and Jack Sherting have regarded Emily's relationship with her father as the central theme of the story and according to them, the suppression and abuse which she suffers at his hands makes her murder Homer Barron, her only suitor (Brook 133).

But it is not just a patriarchal parental figure who works as a force of suppression for Emily. The Jefferson society is also seen by critics as a patriarchal figure and its continuous interference in Emily's life proves them right to a great extent. But patriarchal society does not mean that only men are responsible for the restriction and discrimination of women, the women of the town also work as the spokesperson of patriarchal ideology in this text. They keenly observe every activity in Emily's life. After her father's death, she is seen as a pathetic figure and is addressed as "poor Emily" by them time and again. When Homer Barron, a Northern labourer, comes in her life, they accept this fact with the expectation that she would marry him. But when they come to know that Homer calls himself "not a marrying man," they get suspicious about the relationship and ask the Bishop to write to Emily's cousins. So that she could be stopped from committing a sinful act. The patriarchal ideology can be seen at work when they think that the affair is a disgrace for the society and call Emily a "fallen" woman. She is called a "fallen" woman, probably because she is in love with a man

below her standards and also because he cannot marry her. The irony of the situation is that a woman is called "fallen" if she does not follow the rules of a society but not a man. There is no reference in the text where Homer is addressed as a tragic figure or a disgrace for the society, as if only Emily has the responsibility to maintain the moral standards of her society.

#### **Maggie in The Mill on the Floss**

Maggie also meets the same fate that Emily does. Maggie is discriminated at every stage of her life. Her parents discriminate between Maggie and her brother Tom while raising them. He is allowed to play outside with his friends and Maggie is asked to behave in a girl-like manner. Her mother insists her to wear "frilled" dresses and do her hair nicely which she does not like. She wants to make her a meek and docile girl who will be an excellent product for marriage. Maggie is not given proper education unlike his brother because her father thinks that education is not a woman's business; she is just meant for marriage. Although she is more intelligent than her brother, she is not given an opportunity to work on her skills.

But her conflict with her family and society begins when she reaches adulthood. Her brother tries to control her social and personal relationships. He does not allow her to meet Philip, her childhood friend. He orders her to sit in the house and wait for her marriage. He does not even allow her to work and earn for the family. He thinks that it will be a disgrace for the family if his sister goes out and works.

Maggie, just like Emily, keeps accepting his instructions because that is what women were expected to do in the nineteenth century England. But what differentiates these characters is their courage to fight back against this discrimination. These women express their displeasure against patriarchal structure in different manners. As we have discussed earlier, Emily kills her suitor and sleeps with his corpse because she is not able to marry him otherwise. Her society may not have allowed her to marry a man below her standards. By choosing to create her own world inside her room she renounces the society and remains alone for the rest of her life. Critics justify her act and classify her as a feminist figure who challenges the patriarchal structure by doing everything she is not supposed to do according to a given cultural setup.

Similarly, Maggie Tulliver happens to elope with her suitor, Stephen Guest; her boat drifts when she is in her fantasy world. She has the choice to marry her love Stephen who proposes her that day. But she chooses to return to the town where she is discarded by her family and society. The public opinion is against Maggie as she has returned "without a trousseau, with-

out a husband", and in a "degraded and outcast condition" (Eliot 503). She is considered to be prompted by "unwomanly boldness" and "unbridled passion". Stephen sends a letter describing all that was happened between him and Maggie but it fails to save Maggie's reputation. Rather he is considered a gentleman who had fallen at the hands of an intriguing woman. The irony of the situation is that Maggie is not believed when she herself tells what was happened to her. But "a letter" by Stephen is considered trustworthy and is given primary importance. People consider him a gentleman who is ready to take the blame on his shoulders to save the reputation of a low-woman. When she tries to face the townspeople so that she can prove her innocence to the priest, she is addressed as a shameless girl who can ruin the character of other girls in the town. They wonder that how can she stay in St. Ogg's after committing such a blunder.

In all this turmoil, when mere survival has become a problem for her, she does not stop thinking about earning for herself. She tells Dr. Kenn, "The only thing I want is some occupation that will enable me to get my bread and be independent" (509). This is very radical idea on a woman's part who lives in society where marriage is considered the only occupation meant for women. She does not want to be a parasite for Bob, Tom's childhood friend, too who is ready to support her. It seems to be her effort to earn her freedom actually. Like de Beauvoir says, a woman cannot get her freedom until she becomes economically independent (de Beauvoir 522). Dr. Kenn, the priest, is severely criticized by both men and women of the society for keeping Maggie as a governess in his house. As Eliot writes, "the feminine mind" thinks that he will be beguiled into marrying her. They also think that an apostle has fallen and will wept bitterly afterwards. "The masculine mind" on the other hand, smiles pleasantly and does not wonder at this new turn of event. The contradiction lies here between the thinking of both men and women of the St. Ogg's society. Because it is the women of St. Ogg's who criticize Maggie and not the men, particularly. Being women they do not think from Maggie's perspective but condemn her behaviour more than anybody else. There are instances in the text which prove that Maggie was aware of the criticism which were to follow on her return to the town but this would not curb her desire to go back and settle in the same town. That is why, this act of hers is more significant than others; the courage to face an indifferent, male-chauvinistic society makes her a feminist being. Dr. Kenn thinks, she has chosen "the steep and difficult path of a return...when that return was most of all difficult" (Eliot 508). As discussed earlier, in "A Rose for Emily", the society is presented as an active

agent in the story. When the townspeople begin to see Miss Emily and Homer often riding together in a buggy, they acknowledge her right to date him but they also believe that she would never consider him seriously because he is "a Northerner, a day labourer," and she is a "Grierson". They wonder if she is forgetting her family pride and becoming involved with a man beneath her standard. Then the townspeople relegate her to adultery, condemning her as "fallen," and we recall the first sentence of the story, when the men of the town go to Miss Emily's funeral to pay their last respects to "a fallen monument."

One day when she buys poison from the drug store, the townspeople, never suspecting the poison is intended for Homer, conclude that Miss Emily will probably use it to kill herself. After Homer Barron announces to the men that he is not the marrying kind, the townspeople think that his and Miss Emily's relationship is a disgrace and they try to stop it. The outraged women of the society insist that Baptist minister should talk to Emily. When townspeople cannot put an end to the relationship between the perceived lovers, they ask the minister's wife to write to Miss Emily's relatives in Alabama and as a result, two cousins come to stay with her. Homer disappears after Miss Emily's cousins move into the house and everyone assumes that he has gone to prepare for their marriage. A week later, the cousins leave. Three days later, Homer returns to the town. The narrator notes, "And that was the last we saw of Homer Barron." The townspeople never suspect that she could kill Homer Barron, believing that such an aristocratic woman as Miss Emily could never do any wrong. A critic, Judith Fetterley who sees the story through a feminist lens argues that Emily takes her revenge from the tyrannical patriarchal society by murdering Homer Barron (Brook 133). Faulkner himself implied: [I]t is a story of a woman victimized and betrayed by the

system of sexual politics, who nevertheless has discovered, within the structures that victimize her, sources of power for herself (qtd in Fetterley 35).

### **Conclusion**

Thus both Maggie and Emily are victims of their patriarchal societies. They are devoid of basic human need of freedom of choice. There is a strong check on their social relationships. They are not allowed to choose their marriage partners. Above all, it is the society which judges and guides the actions of a woman. The way Maggie is blamed for her elopement with Stephen similarly Emily is accused of dating Homer Barron who does not intend to marry her. They are called fallen, low-women but no such terms are used for Homer Barron or Stephen Guest because they belong to a superior sex. These double standards of society of Faulkner's time and that of Eliot's time can be questioned. Only women were expected to follow the prescribed rules and their behaviour were strictly checked upon by their societies. In the short story Jefferson people notice Emily's every movement and do not let her slip out of the given pattern although she revolts against them by creating a life of her own in her house. Emily's affair with a man, who is considered below her standards, also seems to be a revolt against the Jefferson society that tries to control the behaviour of upper class ladies. Emily emerges as a strong character by choosing the kind of life she had imagined for herself. Similarly, Maggie in her elopement with Stephen and returning to the town proves herself as a very bold, strong woman who is ready to face all the criticism thrown at her. In the context Simone de Beauvoir's statement about Maggie is significant, [Tom] obstinately upholds accepted principles congeal morality in formal rules; but Maggie tries to put the breath of life into them, she upsets them...emerges as a genuine free being, beyond the sclerosed universe of males. (de Beauvoir 385)

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