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Knowledge and Control : A shortstudy of VictorianEngland and Colonial India

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Abstract: During the 15th century (English) Renaissance, the education system in England began to change in exciting and meaningful ways. This was a time when people started to look back to the wisdom of the ancient Greeks and Romans, and as a result, classical studies became the core of learning once again. Schools shifted their focus from overwhelmingly religious teachings to largely non-secular subjects like grammar, rhetoric, history, and philosophy, which were mostly taught through the classical Latin and Greek texts. Grammar schools began to grow in number, often supported by wealthy individuals or sometimes even by the local Church, and they provided basic school education, mainly to the boys from the middle and upper classes. These schools aimed to shape well-rounded, thoughtful men who could speak and write both English and Latin eloquently. At universities like Oxford and Cambridge, drawing heavily on classical models, similar changes were happening, with scholars embracing humanistic rather than theological ideals of yore and pushing for a broader, more critical approach to knowledge. While the system had its limits, education was not widely available to the lower classes or even to the girls of middle and upper classes (Hill 145). The Renaissance marked the beginning of a more structured and intellectually rich education system in England, one that valued not just religion, obedience and faith, but also curiosity, reasoning, and the power of the human mind, but strictly keeping the women out of its parameter (Armstrong 156).

Even in the 16th and 17th centuries, education in England was still largely limited and uneven. Formal schooling was mainly reserved for the sons of the wealthy, with grammar schools focusing on Latin language, religious instructions, and classical texts. The influence of the Church was strong, and many schools were connected to religious institutions. The Reformation and the rise of Protestantism encouraged literacy, especially for reading *The Bible*. However for the majority of the population, education remained basic or non-existent. **(** Hill 142**).**

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In 18th-century England also, education didn‟t follow a single, organized system like we see today. It was largely informal. Formal schooling was not yet widespread, and there was no centralized system of education. The wealthy people often employed private tutors or sent their children to residential grammar schools, which provided instruction in classical subjects such as Latin, Greek, and philosophy (143). Charity schools, established by religious and philanthropic organizations, aimed to educate the poor in basic literacy, numeracy, and religious principles. Some towns like Norwich and York had endowed schools funded by local benefactors, while others relied on informal instruction. Higher education was centered around the universities of Oxford and Cambridge, which maintained a curriculum rooted in classical studies and theology. Overall, education during this period was fragmented, with access to, and the quality of, education varying significantly acrossregions and social groups. (Porter 39).
For the girls, formal education in 18th century England was generally considered tobe less important than education for boys. Most girls received only a basic education, often at home or in small village schools, where they learned the basics of reading, writing, and some domestic skills such as sewing, embroidery, and household management. The purpose of educating girls was typically to prepare them for domestic life rather than academic or professional pursuits. In wealthier families, girls might receive some knowledge in music, drawing, and languages, but higher education opportunities were almost non existent even for them (46) , Formal schools for girls were rare, and when they did exist, their curriculum focused more on refining manners and social graces than on intellectual development. Overall, educational opportunities for girls were shaped by societal expectations that placed women within the domestic sphere. (Armstrong 161).

Maggie Tulliver‟s educational experience in *The Mill on the Floss* portrays the limited and gendered schooling available to girls. While Maggie is naturally intelligent and passionate about learning, her education is undervalued by her parents and relatives compared to that of her brother Tom. Her father, Mr. Tulliver thinks Tom‟s education will benefit him, as he says “But then, you know, it‟s an investment; Tom‟s eddication „ull be so much capital to him.” (73) But Maggie‟s formal education will only make it hard for her to get married, as he states “But it‟s a pity she isn‟t made o‟ commoner stuff; she’ll be thrown away, I doubt—there’ll be nobody to marry her that is fit for her.”(74).

Despite her natural intelligence and hunger for knowledge, Maggie‟s educational opportunities are largely limited simply because she is a girl. She attends a local village school, while her brother Tom is sent to a proper boarding school, reflecting the belief that serious education was meant for boys. “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”,-------declares Mr. Tulliver declares to his wife , and in the same breath believes that Maggie is “Too ‟cute (acute) for a woman… she‟ll fetch none the bigger price (i.e, a goodmatrimonial alliance) forthat.”(9)

Mr. Tulliver‟s words amply demonstrate how the boys were prioritized in educational investments, since the boys would later be the bread-earners for the family. And, since the girls were to remain enclosed within the four walls of the house, with no question of their earning a living, formal education for them was not a priority. Mr. Tulliver himself makes this clear when he says, "what I want is to give Tom a good education; an education as‟ll be a bread to him," highlighting the belief that education for boys was practical and necessary, while for girls it was optional and secondary.(5) It also shows that education was valued for its economic usefulness (for sons) and not for personal growth (for daughters). Maggie‟s schooling is limited not because of her ability, but because of her gender. Mr. Tulliver says to his wife: "I‟ve done what I could…I‟ve given him a eddication… and there‟s the little wench, she‟ll get married." (235) While parents think of their son‟s education and eventual profession, all they think about their daughter is
marriage.

This shows what was the priority for both boys and girls at that time. Even Mr. Riley, a family friend, reinforces this bias when he advises Mr. Tulliver "there‟s no greater advantage you can give him than a good education." (16) This emphasis on usefulness and preparation for a profession was reserved for boys, while girls were expected to stay within the domestic sphere. Mr. Riley, advising Mr. Tulliver, reinforces the same values: "Better spend an extra hundred or two on your son‟s education, than leave it him in your will," (17) These views underline the societal mindset that education was an investment for boys and an afterthought for girls, even for a gifted girl like Maggie, who reads and understands Tom‟s books, (which are actually above her level) while Tom struggles with them. As Mr. Tulliver proudly observes, "she‟ll read the books and understand „em better than half the folks as are growed up."(14) Still, her intelligence is admired only as a novelty, not nurtured with real opportunity.

Maggie‟s passion for learning, paired with the constant dismissal of her abilities, reflects the frustration of many girls in earlier centuries whose potential was stifled by a system that refused to take their innate intelligence seriously. Maggie‟s hunger for knowledge and her frustration with her limited opportunities mirror the reality for many girls in the 18th century, who were taught just enough to read, write, and manage a household but were denied access to serious intellectual growth. Her story captures the emotional and intellectual struggle of a gifted girl trapped by a system that values obedience and tradition
over curiosity and potential.

The situation was much the same in the elsewhere in the world. The tale in India is, astonishingly, the same. In the early Vedic age, Indian women were permitted to engage in learning, and figures like Gargi and Maitreyi were known for their erudition. However, as patriarchal norms became more rigid through religious codification and societal shifts, women‟s access to formal education declined drastically (Sarkar & Butalia,113). In medieval age women‟s educational participation was minimal. Cultural

practices such as seclusion, arranged marriage at a young age, and rigid caste boundaries curtailed any intellectual advancement for most women. Brahminical traditions strengthened over time, societal norms began to exclude women from formal learning spaces, reinforcing their roles within the domestic sphere. In addition, social structures and Islamic invasionss further restricted female literacy (114). Practices such as purdah (seclusion) and early marriage were prevalent, particularly among the elite, leaving most women with minimal or no educational access (Forbes19) . Formal education was limited to the privileged few, while the majority depended on informal, oral, or religious instructions. Overall, educational opportunities for girls were shaped by societal expectations that placed women within the domestic sphere. Women themselves were so well moored in being the secondary strata of the society that they largely remained mute and acquiescent. In this context, Maggie Tulliver‟s yearningfor knowledge and self expression is radical (23). When, in spite of her evident intellectual curiosity, she is denied access to formal education while her brother Tom, with far less aptitude, is sent to school, her pitiful lament—"I wish I could make myself a world outside it, as men do" , exemplifies her futile rebellion against an education/socialsystem designed to stifle her growth. (Eliot 51).

Such yearning voicesin India too, were by and large stifled. The arrival of British colonial rule brought the western education system to India, yet the focus remained heavily skewed toward educating men, with very little attention paid to female literacy or inclusion. While the British sought to "modernize" India through English education, the colonial system reinforced existing gender disparities (Sarkar & Butalia 115). Simultaneously, social orthodoxy continued to resist the idea of women receiving formal instruction, associating it with moral decline or social rebellion. (Forbes 24). As Gauri Viswanathan points out, Lord

Macaulay‟s 1835 educational reform advocated English learning as a tool for cultural transformation but failed to include women in this vision (96). While the colonial system introduced new academic structures, it reinforced existing gender hierarchies. The colonial and traditional Indian society, treated women‟s intellect with suspicion and disdain. Indian reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, and Jyotiba Phule took significant steps to advocate for women‟s literacy(100). As

Geraldine Forbes highlights, while Maggie Tulliver‟s fictional tragedy was unfolding in Victorian England, real Indian women like Savitribai Phule and Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain were risking ostracism to light a spark of literacy (28). However, despite these pioneering efforts,societal resistance and deep-rooted patriarchy continued to treat female education as unnecessary or even harmful.

George Eliot uses Maggie‟s narrative to critique the gendered barriers that deny women access to learning, portraying her intellect as a threat to social norms(Beer 123). In one scene, Maggie‟s hunger for books is met with disdain rather than encouragement,

as her intellectual curiosity challenges conventional expectations of femininity **(**124**).** Nancy Armstrong supports this view, arguing that women‟s access to knowledge is often depicted as disruptive to patriarchal stability, threatening the idealized roles of women as submissive wives and daughters (23). Maggie is perceived by her greater family (viz .her aunts) as unsuitable for the conventional feminine role due to her sharp intelligence and independent spirit (Beer 123). Surprisingly, both English and Indian contexts demonstrate how education became a boundary line between social acceptance and personal freedom for women. However strict societal resistance failed to crush the yearning for education for some Indian women, who were determined to carve their own paths in the realm of education. Kadambini Ganguly became one of India‟s first woman physician **in 1890**. Chandramukhi Basu was the first woman to graduate in 1883 from Bethune College (Viswanathan 101). She later became the first Indian woman to serve as the principal of an undergraduate college in 1888. Efforts of these valiant women demonstrate a defiant refusal to belimited by patriarchal expectations, building the foundation for future generations of women seeking education when traditionally girlslearned to cook and clean before learning to read and write.

George Eliot exposes the systemic gender disparity in education, illustrating how Maggie‟s intellect is viewed not as a virtue, but as a threat to the stability of the household. Maggie‟s world, where a girl‟s intellect is seen as a disruption to domestic order, reflects India‟s long- standing fear of the “educated woman.” (Beer 34). Like Maggie, Indian women who dared to educate themselves were often labeled quaint, emotionally unstable, or socially dangerous (Armstrong 56). Both societies feared that an educated woman might question norms or make independent decisions about her life. Through this lens, Maggie becomes a symbol—her story no longer remains English but becomes universal (Showalter 20). Indian women who expressed a desire to study (and be independent) were often stigmatized, being perceived as stepping beyond the boundaries of acceptable feminine behavior, and were labeled as disruptive, emotionally unstable, or of doubtful morality(Sarkar & Butalia 79). By and large the society apprehended that educating women would lead to rebellion, defying their traditional submissive role. The First and Second World Wars drastically altered societal structures across the globe, especially in relation to women‟s roles. As men went to war, women entered the workforce in unprecedented numbers—taking up jobs in factories, offices, and higher educational institutions. As Geraldine Forbes observes this sudden visibility and necessity of women in public life disrupted long-held patriarchal beliefs and opened doors to formal education and skill based training in many nations (172). In India, the war years overlapped with the intensifying struggle for independence, allowing women not only to participate in nationalist movements but also to assert their demand for educational and political rights. Women like Sarojini Naidu (who was also an accomplished poet and political leader) and Aruna Asaf Ali (who led protests during the Quit India Movement) were products of an evolving educational landscape that began to recognize women as agents of change (Sarkar and Butalia 59). The devastating world wars created economic and social shifts that allowed women, in both England and

colonial India, to step into roles that were previously denied to them to a large extent (60).

Modern feminist theorists such as Simone de Beauvoir and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak emphasize that control over knowledge has historically been used to justify female subordination. Beauvoir‟s assertion that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" highlights how societal structures mould women into roles that restrict intellectual freedom (95). Spivak, focusing on the postcolonial female subject, draws attention to how both imperial and indigenous patriarchies silence women in the name of tradition and morality. Maggie and her Indian counterparts were not just unheard; they were deliberately muted. Their minds were not empty—they were eclipsed, opines Spivak (287).

In this light, Maggie Tulliver‟s fictional struggle parallels real historical forces that denied Indian women their right to education and expression. Yet, as the 20th century progressed, women in India (as in elsewhere in the world) began reclaiming their space—using education as a tool not only for self empowerment but also for national transformation. The world wars had been tragic, but they inadvertently loosened the chains of gendered roles, providing a platform for women to challenge long-standing norms, and forge new identities as thinkers, leaders, and reformers on not only national but also to an international level.

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