
Feminine Liberty vs Social Shackles: A Study of *The Mill on the Floss*

Dr. Rituparna Datta Roy

Associate Professor, P. G. Department of English,
Kanya Maha Vidyalaya, Jalandhar, Punjab.

Article Received: 03/05/2026

Article Accepted:01/06/2026

Published Online:02/06/2026

DOI:10.47311/IJOES.2026.8.06.22

Abstract:

The Victorian period in England (1837 --- 1901) named after Queen Victoria , was an era of intense social change , marked by industrial growth, expanding empire, and shifting intellectual currents. Paradoxically, however, it was also a deeply conservative age in matters of morality gender roles, and social order. Progress and regression existed side (Stubbs 142). To understand Victorian literature, especially the works of George Eliot, it is essential to examine the historical, social, and educational structures of the time, particularly “the subservient position of women” (143).

Victorian society was rigidly divided into classes. The upper class consisted of aristocrats and large land owners, who inherited wealth and socio- political influence. The middle class included educationists, merchants, industrialists, and administrators. This class placed great importance on respectability, discipline, and moral behaviour, particularly in respect to women (Hughes 123).

Social control operated not only through law but also through moral judgement. Social communities closely monitored individual behaviour, especially that of women. Moral reputation for women was crucial, and once damaged, it was almost impossible to restore (Stubbs 150).Victorian morality stressed duty, self- restraint, and respect for authority, particularly from women. Personal desires were expected to be controlled in favour of social responsibility. Societies showed little sympathy for their emotional suffering but praised their endurance and self sacrifice (Hughes 124).

George Eliot's celebrated novel, *The Mill on the Floss* (henceforth referred to as *MF*) published in 1860, is widely regarded as an emotionally intense, autobiographical novel (Ashton17). Set in the fictional town of St. Oggs, the novel reflects Eliot’s childhood experiences and a deep engagement with morality and social constraints, portrayed through Maggie's relationship with Philip Wakem (18).

The conflict between individual desire and social demand is one of the central concerns of the novel. The central woman character, Maggie Tulliver, is forced to choose between

personal happiness and moral or fiction familial obligation, being, to borrow a phrase from Simone de Beauvoir, "the second sex", in a rigidly patriarchal society.

The relationship between Maggie and Philip is one of the most complex emotional threads of the novel. It begins in their childhood, with the 9- years-- old Maggie meeting the 13- years-- old Philip, as her brother, the 12- years old Tom's school mate in Mr Stelling's School; continuous into adolescence, with the 13 -years- old girl meeting the 17 -year - old boy in the Red Deeps woods, and finally, in the third phase, the 19 -years -old Maggie meets 23years-old Philip in her cousin Lucy's house. These interactions gradually reshape Maggie's understanding of her true self. Philip becomes the first person who sees the intelligence and emotional depth that Maggie carries within her. When he tells her "I always liked you better than anyone else" (Eliot 142), his voice addresses a need Maggie has felt for years---- the need to be accepted with affection and without judgement. Yet, this bond also becomes the source of one of the deepest conflicts of Maggie's life. Through Philip, she experiences an emotional world that is gentle and expansive, and also pays a heavy price for this non---romantic, innocent friendship. Her brother and father consider Philip as the son of an enemy, and this (false) perception leads to an escalating conflict between her inner craving for unconditional acceptance and familial obligations, --- between duty and desire , loyalty and inner truth (Hardy 129).

Through this relationship an important question emerges ----- how does a woman in 19th century England negotiate personal affection and familial duty, when these forces collide with each other so intensely? The voice of the omniscient narrator makes it clear that women are expected to obey, to sacrifice, and to silent their own desires (Henry186). Thus Maggie's story becomes the mirror that reflects the suffering of women who are denied the right to emotional fulfilment and intellectual companionship. Thus their meetings, tender as they are, unfold in secrecy, not because she is ashamed of their affection, but because the world around her is not willing to grant her the freedom to choose her own friend, and hence, herownfate.

This paper examines how this bond between Maggie and Philip transform her inner life while creating a painful chasm between her family, and particularly with her brother Tom, whom she adores with all her heart, from her earliest childhood. The analysis also connects this personal conflict to the broader question of women's treatment in the social and moral climate of Victorian England.

Philip does not simply influence Maggie. He becomes the point where the expectations placed on Maggie clash with her own natural desire for emotional companionship. Through this bond, Maggie becomes both a symbol of resilience and the tragic figure caught in the rigid feudal world that refuses to understand her (Hardy 25). She yearns for affection without judgement, freedom to think without restraint, act without constraint, but her entire identity is moulded by her social surroundings, family

expectations and social diktats that later define her connection with Philip Wakem.

Maggie is formed by a world that tells her to nod and accept male dominance questioningly (Hughes 129). To that tune her family's bland inability and even unwillingness to value her inner world create a deep void, which is filled by Philip's tender understanding of her deepest emotions, who listens to her with affection, and not with harsh judgement or Indifference. On the other hand, she never hurts the sentiments of the hunchbacked boy, but tenderly accepts him as any normal, able bodied man. Philip truly realizes and appreciates her quality of sensitivity and empathy, whereas Tom whom we can call the representative of the male dominated society, is sensitive neither about the depths of Maggie's nor Philip's sentiments. While Phillip sees in Maggie a rare combination of Intelligence and compassion, Maggie discovers in him someone who understands the intensity of her inner world. Thus, their companionship forms a direct contrast to the harsh and unforgiving tone of their social environment (Henry 262). While their paternal families represent conflict, they themselves represent harmony. George shows explicitly that their bond is not romantic but intellectual, which grows from mutual trust, from the instinctual realization that the other person understands what it feels like to the judged, limited, or stunted by others' expectations (133).

When they re- connect as adolescents near the Red Deeps wood, the tone of their friendship shifts. Philip becomes the first person to treat Maggie as an intellectual equal. He encourages her to question, listens to her thoughts, and admires the very qualities that others criticize. In other words he sees Maggie's inner life clearly, and because he does, he becomes the source of emotional noturishment that she has been denied by her family constantly (Hardy 29).

George Eliot makes this bond powerful but not simple. Philip is gentle and sincere, but even he is rooted in the family conflict that has pervaded Maggie's family life. His father Mr John Wakem takes over the Dorlcote mill (winning the lawsuit against Mr. James Tulliver, Maggie and Tom's father) leading to the ruin of Tulliver family. Because of this, Tom grows to hate Phillip wholeheartedly with fierce loyalty to his father. Poor Maggie (as Eliot repeatedly calls her is caught between the two people who shape her emotional life - ---- Philip, who understands and appreciates her, and Tom, about whom she feels she is morally bound to obey even when he is unfair I(Eliot 26,146, 273, 310, 432).

Tom disregards Maggie's feelings entirely. What matters to him is not her happiness but family pride and his own authority. He almost forces Maggie to believe that her desires are dangerous (Hardy 29). He makes her understand that her emotions must be suppressed, her happiness sacrificed, and desires silenced. Phillip, who has been her source of emotional support and intellectual bond, becomes a symbol of forbidden freedom. She obeys Tom's

command of not meeting Philip in the Red Deeps, not because her affection for him lessens, but because the weight of duty/ loyalty towards her family stunts her.

Tom believes that loyalty towards family must be shown through sacrifice, even if that sacrifice destroys Maggie's emotional stability. On the other hand, Philip envisions Maggie not as "a vessel of duty", but as a person capable of having independent desires for friendship and intellectual comradeship (Stubbs 148). In her social/ familial life she is expected to endure and silence her own desires. She attempts to live according to the social rules, but her emotional nature refuses to be constrained by narrow expectations. Her intellectual bond with Philip brings joy, but it also ushers conflict, because society views female desire as dangerous (Stubbs 149). Maggie's treatment at the hands of her family, especially her brother Tom, shows how deeply social culture shapes/ controls a woman's life;----- she is taught and tutored to sacrifice her own happiness, her emotional void, not because it is morally necessary but because it is socially expected (Ashton 76). Her affection for Philip is not viewed and accepted as a natural expression of her heart, but as a threat to the family honour (Henry 39). This perception reveals the injustice faced by women who are denied the right to choose their companion or openly express their emotional needs (Henry 179).

After a brief hiatus Maggie and Philip meet again, this time in the presence of her mother Mrs Tulliver, and her cousin Lucy's father, Uncle Deane, in Uncle Deane's house. Their renewed friendship and conversation fill the intellectual depth that she is denied at home constantly. She experiences a friendship that does not require her to shrink herself. Rather, she can now discuss the tenets of higher intellectual life----- literature, music, art, philosophy, freely and engagingly with Philip. Her sparkling intelligence is not seen by Philip as a fault as others tend to think, but as a gift, when he says "your mind has a music of its own" (Eliot 318). He gives expression to her inner beauty, which is something that she has never dared to claim for herself. He gives her permission to feel that her mind is a form of light, not a social deviant (Ashton 125). Thus his love for her is not the romance of a young man, but something that awakens her inner soul, that otherwise silently screams for recognition and validation. He dares her to dream beyond the mundane (128).

Through Maggie, George Eliot exposes the crushing impact of moral rigidity on female lives, which is basically a struggle to balance duty and desire (Hardy 125). This struggle becomes the central tragedy of Maggie's story (Henry 146). Her guilt, her fear, and her silent acquiescence---- all reflect the heavy loadstone of emotional burden placed upon her. It also mirrors the fate of those unfortunate women who are commanded to renounce themselves at the altar of social order (146). Tragedy lies in the fact that Maggie is compelled to deny her own heart in order to uphold the expectations of the society and family, forced to be measured by not only her physical but also emotional purity.

The tragedy of Maggie's life is not her intellectual attraction towards Philip, but the heartlessness of a society that refuses to allow that tenderness to exist openly(Hughes 45). Through her experience Eliot offers a powerful critique of the constraints and restraints placed upon hapless women, and thus reveals the profound cost defying the world that denies any sort of freedom to women, including their emotional freedom to interact with men, openly and without shame.

Works Cited

Ashton, Rosemarie. *George Eliot: A Life*. Penguin Books, 1998.

Eliot, George. *The Mill on the Floss*. Palgrave, 2000.

Hardy, Barbara. *The Novels of George Eliot*. A & C Publishing, 2002.

Henry, Nancy. *The Life of George Eliot: A Critical Biography*. Cambridge University Press, 2012.

Hughes, Kathryn. *George Eliot: The Last Victorian*. Cooper Square Press, 2001.

Stubbs, Patricia. *Women and Fiction: Feminism and the Novel*. Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 1982.