

**GEORGE ELIOT'S CONCEPT OF TOLERANCE AND FORGIVENESS IN 'THE  
MILL ON THE FLOSS**Asiya Mustafa Zehri<sup>1</sup> Faria Saeed Khan<sup>1</sup><sup>1</sup>Department of English Literature, University of Balochistan Quetta

Received on: April. 02/2021.

Published on: April. 21/2021.

**ABSTRACT**

*George Eliot belongs to the Victorian Era. She wrote many famous novels such as Adam Bede, Middlemarch, Romola and her classic novel The Mill on the Floss. It is believed that the humour in The Mill on the Floss is overshadowed by the tragic theme of the novel. This research work will focus on the oppressive nature of patriarchal Victorian society and the element of tolerance and forgiveness in the work. The presented work centered on the concept of tolerance and forgiveness within a specific context during the Victorian era and how George Eliot examined these concepts in The Mill on the Floss. This work illuminated light on tragedy in the novel in the concept of tolerance and forgiveness concerning it. It is contended by the researcher that there could be a powerful depiction of tolerance and forgiveness offered by the literature and cultural texts selected here. Moreover, a powerful critique of the societal restrictions of Victorian society, as well as the role imposed on the character in the novel, was presented in this work. The identities were historicized and social restrictions were situated, revealing that restrictions were the results of the social condition that that was aggravated and reinforced by Victorian society.*

**KEYWORDS:** Tolerance, Forgiveness, Victorian society, Tragedy, Societal & Restrictions**1. INTRODUCTION**

Forgiveness does not mean approving the other's behavior and forgiving the other's misdeeds rather it simply means giving up hope that yesterday could have happened differently (Pollock, 2016). That is, people no longer cling to the unconscious fantasy of being able to change the past. Forgiveness allows an individual to get rid of the limitations of beliefs and attitudes and allows them to unleash their mental and emotional energies so they can use them to create a better life (Heylighen et al., 2018). The fact that people have a huge benefit when they choose to forgive themselves makes forgiveness extremely practical and useful. There is nothing vague or impractical about it that forgiveness sets human beings free (Strelan, McKee & Feather, 2016). It will be as if they see their life from



above and see the easiest way to get where they want to go and life opens before them (Strelan, McKee & Feather, 2016). However, forgiveness cannot be found within patriarchal society because it literally means male domination, and by the term it means a social structure in which men are systematically subordinated to women and women are systematically subordinated to men (Wood, 2013).

The institution of patriarchy is not some modern invention; this social structure has, in fact, existed for centuries. Even in the time of feudalism, societies were characterized by a patriarchal system, but its formation dates back to the ancient Greeks (Sanauddin, 2015). Interestingly, according to some sources, even earlier, tribal societies operated in a completely different arrangement. At that time, matriarchy, that is, mother societies, or other equality based arrangements were prevalent (Siqueira de Miranda, 2015).

According to the theory of Kocabicak (2020), there are two types of patriarchy: exclusionary and segregating. Excluding patriarchy is a social order in which women are excluded from public life (including the worlds of politics, the economy, and work) and confined to the private sphere, the home. In contrast, in the segregating patriarchy, women may already be involved in various public life processes, but there are structural dynamics in society that separate areas and tasks that are considered masculine and feminine (Batton & Wright, 2019). While women are present in large numbers in care professions, education, and nursing or even in bureaucratic, less powerful public service tasks, men end up in more recognized professions with more financial compensation (Batton & Wright, 2019).

This is not a thing required by law, so it is not the law that women can only do service type jobs or perform more underpaid duties, while men need to be better recognized; this type of arrangement is caused by a great many cumulative, additive, smaller dynamics and mechanisms (Williams, Wallis & Williams, 2013).

Patriarchal societies are primarily supported by gender roles, gender-based expectations and prejudices that are fixed in us. But in addition to these, the patriarchate also has a tangible and material basis - even the fact that, due to their biological structure, women are able to give birth (Haufiku, 2019).

It has also been evident in the *Mill on the Floss* where Maggie and Tom had represented opposite sides of the theme where gender inequality is quite evident. It is due to the fact that men used to have all the rights during Victorian period and Tom, in the novel, had always found to be bossing Maggie around and had obtained more advantages in terms of education than Maggie

(Literary Works, 2016). The work of this novel however has shown a very narrow dimension of how men and women should be behaving whereas men similar to Phillip in the story that has been sensitive and artistic had considered Maggie as scandalous as she had bold nature.

Another major theme found in the novel has been the lack of compassion and forgiveness. Most of the characters in *The Mill on the Floss* have seemed to be more persuaded towards plotting revenge, spreading rumours, maintaining prejudices and holding grudges (The Guardian, 2019). In this work, there has been a very little consideration given to the feelings of the people whereas those people who have lack of compassion and sensitivity have not been considered as bad or evil in the book (The Guardian, 2019).

The ability to forgive someone and compassion are found to be hard realities and a lot of characters have not been able to rationalize this lack of forgiveness and compassion in them. For instance, Tom considers his loyalty towards his father as a fair reason for holding grudge against Wakems (Gutenberg.Org, 2020).

In this way, forgiveness and compassion have been shown as the qualities that are worth fighting for such as the revenge of Mr Tulliver against Mr Wakem has found to be misguided because Mr Wakem has only been doing his job and was not deliberately ruining the life of Tullivers (Gutenberg.Org, 2020). In addition, it has been an inability of Tom to forgive the sins of Maggie because he perceived that she was at fault and it was resulted from the fact that she loved her so much that he could not forgive her sins. The main purpose of this research was to study George Eliot's concept of tolerance and forgiveness in 'The Mill on the Floss'.

### 1.1 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY:

Compassion and forgiveness, in terms of its characteristics, includes: motivation to care, sympathy, and tolerance for unpleasant feelings, ability to empathize, judgment, and judgment (Gilbert, 2015). In terms of the direction of compassion, it can be distinguished between (self) compassion towards others, received from others, and towards ourselves. These affect each other and are inseparable.

Being compassionate is associated with motivations such as care, sensitivity to stress, tolerance for anxiety, and empathy. Susceptibility to compassion for others can help regulate anxiety and overcome negative emotions (Matos, Duarte & Pinto-Gouveia, 2017). However, Mr Tulliver, in *The Mill on the Floss*, has called the society as puzzling because the society of St. Ogg has found to be contradictory and confusing because it operates with strict rules but it has harmful and outlandish assumptions. This study has been significant for finding how patriarchal society has been portrayed from the time of Victorian era and



why it has called as cruel in *The Mill on the Floss*. Prejudice and gossip have found to be judge mental attitudes in the society depicted in *The Mill on the Floss* and it has found to be the place where action is taken in a wrong way (Wheeler, 2016). In this way, society has allowed the characters to misbehave towards others. It is important to find how patriarchy was being penetrated in the Victorian society and how it has been depicted in the work of George Eliot. For instance, the extended family of Dodson has represented the greater picture of St Ogg's society and it has been ruled by various strict rules for women and a large number of scandals and gossips (The Guardian, 2019). Hence, this study has been significant for identifying how the concept of tolerance and forgiveness during Victorian era has been elaborated in the work of George

Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*. It has also been significant for its in-depth nature where the question of how the issue of patriarchy in Victorian society has been demonstrated in the work of George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* has been answered.

The key importance of the study can be determined by considering how it has portrayed the key issues related with patriarchy in the society and its roots in the era of Victorian society. The motivation behind this is to fill the gap that is pertinent in the existing body of knowledge. For instance, tolerance and forgiveness have been the key themes in various researches (Conejero, Etxebarria & Montero, 2014; Kijewski & Rapp, 2019; Rääkkä & Ahteensuu, 2016; Gull and Rana, 2013), however, these studies have not depicted regarding how the concepts have been portrayed in the story of *The Mill on the Floss* by George Elliot. Moreover, the issue of patriarchy has also been a main theme of numerous researches (Ortner, 2014; Aluko, 2015; Dlamini & Adams, 2014); however, again these researches have not depicted the issue of patriarchy in the context of *The Mill on the Floss*.

Different researches on the *Mill on the Floss* have focused on various different themes. For instance, Archer, Turley & Thomas (2015) have conducted the study on *The Mill on the Floss* and focused on landscape issues, historical past, childhood and female childhood; however, themes of patriarchy, forgiveness and tolerance have not been found in the study.

On the other hand, Yasmin (2014) has provided how women have been portrayed in the novels including *The Mill on the Floss*; however, the researcher has not included the themes of tolerance and forgiveness in the context of the book. Considering these gaps in the body of literature, the current study has been of utmost importance as it has largely contributed in the array of literature by focusing on the themes such as tolerance and forgiveness and patriarchal society during the Victorian era.



### 1.2.1. PROBLEM STATEMENT:

This research paper covers all seven series of the books called 'The Mill on The Floss' with regards to the concept of tolerance and forgiveness. The research paper provides the overall view of the book series in the light of the concept of tolerance and forgiveness. Tolerance and forgiveness in literature are considered moral values, and a form of social institution contributing to valuable actions (Räikkä & Ahteensuu, 2016). As per Bostrom and Roache (2008), tolerance and forgiveness are taken as a measure of a judging a person as being morally priceless. Subthemes or devices of tolerance and forgiveness are addressed in this research paper including compassion, reconciliation and empathy (Song, 2020). These underlying concepts deal with the significant characteristic of weaknesses in the close connection to immoral actions taken by individuals (Räikkä, & Ahteensuu, 2016). In this manner, morally problematic thoughts and actions such as seeking revenge are identified in the light of tolerance and forgiveness.

### 1.3 RATIONALE OF THE STUDY

The core rationale of this research paper is to describe and examine the book series 'The Mill on The Floss' by George Eliot with respect to tolerance and forgiveness. Tolerance and forgiveness have been found to be very difficult to come by in The Mill on the Floss. Allen (2010) stated that almost all main characters are inclined towards plotting revenge, holding grudges, spreading rumours and sustaining prejudice. Moreover, other characters' feelings are not considered, and main characters lacking tolerance and forgiveness, are not addressed as bad or evil in the book. According to Pinch (2013), tolerance and the capability to forgive other people are qualities to sustain and most of the characters rationalize their lack of forgiveness and tolerance. However, Eliot displays tolerance and forgiveness as qualities worth fighting for. Therefore, this research paper explores all parts of the book to analyse the concept of tolerance and forgiveness, effectively and in-depth.

### 1.4 DELIMITATION OF THE STUDY

Delimitation are elements that are not involved in the research or examination (The of anidis, & Fountouki, A. (2018). Simon and Goes (2013) mentioned that delimitations assist in setting boundaries with respect to type of participants, population size, and study duration. In this research paper, the major elements of tolerance and forgiveness are included that were observed in all seven series of The Mill on The Floss (Harris, 2008). Hence, other minor elements, concepts or sub themes were not taken into the research paper of the concept. In this regard, Eliot's thoughts with regards to the underlying elements of compassion, empathy, reconciliation are highlighted in the light of tolerance and



forgiveness. The research paper, thus, establishes a better comprehension of 'The Mill on The Floss' as the concept of tolerance and forgiveness.

### 1.5 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The following are the research objectives:

- To examine the concept of tolerance and forgiveness within a specific context during the Victorian era and how George Eliot examined these concepts in *The Mill on the Floss*.
- To investigate the issue of patriarchy in Victorian society demonstrated in the work of George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*.

### 1.6 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following research questions have been devised:

- How the concept of tolerance and forgiveness during Victorian era has been elaborated in the work of George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*?
- How the issue of patriarchy in Victorian society has been demonstrated in the work of George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*?

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

*The Mill on The Floss* is the most highly appreciated novels of the 19th century. Maitzen (2014) defined the book as Eliot's "most autobiographical novel". According to Akça and Güneş, (2009), the novel internalizes a patriarchal community in the Victorian era, which limited females to become ambitious. The novel has portrayed how women felt the need for love and acceptance, which were denied in Victorian era. As per Boucher-Rivalain (2019), Alan Bellringer claimed that the book presents two primary themes concerning "lend themselves to amusement", and "growing up and falling in love" along with highlighting frustrated love and stunted growth. Whereas, Wheeler (2016) suggested that the novel has portrayed consistent rejection of female talents by community and family as well as intellectual growth. On the contrary, Ermarth (1974) addressed that the book informs norms, which explained that women were considered dependent and inferior creatures, hence, denying their full humanity. In this manner, the book series discusses the concept of tolerance and forgiveness concerning gender tragedy, societal restriction, and social conditions aggravated and reinforced by patriarchal Victorian society.

With regards to gender tragedy, Odubajo and Odubajo (2017) stated that Victorian women were particularly disadvantaged both sexually and financially due to which they endured inequality in their communities and marriages. Whelan (2011) explained that women were expected to have only one life partner, however, men were permitted to have

multiple. Moreover, women were not given the option of divorce when their husbands had lengthy affairs, presenting societal restrictions for women. Whereas, Behrend (2020) described social conditions for women that were set as marrying and taking part in their husbands' businesses and interests. Before marriage, women had to learn washing, cooking, weaving, and cleaning unless they belonged to wealthy families. The discussion highlights that tolerance and forgiveness in Victorian era were only limited to women in terms of women submitting and sacrificing majority of things in their lives.

Victorian era has always been very influential in history as it spanned for 63 years, from 1837 to 1901 (Walker, 2011). According to Whelan (2011), the era saw a growth of British Empire in which Britain became the first international industrial power, generating most of the world's steel, iron, coal and textiles. Elliott-Binns (2019) asserted that the era was mainly comprised of class-based communities in which people were capable of voting, and economy and state were growing. Friedman (2012) highlighted that mainly, rich individuals were able to enjoy lots of holidays, treats, fancy clothes and telephones when they were invented. However, poor individuals had to work in workhouses, mines or factories, and were not paid much.

The literature of Victorian era or Victorian literature means English literature during the supremacy of Queen Victoria. Adams (2012) addressed that novel became the leading literary genre in English, and many women novelists became successful, however, they had to utilize a masculine pseudonym. Zemka (2011) further informed that major transformations were seen in English literature including economic, scientific and technological advances along with religion and class structures in communities. Whereas, Walker (2011) asserted that Victorian literature was materialistic and practical as it displayed a completely ideal life where truth, love, justice, brotherhood, tolerance and forgiveness were taken as ideals by essayists, novelists, and poets of the age.

Walters (2014) explained that tolerance is acceptance, respect and appreciation of rich diversity of the cultures of the world, a way of being human, and a form of expression. Whereas, Hughes and Warmke (2010) defined forgiveness as a generous response to wrongdoing and a personal reaction to wrongful harm, which is expressed in verbal, emotional and relational terms. In Victorian era, Gibson (2015) stated that tolerance and forgiveness meant a common value and language that eased negotiations between religions and ethical frameworks. However, it complicated the traditional forgiveness powers to report and create narratives, and offer closure.



## 2.1 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theory of tolerance states that circumstances must be recognized under which a value system is transmitted (Corneo & Jeanne, 2009). This attaches relatively equal worth to different lifestyles and trials. Zhang and Zhang (2009) mentioned that the theory presents a belief that addressing expressive freedom can make institutions and individuals more open to ideas than they can be otherwise. All the series of the book depicts the theory as characters in the book seek revenge rather than moving on. The characters see it more feasible to misguide others, ruin their lives than solving the issue. Due to this, the characters constantly get involved in conflicts and fights with their families.

The theory of forgiveness promotes responding in a certain manner to someone who has treated someone wrongly or badly (Warmke, 2016). The theory presents that there is dyadic relation between a wronged party and a wrongdoer. It is thought that wronged ones alter both their and wrongdoer's status i.e., moving past a moral transgression. Forster et al. (2020) indicated that the theory highlights giving up negative feelings towards the wrongdoer, and restoring the connection with the wrongdoer to understand the nature of forgiveness, standing to forgive, and the norms regarding forgiveness such as forgiveness being morally right, good, or praiseworthy. The theory relates to the incapability of main characters to forgive, and change their perceptions towards others' sins.

## 3. METHODOLOGY

Research methodology is an integral part of the research which provides an overall framework for conducting a research in an in-depth manner (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015). Two research designs are present for the researchers such as quantitative and qualitative design where the combination of these two is known as mixed method design. For this study, the researcher has chosen qualitative design which has provided various interpretations for the given phenomenon. In addition, qualitative research is associated with more subjective approach where there is no room for quantitative analysis and statistical underpinnings. Within qualitative design, secondary data has been collected. Roller & Lavrakas (2015) stated that secondary data is the existing data which is derived from different articles, books, journals and research papers. For this research, the secondary information has been collected by using journals, books, websites and other sources. The primary source for this research has been the novel known as *The Mill on the Floss*. For the purpose of analysis, the researcher has adopted content analysis has been used where the researcher has derived key themes from the existing sources and critically analyzed the findings from literature.

#### 4. FINDINGS

Every series of *The Mill on The Floss* depicts the concept of tolerance and forgiveness. Therefore, every series is kept under view to discuss the concept in this research paper. The Victorian community portrayed is one that holds grudges for generations (Eliot, 2007). Moreover, individuals have a strong sense of loyalty towards their traditions, which results in intolerance towards those who deviate from it (Allen, 2010). Maggie Tulliver, one of the main characters of the book, is a clever individual who has encountered prejudice and intolerance from her family and society (Archer, Turley & Thomas, 2015). However, she has also experienced forgiveness and compassion from Lucy Deane and Philip Wakem. On the other hand, Maggie still longs for a more generous and forgiving world, and attempts to promote one by rescuing her brother Tom from a flood, and sacrificing her life with him in the process (Corbett, 2007).

Maggie and Tom have showed different attitudes towards forgiveness. Maggie is more compassionate and empathetic, whereas, Tom is stubborn and principled who always considers himself right, hence, the patriarchal influence (Green, 2005). Their reconciliation prior to death in the flood is a sign that Maggie's compassion was bigger than Tom's. Mr Tulliver, their father, is just as unforgiving and stubborn as Tom and Dodsons (Mr. Tulliver's sister-in-laws) (Archer et al., 2015). He constantly fights with his neighbours, initiating lawsuits over management of land, which has ruined him financially. For this, however he blames and holds grudges towards his lawyer Wakem as being the core cause (Blake, 2005). He makes Tom swear on Bible to hate Wakems, making forgiveness impossible for coming generations (Purdy, 2005).

Maggie was affected by both sides of families including Tullivers and Dodsons, who are intolerant and unwilling to admit when they are wrong, and forgive wrongdoers. Mrs Glegg (Mr. Tulliver's sister-in-law) is one of the examples as she is very perilous of her Tulliver relations. She maintains standards of dress, etiquettes and household management since her own youth along with a bad temper (Blake, 2005). However, Mrs Glegg has stood by Maggie when she was rejected by everyone in the town due to her elopement with Stephen

Guest (Green, 2005). Mrs Glegg believed in Maggie's innocence, portraying forgiveness and compassion when it was least expected by Maggie.

In a similar manner, Lucy Deane and Philip Waken also illustrated the power of forgiveness. Philip loved Maggie, and Lucy was engaged in all but name to Stephen Guest



(Pinch, 2013). Due to this, Stephen and Maggie's elopement caused distress to both of them. Philip later forgave Maggie and offered apology for asserting his romantic emotions on her when she was not able to reciprocate them (Green, 2005). Philip accepted Maggie's flaws and empathized with her, which was lacking in her relatives. Lucy also forgave Maggie after the botched elopement, and said that he never intended to hurt her. Due to this, Maggie's pain of intolerance and rejection were softened that she was receiving from other people, displaying that forgiveness is one of the most powerful acts by humans.

On the other hand, Maggie's did not receive forgiveness from Tom, who distressed her most of her life due to which she longed for his affection. Maggie asks for forgiveness after elopement; however, he refuses and shows disgust, plunging her into despair (Hadjiafxendi, 2011). When Maggie came to rescue him from the flood; the intolerance, grudges and stubbornness that Tom had kept for Maggie turned into forgiveness (Amiel Houser, 2016). Hence, the sibling reconciliation portrayed is a final act of forgiveness and compassion over intolerance.

The book has all aspects and qualities of tolerance and forgiveness, and their elements including reconciliation, compassion and empathy. The book is a combination of these elements that are represented to incorporate the feelings of mercy, understanding, open mindedness and acceptance. These are the core qualities in the concept of tolerance and forgiveness that are heavily portrayed in the theme, plot and setting of the book.

## 5. DISCUSSION

The Mill on the Floss has common features of tolerance and forgiveness. The story revolved around the Victorian lives of Maggie and Tom bounded by love-hate sibling relationship. Eliot has portrayed the concept of tolerance and forgiveness with respect to compassion, empathy, and reconciliation. In Victorian era, tolerance and forgiveness meant a common value and language that eased negotiations between religions and ethical frameworks.

The book is a combination of positive and negative feelings that addressed human emotions, patriarchal issues, and thoughts. In this manner, the Eliot has discussed the concept of tolerance and forgiveness concerning gender tragedy, societal restriction, and social conditions as a result of patriarchal Victorian society.

Eliot has marvelously displayed the use of expressive language that develops a great interest in readers of every age. Moreover, the theories of tolerance and forgiveness are depicted by every series of the book as the characters were more inclined towards seeking revenge, misguiding others, and ruining lives. Due to which, characters were involved in conflicts and fights, and were incapable to forgive, and change their perceptions towards



others. Tolerance and forgiveness have been combined together in the novel to offer some changed meaning to readers by Eliot. In this way, the reader realizes the presence of Eliot and her feelings while reading the story. The story is a transition between acceptance, compassion, and open mindedness that makes the book a highly impressive portrayal of the concept of tolerance and forgiveness.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The main purpose of this research was to study George Eliot's concept of tolerance and forgiveness in 'The Mill on the Floss'. Every series of The Mill on the Floss depicts the concept of tolerance and forgiveness. Therefore, every series is kept under view to discuss the concept in this research paper. This study has been significant for finding how patriarchal society has been portrayed from the time of Victorian era and why it has called as cruel in The Mill on the Floss. Prejudice and gossip have found to be judge mental attitudes in the society depicted in The Mill on the Floss and it has found to be the place where action is taken in a wrong way. Maggie and Tom have showed different attitudes towards forgiveness. Maggie is more compassionate and empathetic, whereas, Tom is stubborn and principled who always considers himself right, hence, the patriarchal influence. Maggie was affected by both sides of families including Tullivers and Dodsons, who are intolerant and unwilling to admit when they are wrong, and forgive wrongdoers. The book is a combination of positive and negative feelings that addressed human emotions, patriarchal issues, and thoughts. In this manner, the Eliot has discussed the concept of tolerance and forgiveness concerning gender tragedy, societal restriction, and social conditions as a result of patriarchal Victorian society.

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