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George Eliot's *Middlemarch*: An Approach to Feminism

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Abstract:

Feminism focuses on understanding women's roles in a patriarchal society, shedding light on their struggles, and encouraging readers to challenge the injustices they have faced. While many feminists have made significant contributions to this movement, George Eliot's work has sparked debate among critics regarding her portrayal of women and their issues. This paper explores Eliot's views on gender and raises a key question: Does her depiction of women uphold the oppression of a patriarchal society, or does it seek to confront and dismantle male dominance and authority? It also examines how Eliot critiques the limited opportunities available to women and their constrained social roles, particularly in the realms of marriage, education, and ambition.

George Eliot illustrates a range of female experiences through figures like Dorothea Brooke, from the idealistic search for intellectual and spiritual fulfilment to the more traditional and materialistic goals of Victorian women. Through the nuanced portrayal of Rosamond Vincy and Mary Garth, Eliot challenges the restrictive norms of her time, advocating for greater agency and equality for women. She remains a cornerstone in feminist literary studies, offering a timeless reflection on the challenges and aspirations of women navigating a male-dominated society.

Keywords: Feminism, George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, Gender Discrimination, Male Dogmatism, Domination, Patriarchal Society, Female Oppression.

Introduction:

George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871-72) is often considered one of the finest works of the Victorian period and a landmark achievement in literary history. Eliot, celebrated for her exceptional intellect, demonstrated a profound understanding of human society, blending her insights with a moral vision. Harold Bloom, a renowned literary critic, elevates her to the ranks of great philosophers rather than just artists, stating that the novel inspires "aesthetic awe" due to its ability to elevate moral reflection to the level of high art (Bloom 23).

Despite its widespread acclaim, some critics argue that *Middlemarch* perpetuates the tradition of female subjugation within a patriarchal framework. Ellen Moers, for example, criticises the novel for reinforcing traditional gender roles rather than dismantling them (Moers 45). This critique is surprising, given that the novel is authored by a woman and delves deeply into issues of gender inequality, discrimination, and the social injustices faced by women. The narrative revolves around Dorothea Brooke, whose journey frames both the beginning and end of the novel, making gender issues a central theme. However, feminist critics have expressed dissatisfaction with how these issues are resolved.

The primary criticism stems from Dorothea's inability to fully transcend the societal constraints imposed on her as a woman. Although she possesses an intelligent mind and a noble spirit, she ultimately conforms to the traditional gender roles of her time. Feminist scholars argue that Dorothea's marriage to Will Ladislaw symbolises a surrender to patriarchal norms, undermining her potential to inspire women to break free from these constraints. They view her life as falling short of the epic example they hoped for—"a life that could serve as a model for overthrowing societal bonds.". (Moers 48)

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Nevertheless, many scholars defend George Eliot against these critiques, arguing that *Middlemarch* reflects a realistic portrayal of the limitations faced by women in the nineteenth century. Rather than idealising rebellion, the novel underscores the systemic inequality women endure while hinting at gradual social evolution toward gender equity. By focusing on Through Dorothea's struggles and choices, Eliot demonstrates her deep sympathy for the plight of women. Ultimately, *Middlemarch* lends itself to feminist interpretation not because it offers a radical solution but because it presents a nuanced exploration of gender and social constraints within its historical context.

George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, as explicitly stated in its prelude, critiques the restrictive conditions imposed on women by modern society. Through the metaphor of Saint Theresa, Eliot highlights the challenges and rarity of achieving an epic life for women. She writes,

"Here and there is born a Saint Teresa, passionate, idealistic, restless under the pressure of inexorable social laws, who finds no epic life wherein there is a constant unfolding of far-resonant action. Many Theresas have been born who found no epic life in which their actions could resonate far and wide. Instead, their lives often amounted to mistakes—products of a spiritual grandeur mismatched with limited opportunities. For some, this led to tragic failures, unnoticed and uncelebrated, fading into oblivion. Struggling amidst dim circumstances, they sought to align their thoughts and actions with noble ideals. Yet, to the ordinary observer, these struggles seemed inconsistent and without form. Unlike earlier times, these later-born Theresas lacked the cohesive social faith and order that could provide clarity and guidance to their ardent spirits. Their passion vacillated between vague ideals and the universal yearning of womanhood.". (Eliot 5)

This passage encapsulates the essence of Eliot's feminist inquiry—whether women's aspirations are doomed to be unfulfilled within a rigidly patriarchal society or whether incremental change is possible.

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The phrase "meanness of opportunity (Eliot 199)" underscores the plight of women, who are not only denied opportunities but are also constrained by the disapproval of a patriarchal society. This introduction serves as a poignant commentary on how societal pressures stifle women's potential, suggesting that, if given the chance, they could achieve even greater heights than men.

The novel follows Dorothea Brooke and her quest for self-discovery. She is an idealistic young woman who lives with her uncle, Mr. Brooke, at Tipton Grange near the provincial town of Middlemarch in the English Midlands. Jae Hwang Shim writes:

Middlemarch is about the struggle of the protagonist Dorothea as to how her assertion of her individuality to achieve freedom leads to her confrontation with the male-dominated society. Feeling smothered in an oppressive, male-dominated, and tradition-bound society, she attempts to explore her inner self to assert her individuality (Shim 45).

George Eliot begins by highlighting the constraints imposed on women by society. Women are compelled to adopt a passive role in various aspects of their lives, both internally and externally. Despite societal shifts and the gradual acceptance of new values, women's roles remained confined to domestic responsibilities, primarily focused on maintaining the household and serving men. Eliot critiques this restriction, emphasising that women were denied the opportunity to engage with significant social issues. In Chapter II of Book I, when Mr. Casaubon commends Dorothea for her interest in politics, her uncle, Mr. Brooke, remarks:

"Young ladies don't understand political economy, you know… But some way, history moves in circles, and that may be very well argued; I have argued it myself" (Eliot 13).

Furthermore, women were restricted from expressing explicit opinions. The expected virtue of women is evident in a conversation between Celia and Dorothea:

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"Women were expected to have weak opinions, but the great safeguard of society and of domestic life was that opinions were not acted on. Some people did what their neighbours did, so that if any lunatic were at large, one might know and avoid them" (Eliot 9).

There are several instances in *Middlemarch* that highlight how patriarchy discourages women from learning. In Chapter 7 of Book I, Dorothea persuades Mr. Casaubon to teach her Latin or Greek for an hour each day. However, Mr. Brooke's response dismisses and discourages her ambition (Eliot 21).

In *Middlemarch*, the constraints imposed on women are evident in the way their intellectual pursuits are dismissed. Mr. Brooke states:

"Well, but now, Casaubon, such deep studies, classics, mathematics—that kind of thing—are too taxing for a woman… too taxing, you know." (Eliot 53).

He believes that women should focus on fine arts and music rather than engaging in rigorous academic studies. However, Dorothea recognises these imposed limitations and rejects them. She refuses to confine herself to what is deemed "appropriate education" for women and instead aspires to engage in studies considered "too demanding for a woman." By marrying Casaubon, she hopes to fulfil her ambitions, believing that he will enable her to realise her dreams. She perceives him as someone who could nurture her intellectual aspirations, as she reflects:

"… was a man who could understand the higher, inward life with whom there could be some spiritual communion" (Eliot 15).

Dorothea believes that marrying Casaubon will free her from the constraints of her youthful ignorance. She hopes that, as his wife, she will gain access to the kind of education that is traditionally reserved for men. This highlights the broader theme of women's restricted access to education and their constant yearning for intellectual opportunities.

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Dorothea's idealistic vision of marriage leads her to wed a man much older than herself. This decision reflects the challenges women face in their search for a suitable partner. The difficulty of finding an intellectually and emotionally compatible match often results in women settling for unsuitable marriages out of desperation.

Dorothea's perspective on marriage differs significantly from that of Casaubon. She envisions herself as a devoted student or daughter to him, akin to "Milton's daughter" (Eliot 52). Rather than viewing him as a traditional husband, she sees him as a combination of "father, partner, and teacher, Milton and Hooker" (Hardy 21). In contrast, Casaubon perceives their marriage as a means to secure a caretaker for his old age, showing little interest in fulfilling Dorothea's aspirations. His letter to Dorothea reflects this sentiment:

"Such, my dear Miss Brooke, is the accurate statement of my feelings… to be accepted by you as your husband and the earthly guardian of your welfare, I should regard as the highest of providential gifts… I wait for the expression of your sentiments with an anxiety, which it would be the part of wisdom to divert by a more arduous labour than usual…" (Eliot 35).

George Eliot critiques the societal expectation that women should be submissive companions, serving men in subordinate roles. In *Middlemarch*, Casaubon chooses Dorothea not for who she is but for what he believes he can shape her into. The novel delves into the societal position of women, inviting a feminist interpretation.

Dorothea enters marriage with hopes of finding a relationship that fosters her self-discovery and personal growth, but instead, she faces the opposite reality. Women readers often sympathise with her plight, and the shared empathy for her circumstances reinforces the novel's feminist perspective.

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Through *Middlemarch*, George Eliot critiques the institution of marriage—its impact on men, its constraints on women, and the loss of identity it imposes on the latter. As Rosenman aptly observes:

"*Middlemarch*… [is] imbued with strong feminist feelings as the novelist protests against such a conjugal relationship, which curtails a woman's freedom and erodes her personality" (Rosenman).

Dorothea and Casaubon's marriage serves as an emblem of the insidious nature of sexism, revealing how it seeps into even the noblest souls. It also portrays the soul-crushing power of male domination. After marriage, Eliot depicts a very changed Dorothea. One of the most poignant moments of the novel is the transformation of the once vibrant young Dorothea into a deeply depressed woman during her honeymoon.

Amid her sorrow, she slowly begins to realise her mistake. There is no doubt that Eliot presents this marriage as a grave error. Dorothea is described as:

"In the midst of her confused thought and passion, the mental act that was struggling forth into clearness was a self-accusing cry that her feeling of desolation was the fault of her own spiritual poverty. She had married the man of her choice" (Eliot 158).

The novel portrays Dorothea and Casaubon's marriage as an undeniable mistake. Over time, Dorothea transforms from an enthusiastic young woman filled with dreams into someone burdened by deep frustration and despair. The failure of their marriage stems from their fundamental incompatibility, with much of the blame resting on Casaubon. His rigid and controlling nature clashes with Dorothea's aspirations, leading to the inevitable collapse of their relationship. Casaubon's relentless need to dominate and his disregard for Dorothea's individuality ultimately erode their bond.

Dorothea painfully realises that her marriage has left her unfulfilled, stripping her of her sense of self. She finds herself no different from the conventional women she had once sought to

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distinguish herself from. In the process, she loses her identity and personal needs. Casaubon, who despises any emotional expression from Dorothea, denies her even the most basic forms of physical and emotional intimacy. Even within the privacy of their bedroom, she is not allowed to express herself freely. When Dorothea attempts to engage him in conversation, Casaubon coldly dismisses her efforts, reinforcing the novel's critique of patriarchal oppression in marriage.

"No; I am not well. Get everything ready in my dressing room, but pray don't disturb me again" (Eliot 349).

Being so snubbed by Casaubon, Dorothea feels disillusioned. Instead of tears, these words come:

"What have I done…what am I…that he should treat me so? He never knows what is in my mind…He never cares—what is the use of anything I do?" (Eliot 352).

Throughout the novel, numerous instances reveal that Dorothea conforms to the role of a dutiful wife to ensure Casaubon's happiness and satisfaction, often at the cost of her own desires. Despite her reservations, she continues to cater to his demands. For example, she requests Mr. Brooke not to allow Will Ladislaw to stay at Tipton Grange solely because Casaubon disapproves of him. This incident underscores the constrained lives of wives and their suppressed individuality.

Dorothea's eagerness to fulfill the expectations of a loyal wife leads her to stifle her true self. Like many other women, she has been conditioned from childhood to accept such sacrifices. She even acquiesces to the change of her identity from Miss Brooke to Mrs. Casaubon after marriage, simply to please her husband. Her free will, systematically subdued by societal norms, remains suppressed as she prioritizes her role as a wife over her individuality.

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"...the importance and necessity of stable marriage and family...as a source of emotional strength" (Rosenman).

However, the same "emotional strength" is denied to her, and she is forced to swallow the pills of renunciation. From childhood, girls are taught to be submissive—to be feminine and to allow men to do as they please. A clear example of gender difference is seen in Book 1, Chapter 11, in the discourse between Mrs. Vincy and her daughter Rosamond:

"'Mamma,' said Rosamond, 'when Fred comes down, I wish you would not let him have red herrings. I cannot bear the smell of them all over the house at this hour of the morning.'
'Oh, my dear, you are so hard on your brothers! It is the only fault I have to find with you...'
'Brothers are so unpleasant.'
'Oh, my dear, you must allow for young men. Be thankful if they have good hearts. A woman must learn to put up with little things. You will be married someday'" (Eliot 81).

This passage reflects the gendered expectations imposed on women, reinforcing the belief that they must tolerate inconveniences and sacrifices, ultimately preparing them for a life of subordination within marriage.

Furthermore, the novelist criticises society, which considers women's sacrifice an ordinary expectation. Dorothea suppresses her pride and expects appreciation for her self-sacrificing submission. However, Casaubon, her husband, perceives it merely as part of her duty as a wife. By doing so, he drains Dorothea of her vitality and happiness.

Dorothea is not a rebel but seeks a realistic approach to her emancipation. The following discourse between Casaubon and Dorothea clearly illustrates the miserable condition of a subjugated wife:

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"He said, seating himself, 'You will oblige me, my dear, if instead of other reading this evening, you will go through this aloud, pencil in hand; at each point where I say 'mark,' you will make a cross with your pencil.'

'Yes,' she said.

After she had read and marked for two hours, he said, 'We will take the volume upstairs and the pencil if you please… and in case of reading at night, we can pursue this task. It is not wearisome to you, I trust, Dorothea?'

'I prefer always reading what you like best to hear,' said Dorothea, sobbing" (Eliot 392–393).

When Casaubon dies, he leaves a will stating that Dorothea will forfeit his property if she marries Will Ladislaw. Even in death, Casaubon seeks to control Dorothea, binding her to a rigid social expectation—one that functions as a metaphorical chain. Dorothea learns of this will through Celia. In Chapter 50 of *Middlemarch*, George Eliot writes:

"'Celia,' said Dorothea, entreatingly, 'You distress me. Tell me at once what you mean.'

'Why, he has made a codicil to his will, to say the property was all to go away from you if you married… I mean…'

'That is of no consequence,' said Dorothea, impetuously.

'But if you married Mr. Ladislaw, nobody else,' Celia went on.

'Of course, that is of no consequence in one way.

You never would marry Mr. Ladislaw, but that only makes it worse for Mr. Casaubon'" (Eliot 404).

This passage highlights Casaubon's desire to impose his will upon Dorothea even beyond the grave, reinforcing the oppressive societal norms that restrict women's autonomy.

Casaubon embodies more than just narcissistic imagination. His supposed embodiment of the qualities of the ideal husband—father, lord, master, and teacher—proves false in him.

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However, it is his obsessive struggle to write *The Key to All Mythologies* that truly establishes him as a symbol of male oppression. He represents the oppressive "masquerade of ages" (Eliot 190).

Eliot sets the novel just before the Reform Act, positioning it as a story about social progress. Casaubon's death symbolises this progress and represents Eliot's vision of social evolution. However, this transformation is not immediate; it does not lead to a utopian world of equality. The masquerade continues. The codicil in Casaubon's will serves as a powerful symbol of the persistence of male oppression. Dorothea longs to break free from this oppression and pursue true love through a meaningful relationship with Will Ladislaw. At one point, she cries:

"'Oh, I cannot bear it—my heart will break,' said Dorothea, starting from her seat, the folly of her young passion bearing down all the obstructions which had kept her silent—the great tears rising and falling in an instant: 'I don't mind about poverty—I hate my wealth.'" (Eliot 663).

Ultimately, she marries Will Ladislaw, a decision that represents an even more forceful act of rebellion. Some critics, such as Dorothea Barrett, argue that Dorothea's marriage to Will betrays the feminist movement because it "functions to support the dominant patriarchal order by reinforcing the woman's role as wife" (Barrett 45). However, her marriage to Will is not a reaffirmation of patriarchal values. Rather, it is an act of defiance against Casaubon's legacy and societal expectations. Jeanie explains:

"She, unlike Mary Garth, breaks with family and tradition when she marries Will Ladislaw. The choice to marry, however conventional, is the protest that it is within her power to make against the existing structure of things" (Jeanie 212).

Dorothea's choice, therefore, is not submission but a conscious assertion of her agency.

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Secondly, the simple fact that Dorothea marries cannot be read as a justification for the subjugation of women. While marriage has often served as a form of enslavement for women, Eliot is aware of this and criticises it, as evidenced by Dorothea's marriage to Casaubon. The novel illustrates the movement towards gender equality in marriage through Dorothea's transition from Casaubon to Ladislaw—not suggesting that the problem of gender inequality has been solved, but that progress has been made (Eliot 320).

Middlemarch presents the tragedy of social inequalities—particularly for individuals whose passion and potential are stifled by societal expectations. Eliot makes a strong critique of mismatched marriages, which often disadvantage women. A husband can have a mistress with impunity, whereas a wife's similar act is branded as adultery. Neera Arora aptly remarks:

"This condemnation is dictated by man's interest in preserving his property rather than by any moral consideration" (Arora 78).

Eliot highlights this double standard in multiple instances. For example, no one condemns Sir Peter Featherstone when he leaves all his property to his illegitimate son, Rigg, but when Will Ladislaw's grandmother marries a poor Polish man of her own choosing, she is disowned. This incident forces the reader to ask: why do such consequences fall only upon women?

The feminist voice in Eliot compels her to critique social conventions that discriminate against women. In *Middlemarch*, she challenges the idea that women should not have the freedom to choose their own partners through the character of Rosamond. When Rosamond wishes to marry Lydgate, Mrs. Bulstrode warns her:

"Oh, my dear, be more thoughtful: don't despise your neighbor so…Mr. Lydgate is very intellectual and clever. I like talking to such men myself, and your uncle finds him very useful. But the profession is a poor one here…and you are not to marry a poor man. A girl should keep her heart within her own power" (Eliot 245-246).

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Although this statement appears to be a gesture of familial concern, it reflects the societal restrictions that limit women's autonomy in choosing their partners.

Not only daughters but also widows suffer under societal conventions. According to traditional norms, a widow is required to mourn for at least a year and is forbidden from remarrying during this period. If she attempts to do so, society rejects her. In the novel, when Dorothea expresses her desire to remarry, Mrs. Cadwallader conspires to see her wed as soon as her mourning period concludes. The quick remarriage is expected to quell the malicious gossip surrounding her connection with Will. This scenario highlights the grim reality faced by widows in a traditional society. Lady Chettam, too, remarks to Celia about Dorothea's marriage:

"My dear Celia," said Lady Chettam, "a widow must wear her mourning for at least one month" (Eliot 45).

Farebrother's character further emphasises the challenging social position of women. While men face various financial issues, women are in an even more vulnerable situation. They have significantly lower earning potential and must rely on male support. Women's social opportunities are much more limited than those of men. Farebrother's mother is a widow, his aunt and sister are unmarried, and they all depend on his modest income for survival. A woman whose husband dies without providing sufficient financial security is forced to endure poverty. Typically, a woman's financial stability is tied to her husband, and in his absence, she must rely on the support of other men.

The novel succeeds in drawing the sympathy of female readers to the miserable and submissive condition of the female characters. Though they seem to resist their circumstances, they lack the means to change their situation. The major cause of their helplessness is the lack of education, which society has deprived them of. The novel presents gender discrimination in many places. For example, Walter Vincy funds Fred's costly college education to introduce him to the customs of the upper class and prepare him for a career in the clergy. However, the

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social mobility process for the Vincy's daughter, Rosamond, follows a different path. She embodies a stereotypical view of women, having been groomed to be a well-mannered, fashionable wife through attendance at a basic finishing school. Her "education" has shaped her into the ideal companion for a wealthy husband.

Rosamond is a target of feminist criticism. Many critics view her portrayal as harsh and unsympathetic. Perhaps there is some truth to this, as she has completely embraced her role as an ornamental, idle, and frivolous gentlewoman. Dorothea Barrett explains:

"And it is this—the fact that she criticises women as well as men—one suspects that is at the root of feminist anger with George Eliot" (Barrett 112).

Gillian Beer sees Rosamond's portrayal as a satirical comment on Victorian views of what a woman should be:

"Rosamond, with her equivocal name—the mystical rose of the world and the worldly rose—is a tragic satire on the ideal woman as described in much Victorian writing; in particular, on what constitutes women's work and women's influence" (Beer 127).

However, Kathleen McCormack challenges this perspective by arguing that Rosamond's desire for upward social mobility is hindered by the strict societal limitations placed on women. Unlike Lydgate, she lacks a public role or career to channel her ambitions. Her energies have no outlet beyond the domestic sphere. Captain Lydgate embodies the social class she aspires to join. When Lydgate forbids her from riding with his cousin again, Rosamond, already feeling restless, becomes even more frustrated. His command intensifies her feelings, as it represents yet another male authority figure dictating her choices. In this light, Rosamond emerges as a character deserving of the reader's sympathy.

There are several incidents that prove her condition to be more sympathetic. For example, after the miscarriage accident, she tearfully expresses her despair:

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"It is so very hard to be disgraced here among all the people we know and to live in such a miserable way. I wish I had died with the baby" (Eliot 498).

George Eliot challenges conventional gender roles and condemns a society that oppresses women. A letter written by Sir Godwin exemplifies the rigid patriarchal norms that confine women to the domestic sphere and exclude them from business matters. When Rosamond attempts to help her husband by writing to Lydgate's uncle about their financial difficulties, she is dismissed. Instead of aiding her, Sir Godwin sends a letter to Lydgate, rebuking him for allowing his wife to handle such matters:

"DEAR TERTIUS—Don't have your wife write to me when you have anything to ask. It is a roundabout, wheedling sort of thing, which I should not have credited you with. I never choose to write to a woman on matters of business…" (Eliot 546).

Blake views *Middlemarch* as a "great feminist work," arguing that through the character of Rosamond, George Eliot critiques the way women are denied their roles as equal partners. Blake states that "women's work is man," a phrase that underscores how society strips women of their sense of identity (Blake 213). In addition to criticising the male-dominated society, Eliot's writing style itself reflects feminist ideals. She uses epigrams not just for stylistic flair but to expose the repressed desires of women. The epigrams throughout the novel highlight these suppressed emotions. For example, a line from *Troilus and Cressida* conveys the frustration of women in a patriarchal world:

"He beats me and I rail at him: O worthy satisfaction! Would it were otherwise that I could beat him. While he railed at me" (Shakespeare 216).

In the novel's final passage, Eliot shifts from a first-person perspective to a third-person plural, broadening the narrative's moral implications: "But we significant people with our daily words

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and acts are preparing the lives of many Dorotheas, some of which may present a far sadder sacrifice than that of the Dorothea whose story we know" (Eliot 688). This shift emphasizes that societal norms, shaped by everyday actions, contribute to women's suffering. Eliot's focus on Dorothea underscores the constraints of marriage and presents a clear feminist critique of traditional gender roles.

Conclusion:

Middlemarch stands as a landmark feminist novel, shedding light on the restrictive societal roles imposed on women. Eliot's nuanced portrayal of female characters like Dorothea and Rosamond highlights the challenges women face in conforming to social expectations. The novel critiques traditional gender roles, exploring the barriers to women's personal fulfilment and autonomy. Additionally, Eliot's stylistic choices, such as the use of epigrams and shifts in narrative perspective, reinforce the novel's feminist themes.

However, *Middlemarch* also has limitations in its feminist scope. While it examines gender inequality, it does not fully address the intersectionality of gender with other factors such as class and race. The novel primarily focuses on upper-middle-class women's experiences, leaving the struggles of marginalized women largely unexplored.

Despite this limitation, *Middlemarch* remains highly relevant in contemporary feminist discourse. It prompts readers to reflect on the ways cultural norms continue to shape women's opportunities in marriage, career, and personal identity. Eliot's novel continues to be a valuable resource for examining the ongoing struggle for gender equality and the necessity of challenging patriarchal structures.

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