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George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*: An Approach to Feminism

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Abstract:

Feminism, as both a movement and an ideology, strives to confront the systemic inequities affecting women and advocates for their emancipation across social, economic, and intellectual domains. It challenges patriarchal structures that perpetuate gender-based oppression and calls for equal rights and opportunities for women. In her 1876 novel, Daniel Deronda, George Eliot examines feminist concerns within the context of Victorian society. The novel addresses critical issues such as gender discrimination, marriage as a tool of societal oppression, economic dependence, and the denial of intellectual autonomy to women. Through the contrasting experiences of the principal characters, Gwendolen Harleth and Mirah Lapidoth, Eliot explores the multifaceted struggles of women. Gwendolen , a victim of patriarchy, is coerced into a marriage that symbolises the systemic subjugation of women, while Mirah's journey reflects the intersectional challenges faced by a Jewish woman navigating gender and cultural constraints. Eliot critiques the societal norms that deny women true freedom, advocating for their education, economic independence, and moral growth. This paper highlights how Eliot portrays women as moral agents with the capacity for development and challenges conventional gender roles by promoting women's rights. Daniel Deronda stands as a landmark work, championing feminist ideals of equality, self-realisation, and resilience.

Keywords: Feminism, Gender Discrimination, Marriage, Economic Independence, Intellectual Growth, Intersectionality, Victorian Society, Women's Empowerment, George Eliot.

INTRODUCTION:

George Eliot , one of the first feminist writers to elaborate on the travails of women in their pursuit of emancipation and ultimate liberation, has succeeded in carving out a considerable niche for herself among feminists. Her fictional works mostly explore questions pertinent to women, especially those endowed with acute intelligence, inherent capabilities, and social aspirations. *Daniel Deronda* continues this tradition. Being her last novel, published in 1876, it addresses issues related to women's experiences. Like her other novels, it has been examined by feminist critics for its engagement with the alternatives available to women in conventional marriage. While dealing with women-centred themes, it still ventures into a somewhat unsettled quasi-feminist territory.

Despite this, Bonnie Zimmerman has criticised it for focusing on the male hero, Deronda, not only as a political leader but also as the central figure of sympathy in the novel. However , George Eliot can be strongly defended against this feminist critique with the words of F.R. Leavis:

George Eliot, one of the first feminist writers to elaborate on the travails of women in the process to seek emancipation and ultimately become emancipated, has succeeded in carving out a considerable niche for herself among the community of feminists. Her fictional works mostly treat the questions pertinent to women, especially of those endowed with acute intelligence, inherent capabilities, and social aspirations. *Daniel Deronda* continues this tradition. Being the last novel written by her, published in 1876, she speaks to the issues of the women's experience. Like her other novels, it has also been examined by feminist critics for its

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But despite this, Bonnie Zimmerman has criticised it for focusing her attention on the male hero, Deronda, not only as a political leader but also as the centre of sympathy in the novel. But George Eliot can be much defended against this feminist critique with the words of F.R. Leavis:

> "Though she makes a male, the protagonist of the novel, yet this has not led her to focus entirely on the male. As usual, she has given expression to women's suffering, pain and endurance in marriage… a greater proportion is devoted to Gwendolen Harleth, the heroine, than to Deronda himself… The novel would have benefitted more from the complete removal of the Jewish section and renaming of it as Gwendolen Harleth."

The novel is a heartfelt story of the heroine, Gwendolen Harleth, who struggles against the limitations of the social convention. Through Gwendolen's character, the author critiques the stark injustices women face in matters of property inheritance. Gwendolen is deeply distressed when she realises that her father's property, which she had assumed would be hers, is withheld from her solely due to her gender. Not only she, but the daughters of Sir Hugo Mallinger, also are the victims of this social convention. Sir Hugo Mallinger has no male descendants. He has only daughters. They cannot inherit the property because they are females. Therefore, his entire estate is bequeathed to Henleigh Grandcourt, his nephew. Eliot's protest against depriving women of their property ownership in the novel is enough to make *Daniel Deronda* a feminist work. This deprivation Eliot seems to suggest is not less than the deprivation of their identity

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The novel highlights the sorrow brought about by social inequalities, particularly focusing on individuals with fervent aspirations whose efforts are obstructed and whose passion is gradually drained by societal expectations. George Eliot critiques the injustices of mismatched marriages, especially those that are inherently biased against women. While a husband may take a mistress without facing societal condemnation, a wife engaging in a similar act is labelled an adulteress. Neera Arora clearly observes this disparity.:

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

George Eliot examines this issue in great detail. For example, in the novel, Grandcourt is involved with Lydia Glasher, who becomes the mother of his illegitimate children. Despite his actions defying traditional societal norms, he faces no criticism or condemnation. Society overlooks his behaviour, excusing it on the grounds of his gender. In contrast, Lydia's actions are met with harsh judgement, as she is condemned for leaving her husband and having children with Grandcourt. This stark difference highlights the prevailing gender inequality in societal perceptions.She is considered a fallen woman by society. This incident raises a question in the female reader's consciousness: why do only women receive such a different treatment?

Furthermore, George Eliot strongly opposes the male-dominated society that regards itself as the ultimate authority. Grandcourt represents this patriarchal mindset. His character is reminiscent of Tom from *The Mill on the Floss*, as both are cruel, arrogant, and lack remorse for their actions. Grandcourt has no interest in a woman who offers him love, devoted companionship, or unquestioning obedience. Instead, he seeks to dominate a woman who possesses a strong will to challenge him. This explains his choice of Gwendolen, who does not love him. Her dislike for him prior to their marriage only heightens his determination to possess her. At one point, he articulates his deepest desire; that is why he selects Gwendolen, who is

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not in love with him. Before they are married, her distaste for him merely adds to the challenge of capturing her. At one place, he states that his strongest wish is

> "…was to completely master of this creature… this piquant combination of maiden line and mischief: She knew things which have made her start away from him, spurred him to triumph.

The novel also protests the social order of the patriarchy, which ignores wives' likes and dislikes. For example, in the novel, Gwendolen does not want to put on the diamonds gifted by Grandcourt. But her husband forces her to put it on for his sake. She does not want to be an ornament; rather she seeks emancipation, of which she is deprived. When she does not put on the diamonds, her husband says:

> "Tell me the reason for not wearing the diamonds when I desire it." (345)

This shows that a wife's likes and dislikes do not matter to a husband. This incident is proof enough of the fettered selves of the wives.

There are several instances in the novel which show that women are forced to live a miserable life. They have to live within the four walls of the house. They don't have their own identity. They behave as they are directed by the patriarchal society. The following discourse between Grandcourt and Gwendolen clearly highlights the pathetic situation of women:

> "Do you take interest in adventure?' asked Grandcourt
>
> 'We women can't go in search of adventures to find out the northwest passage or to hunt tigers in the East', said Gwendolen. 'We must stay where we grow or where the gardeners like to transplant us. We are brought up like the flower to look as pretty as we can, and be dull without complaining. That is my notion about the plants: They are often bored, and that is the why some of them have got poison." (246)

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George Eliot brings the reader's focus to one of the significant issues faced by women, namely, females have to compromise and sacrifice for the sake of their family. Also, they are forced to swallow the pills of resignation and renunciation of their will. The patriarchy keeps on reminding them of their duty. When Gwendolen expresses her reluctance to marry Grandcourt, Mr. Gascoigne, her uncle, tries to make her understand by saying:

> "You are quite capable of reflecting, Gwendolen. You are aware that this is not a trivial occasion, and it concerns your establishment for life under circumstances, which may not occur again. You have a duty here both to yourself and your family… (74)."

Further, the novelist rebels against the dominative nature of males. Males always want to command females. Contessa Maria Alcharisi, Daniel Deronda's mother, endures oppression under her father's authority. Her father views her primary role as bearing Jewish sons. To satisfy his expectations, she consents to marry her cousin, a devoutly religious man. In a way, she is guided by the spirit of his patriarchal and tyrannical father. At one place, Contessa Maria Alcharisi says to Daniel Deronda:

> "Such men (the grandfather) turn their wives and daughters into slaves. They would rule the world if they could; but not ruling the world, they throw all the weight of their will on the necks and souls of women (694)."

The above remark points towards the helpless condition of women. They are enslaved by the male society. They are no better than the puppets. And the strings of these puppets are in the hands of males. In the case of Alcharisi, she is forced to follow her father's command because she has no alternative. If she had had an alternative, she could have denied following her father's command. That alternative could be education, which the novelist seems to suggest.

George Eliot is both sympathetic to women's suffering and conscious of its incendiary potential because of her personal experience as a woman in the 19th century. Again, it is through

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Alcharisi that Eliot explores her ambivalent feelings towards feminism. Although Alcharisi is clearly meant to be a bitter, unnatural, selfish woman, yet the readers sympathise with her situation. The reader's empathy with her condition makes the novel a feminist piece. The feminist in Eliot forces her to express her dislike of social conventions which discriminate against women. In Daniel Deronda, She rebels against the religious convention of the society that does not allow women to marry beyond religion. In the novel, when Daniel expresses his wish to marry Mirah, Hans's response clearly indicates the helpless condition of a woman. He mentions that Mirah wouldn't marry him, even if she loves him, because her religious beliefs hold too much significance for her.

> "My dear fellow, you are only preparing misery for yourself. She would not marry a Christian even if she loved him. Have you ever heard religion allow a woman to marry beyond the boundary"(469).

Similar to Mr. Farebrother and Mr. Moss, Mr. Gascoigne also highlights the challenging social position of women. While men may face a variety of financial difficulties, women find themselves in an even more vulnerable situation. They have significantly less earning potential compared to men and often rely on male support. The social opportunities available to women are much more limited than those for men. For example, Mrs. Davilow, the mother of Gwendolen, and her daughters have to depend upon Mr. Gascoigne after the death of Mr. Davilow. In Book I, She writes a letter to Gwendolen that shows her helplessness that they will have to depend on her uncle:

> "Dearest Child,
>
> This is the sad truth-my child-I wish I could prepare you for it better-but a dreadful calamity has befallen us all. You know nothing about business and will not understand it; but Graphell & Co. has failed for a million and we are totally

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> ruined. Your aunt Gascoigne as well as , only that your Uncle has his benefice-of course we cannot go to the Rectory-there is not a corner there to spare. We must get some hut or other to shelter us, and we must live on your uncle Gascoigne's charity-But come as soon as you can to your afflicted and loving mamma.
>
> Fanny Davilow" (7).

The novel deals with the suffering of women caused by society. This lends the novel to feminist interpretation. Rashmi Rajpal puts it, "A feminist novel revolves around the sufferings of a woman who suffers in different ways—mentally, physically, and sexually.". Lydia Glasher suffers the harshness and unkindness, the indifference and callousness of her lover. She leaves her husband and children for his sake .Despite that, he rejects her and marries Gwendolen. The following remark shows her suffering, which she goes through:

> "All this is of no consequences to you. I and the Children are importunate creatures. You wish to get away again and be with Miss Harleth." (287).

Lydia's suffering becomes more painful and bitter when he takes her family diamonds he had given her. When she refuses to give diamonds, Grandcourt gets angry and says:

> "That you will not do as I tell you." (298).

The novelist reflects on another problem of women, i.e., men consider them a piece of their property that they can sell whenever they like. In the novel, Mirah Lapidoth is the representative of the Victorian women. She is taken by her father at a young age to travel the world as a singer. When she grows up, her venal father plans to sell her as a mistress to a European nobleman in order to get money for his gambling addiction. When Mirah comes to know this, she flees from him in Europe and returns to London to look for her estranged mother and brother. This action shows her protest on her own part. At one place, she says to Deronda:

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> "He considered me a selling bag and put me in the market', ...'how could he do it?"(292)

The above remark also highlights another issue: that women do not have any individuality. They are considered things to sell and purchase.

Furthermore, the novel criticises the institution of marriage. Marriage can't give fulfilment. Marriage is not portrayed as a public affirmation of love, but rather as an institution that legitimises the husband's control over his wife. Grandcourt exploits the private nature of bourgeois marriage, which is ideologically seen as a romantic bond rather than an economic transaction. By taking advantage of the marriage contract's hidden aspects, Grandcourt extends his control over Gwendolen's thoughts, keeping his dominance secret. Externally, their marriage appears perfectly conventional. Gwendolen marries for financial stability, while Grandcourt seeks a wife whom he can display as though she were a possession. The novel expresses George Eliot's contempt for all that marriage entails—the man, his activities, the woman, and her loss of identity. Roseman rightly says:

> "Middlemarch and Daniel Deronda ... imbued with strong feminist feelings as the novelist protests against such a conjugal relationship, which curtails a woman's freedom and erodes her personality."

The marriage between Gwendolen and Grandcourt should perhaps more accurately be read to mean how deep-rooted sexism in society permeates even the noblest souls and as a depiction of the soul-beating nature of male dominance; after this marriage, Gwendolen is represented in a changed state by Eliot. One of the most finely realized gestures of the novel contains the picture of the former brassy young Gwendolen now lost in a sort of haunting fear. It is only amidst her sorrow that she finally starts to understand that she made a mistake, and there is no doubt Eliot viewed this marriage as a mistake. Gwendolen is described as sitting, leaning over the end of a coach and desiring,

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"I wish he could know everything about me without my telling him.". (458)

The marriage is very obviously portrayed as a mistake. The failure of their union can be attributed to their inherent flaws, many of which stem from Grandcourt, who becomes an obstacle to Gwendolen's ambitions. Ultimately, their marriage falls apart when Grandcourt persistently tries to exert control over his wife, disregarding her individuality. The reason of failure in their marriage can be explained by their characteristic drawbacks. Most of them are belied on Grandcourt, who becomes a hindrance in her aspirations. Finally, their marriage is plunged into destruction when Grandcourt incessantly display his desire for controlling his wife and ignores his singularity. At one place in the novel, Grandcourt says to his wife:

> "You are my wife. And you will either fill your place properly-to the world and to me-or you will go to the devil. I never intended anything but to fill my place only." (348).

Grandcourt's ability to control Gwendolen lies in his never needing to resort to overt threats or flattery. The narrative tension in their troubled marriage arises from the hidden nature of both the domination and its painful consequences. The story shifts between the outward appearance of a well-mannered domestic life and Gwendolen's inner suffering. There are no visible outbursts, commands, or grievances. Grandcourt dominates Gwendolen by forcing her to fulfil the role of a contented wife. George Eliot writes: George Eliot writes:

> "Their behavior to each other scandalized no observer… Their companionship consisted chiefly in a well-bred silence" (735).

Grandcourt's power resides in this "well-bred silence"; he dominates by imposing silence and thus renders domination itself silent. In order to see his mastery, one must look to the spectacle 1 1 1 of normalcy he and Gwendolen present to the world. But there is an inside story, the narrative of Gwendolen's silenced psyche. Grandcourt's tyranny is invisible because its object is the mind rather than the body. Graphic metaphors of physical violence render concrete his

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brutal effect on Gwendolen. “The white hand of his … was capable, she fancied, of clinging round her neck and threatening to throttle her.” (481); Grandcourt was “conscious of using pincers on those white creatures” (649); “His words had the power of thumbscrews and the cold touch of the rack” (745).

Grandcourt’s form of violence does not require physical harm to inflict pain as intense as that of bodily injury. However, his control over Gwendolen’s mind is fundamentally different from control over her body. The effect of Grandcourt’s influence on Gwendolen far exceeds his actual actions; while his words can be as agonising as physical torture, he can cause immense suffering without appearing to do so. His subtle, hidden control proves more effective than any physical violence. Rather than resorting to brute force, Grandcourt has perfected his cruelty to the point where it renders physical harm unnecessary. He never needs to strike his wife physically; instead, she succumbs to “the quiet massive pressure of rule.” The key concept here is "quiet." Grandcourt confines her consciousness without ever openly revealing his motives. Their marriage serves as an ideal setting for a novelist exploring psychological depth, as the conflict between them remains completely invisible to outsiders.

Grandcourt is able to transform Gwendolen's mental anguish into a symbol of his power. What he demands is that she be fully conscious of her helplessness, as if she were wearing "locked handcuffs," unable to oppose his will in any way (645). Grandcourt even takes control of Gwendolen’s freedom to think as she pleases, turning it into a form of imprisonment that only deepens her awareness of her inability to act. He dominates her by turning her feelings, which should represent her personal identity, into signs of his control. Gwendolen’s inner life is no longer hers to own; she feels perpetually observed as she tries to conceal her unhappiness. Grandcourt’s manipulation is so effective because he does not directly demand anything from her; instead, he makes her mind turn against itself. This process is described as “a sort of discipline for the refractory,” which bends her will with “a terrible strain” and

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exacerbates her resistance (656). Both aspects of Gwendolen's existence—her outward submission and her internal rebellion—only reinforce Grandcourt's authority. Her mental resistance does not indicate any autonomy or divergence from his desires; instead, her inner life deepens her subjugation, preventing her from finding any space in which she can preserve a sense of independence.

George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* exposes the harsh realities of Victorian society's treatment of women. This aspect of the novel can be illustrated by comparing the current societal conditions and attitudes toward women with the ways male characters in the story treat Gwendolen, Mirah, and Aline. In the novel, men often seem to be the primary agents of the women's suffering and limitations. These characters are subjected to various forms of control, manipulation, and emotional strain imposed by the male figures in their lives, highlighting the gender dynamics and societal expectations of the time. By examining the contrast between these historical portrayals and contemporary views on women's roles, we can better understand the progress made in women's rights and the persistent challenges that still exist. Thus, Deronda is not a conventional romantic hero. Indeed, he is also a traditional male who does not rescue Gwendolen from Grand Court. Rather like Grandcourt, Deronda tries to exert control over Gwendolen. He advises her to be submissive and go back to her husband and unveils everything. Roslyn Belkin says:

> "He, much more effectively than Grandcourt, turns Gwendolen into a submissive woman at the end, a woman "divested completely of herself—respect, her assertiveness, and of her ambition to be independent".

Some of the feminist critics have criticised the novel for letting Gwendolen "pause" moment in her life. However, the novel can be much defended. First of all, Gwendolen does not follow Deronda's precepts to obey her husbands; she in fact murders him. Second, she looks independent and full of initial spirit at the end . The reader of the novel, sensitive to

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Gwendolen's dislike of men throughout, takes some pleasure in the ending when she says to her mother:

"Don't be afraid. I shall live. I meant to live" (621).

Finally, she is liberated from the need to conform, from the pressure of participating in the traditional marriage market, and from being subjected to patriarchal ownership. She is also freed from the burden of having to earn a living on her own in a world where there are limited opportunities for women like her. Eileen Sypher is of the view:

> "The novel doubles the image of female independence; one Gwendolen does so in order to free herself psychically from an oppressive husband; the other Mirah, does so in order to flee physically from an abusive father."

CONCLUSION:

In this research paper, we have explored the nuanced depiction of women's roles and experiences in George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*, focusing on the psychological and social constraints faced by female characters in Victorian society. Through the analysis of Gwendolen's relationship with Grandcourt, we have examined how the power dynamics within marriage reflect broader societal structures that limit women's autonomy. The paper has highlighted how Eliot's portrayal of women, particularly Gwendolen, embodies both personal and collective struggles for freedom within a patriarchal framework.

Advantages: This paper contributes to feminist literary analysis by offering a detailed examination of the complex psychological dimensions of domination and submission within the Victorian marriage institution. By highlighting Gwendolen's inner turmoil and her struggle for self-determination, the paper sheds light on the ways in which female characters are often portrayed as trapped within oppressive societal norms. Eliot's nuanced portrayal challenges the

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idea of women as mere passive recipients of male authority, offering a critique of Victorian gender dynamics.

Limitations: While the paper offers a deep dive into Gwendolen's psychological state, it does not extensively analyse other female characters, such as Mirah or the more minor female figures in the narrative, who also experience gender-based oppression. Additionally, the historical context of 19th-century feminist movements and their impact on literature could have been explored further to provide a richer understanding of the societal forces influencing Eliot's work.

Applications: The findings of this paper can be applied to broader studies on the intersection of gender, power, and autonomy in Victorian literature. Future research can build on this analysis by examining the relationships between female characters in other works of the period, as well as exploring how contemporary feminist movements might have been influenced by or responded to such literary depictions. Furthermore, the paper suggests the importance of continuing to examine literature through a feminist lens, exploring the hidden dynamics of power and control that persist in modern narratives.

Ultimately, *Daniel Deronda* serves as a reflection of 19th-century feminist thought, questioning the rigid roles women were expected to play in a patriarchal society and advocating for women's autonomy and self-realisation, despite the constraints of the time.

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