CHAPTER - III

THE MILL ON THE FLOSS : MAGGIE TULLIVER'S MORAL DILEMMA
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George Eliot’s second novel, *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), not only depicts the physical growth of the protagonist Maggie Tulliver from childhood to youth, but also her moral growth from innocence to experience and from ignorance to vision. Maggie from the beginning is entangled in triple conflicts --- the conflict within her own divided self; the clash with her brother’s principles and temperament and lastly the collision with her society and neighbourhood. Her constant struggle to negotiate with her conflicting self and surrounding gives a moral dimension to her character.

Maggie from her early childhood suffers because she is dreamy and forgetful, thoughtless and impulsive, oversensitive and mentally immature, and her brother, whom she adores, does not have any of these qualities. He is rigid, unimaginative, with all the oversimplified moral doctrines of the Dodsons: ‘He was particularly clear and positive on one point --- namely that he would punish everybody who deserved it.’1 The pattern is established in childhood. In the first episode Maggie, who has been living for the day of Tom’s return from school, has to confess that his rabbits have died because she forgot to feed them. Tom punishes her by refusing to take her to fishing and Maggie rushes sobbing to the attic, where she keeps her fetish, an old wooden doll which she punishes for her

own misfortunes, driving nails into its head and then comforting and caressing it when her mood has changed. On this occasion, since childish quarrels end in reconciliation, she and Tom are soon friends again. But their characters are already measured; Maggie passionate, loving, but always doing the wrong thing; Tom, commonplace, self-righteous, trustworthy, never tempted to any excess at all. Maggie never thinks of the results of her actions before she acts. Driven to frenzy by her aunt's comments on her shaggy black hair, she rushes upstairs and cuts it off, taunted about her brown skin, and wildly jealous of her neat little blond cousin, she pushes Lucy into the mud; the outcry about that decides her to run off to the gypsies. And she is desperately lonely, because no one around her has the least interest in her love of reading, or can share in her longings to enlarge her life and develop the faculties she knows she possesses.

Help comes there when she meets Philip Wakem, the cripple boy who goes to school with Tom, but the seeds of tragic irony are innate in that friendship, but it is fate that makes his father the lawyer against whom Mr. Tulliver hurls humiliation and makes his family swear an unending vengeance.

After the bankruptcy of Mr. Tulliver, when the children leave school, Tom goes to work for his uncle Deane, and all his planning is for the future and paying off his father's debts. He gives no thought to Maggie who is left with her embittered parents, and with a soul untrained for inevitable struggles, to a life filled only with dull duties, vain day dreams and bursts of adolescent fury and despair. Pathetically she finds temporary serenity in the reading of
The Imitation of Christ by St. Thomas a Kempis, and she disciplines herself in the gospel of renunciation and the suppression of self-love.

That unnatural peace is broken by a chance meeting with Philip, whom Maggie has not seen for several years. She longs for the old companionship, but feels that any meeting between them must be kept secret, and their closeness she understanding will act as a spiritual light. Philip argues against her negative asceticism and plays on her pity for his own crippled body and lonely life. She is plunged into many conflicts, not that between good and evil, but that between one good and another good. Philip wears down her scruples, arguing for the necessity of self-development, not self-mortification:

"I shall have strength given me," said Maggie, tremulously.
"No, you will not, Maggie; no one has strength given to do what is unnatural. It is mere cowardice to seek safety in negations ... You will be thrown into the world some day, and then every rational satisfaction of your nature that you deny now, will assault you like a savage appetite."²

It is inevitable that Philip should succeed in persuading Maggie to continue the harmless meetings, and it is obvious that he should fall in love with her. She is, in fact, not sexually awakened, and it is only the warm affection and pity she has for him that make her promise to marry him if it should ever be possible.

The secret is eventually revealed. Ironically again the blow comes from an unlikely quarter. It is the amiable and well-meaning Aunt Pullett who remarks at the Sunday dinner table that she has noticed Philip coming from the Red Deeps. Instantly Tom's suspicions are roused; he surprises Maggie who was on the point

² ibid p.327
of going to see Philip. Tom gives two alternatives to Maggie either she swears never to meet Philip again, or Tom would personally convey this event to their father.

Tom thus says, "I will tell my father everything; and this month, when by my exertions he might be made happy once more, you will cause him the blow of knowing that you a disobedient, deceitful daughter, who throws away her own respectability by clandestine meetings with the son of a man that has helped to ruin her father."3

Tom insults Philip and taunts him with his deformity. Maggie says she must inform her father first, but when Philip has left, she turns on Tom as she has never done before.

Tom, however, forges ahead in the Dodson world. But having a lack of imaginative understanding, appreciates her practical virtues and does not recognize her emotional limitations.

You have been reproaching other people all your life... If you were in fault... I should be sorry for the pain it brought you... But you have always enjoyed punishing me... You have no pity... You are nothing but a Pharisee. You thank God for nothing but your won virtues.4

The critics have hardly any quarrel with the novel upto this point. Action, environment and character have been interfused to produce a sense of rich texture and the inevitable course of development. But ever since the publication of the novel in 1860, the last two books in it have been attacked: partly on the score of the melodramatic ending, but more on the count that Sephen

3. Ibid. p. 328
4. Ibid. p. 340
Guest is not the sort of man Maggie could ever have fallen in love with, and that it degrades her to do so. Meeting this criticism, George Eliot owned that she planned her material badly; she enjoyed writing the earlier part so much that she had not left room to develop the tragic catastrophe as she wished. But she denied violently that her psychology was at fault in making Maggie fall in love with Stephen: “If I am wrong there...if I really did not know what my heroine would do under the circumstances in which I deliberately placed her---I ought not to have written the book at all”. She goes on to say that Maggie is a character “essentially noble, but liable to a great error”, and that she must represent her truthfully.

George Eliot is quite sound here in the point she is making -- the possibility of Maggie being overwhelmed by an attraction to a man who was engaged with her cousin Lucy as well. When Philip tells Maggie that the repression of her natural instincts would mean that they would later assault her “like a savage appetite”, the readers anticipate that Maggie’s next conflict would involve sex as well as moral sensibility. But George Eliot puts into question Maggie’s taste, culture and upbringing in enabling Stephen to steal Maggie’s attention. Though Stephen’s character is not developed well, it is hard to believe that a woman of Maggie’s nature could get attracted towards Stephen who, in the opening of the Sixth Book, is represented as ‘this young man whose diamond ring, atar of roses, and an air of nonchalant leisure, at twelve o’clock in the day, are the graceful and odoriferous result of the largest oilmill and the most extensive wharf in St. Ogg’s’. The reader winces at the picture of this bejeweled and perfumed young spark, and everything that follows is unfortunately tainted with that introductory image. This is a pity.
However, Maggie's attraction to Stephen has a psychological reality. Since her father's death, she has been teaching in a school, with no outlet for adult relationships. After the first evening with the emotional stimulus of the music and the obvious attentions of this handsome young man, George Eliot describes Maggie as being excited in a way that was mysterious to herself:

It was not that she thought distinctly of Mr. Stephen Guest, or dwelt on the indications that he looked at her with admiration: it was rather that she felt the half remote presence of a world of love and beauty and delight, made up of vague, mingled images from all the poetry and romance she had ever read, or had ever woven into her dreamy reveries.  

The meeting, too, comes before she again sees Philip. The development of the mounting sexual tension between Maggie and Stephen is convincing, with the inevitable issue that she gets caught in a situation from which no happy escape is possible. The conflict of loyalties is insoluble and it places Maggie in a genuine dilemma as there are no preconceived principles which could direct her choice and resolve her dilemma.

In fact, Maggie's suffering emanates from her wrong choice. She makes a wrong choice when she decides to leave Stephen Guest and return to St.Ogg's. She should have realised that she was guilty of a great moral wrong. Her nightlong boating expedition with Stephen would be treated as elopement by the society, and if she returns unmarried, she would return in disgrace. Further, her elopement was a wrong both to Lucy and Philip, and that the wrong cannot be amended by her giving up Stephen.

9.ibid.p.385
Her action has demonstrated that she loves neither Lucy nor Philip and that her rejection of Stephen is not going to set matters right. Death alone can solve her problems, and death by drowning brings together the brother and sister for ever, and is a fitting end to the life and suffering of the heroine. Her suffering is intense and poignant and at the moment of her death, she rises to the heights of tragic grandeur.

The final symbolism by which she drifts into an irrevocable situation through the drifting of the boat on the river is skilfully managed. There is irony again in the fact that the river expedition had been planned with Philip, and Maggie looks forward to it, 'for perhaps it would bring her some strength and calmness to be one with Philip again.' But Philip is sick, and Stephen takes his place, and the lovers are carried by the tide and 'the dreamy gliding of the boat'.

When Maggie realizes their position, it is too late for any decision of hers to save pain to others. Her final resolution is that she cannot go forward to be married with Stephen. Her whole family gets involved in the scandal associated with her flight. Maggie’s attitude makes it difficult for the reader to sympathize with her fully.

Moreover, Maggie’s words of refusal to marry Stephen are quite inconsistent with her deeds and makes her argument unacceptable. While refusing Stephen, Maggie once says that ‘if past is not to bind us, where can duty lie’ has a deep moral significance but unfortunately Maggie fails to abide by this moral principle.

10.ibid.p.463
11.ibid.p.464
12.ibid.p.475
Maggie’s decision to leave Stephen and return to St. Ogg’s aggravates her problems. She is driven out of her home by her brother Tom Tulliver. Maggie suffers and suffers alone in the unsympathetic society. Her free spirit gets snared in a prosaic, ruthless and unfeeling society. Simon De Beauvoir rightly says “that Maggie dies because she stands alone and weak against the odds of the world. But the world is too strong to be opposed by her, eventually it perishes her.”

As Maggie returns to St. Ogg’s and seeks advice from Dr. Kenn, George Eliot uses the latter to express her own views, and this employment of a wise, disinterested spectator as a commentator on the action, is, as it were, a lens through which the reader may see the action in a new perspective. The pragmatic approach is akin to such a device as used by some late twentieth century novelists. But this method used in The Mill on the Floss remains on an initial stage only.

Maggie, in her inexperience, fumbles over the conception that the novelist wants to express through Dr. Kenn. Maggie, instead, relies on her own conscience that her temperament, her upbringing and her environment have combined to develop in her a certain strength to get rid of the moral problem.

After Maggie has burnt Stephen’s letter, she has nothing left to hope for except an early death and the author provides her with the timely, wishfulfilling death by getting her drowned. It is emotionally satisfying that Maggie has attempted to save Tom’s life and both the brother and sister have died in each

13Beauvoir, Simone De. The Second Sex. Trans. in English. by Jonathan Cape, OUP, 1953, p.387
other’s arms, and that Tom has, at last, recognised his sister’s worth: ‘a new revelation to his spirit, of the depth in life, that lies beyond his vision which he has fancied so keen and clear.’ 14 Notwithstanding all the tortures meted to her by her brother Tom, Maggie in her final act of supreme sacrifice forgives her brother and tries to save his life. Through this act of Maggie the novelist tries to convey one important message to the society that “morality” means something more than a dry and abstract code of conduct framed by the society. Maggie may be a social outcast but she truly, at the end of the novel, epitomises the quintessence of human morality.

At last, when we reflect we cannot but feel that the poetic justice at the culminating point of this serious and naturalistic novel, is a dishonest contrivance. However, the only solace we find, is that by the end of the novel Maggie’s moral development is complete. So there can be no denying the fact that *The Mill on the Floss* is basically the story of Maggie Tulliver, of her life and suffering. Maggie is the centre of action which cannot be fully appreciated unless we look at it from her point of view. But this novel tells us much more than merely the story of Maggie Tulliver. It also gives us a comprehensive and elaborate picture of English rural life in the opening years of the Victorian age and before the dislocation and disintegration caused by the Industrial Revolution.

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14. ibid. p.360