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Women's lot in George Eliot's fiction *Felix Holt the
Radical*

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Dedication 1

This thesis is proudly dedicated to the memory of my dearest deceased father DassiLéon.

Dedication 2

This thesis is also dedicated to the Almighty God for whom belongs my life.

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Introduction

From the beginning of the world mainly the nineteenth century and up to now, women's lives have been undergoing much oppression either from society or men, which need to be dealt with. Our concern for the writing of this thesis is to bring my little contribution to the clarification of a woman's social position in *Felix Holt, the Radical*. We would like this research work to be profitable to any political leader or any organization for a positive change in people's mentality for the different negative attitudes in the work, by George Eliot, about women constitute a danger to women's emancipation.

George Eliot's view in *Felix Holt, the Radical* post-dated her interest in the subject of the Transomes and moved progressively through an initial concern of the social history of the early nineteenth century to an interest in politics of the first Reform Bill period' itself. The most important fact of the book *Felix Holt, the Radical* is that its history is chiefly concerned with the private lot of a few men and women; but there is no private life which has not been determined by a wider public life. *Felix Holt, the Radical*, begins magnificently. We are taken into history, into the England of 1832, after the Reform Bill. George Eliot's vision is of a nineteenth century society developing within the processes of a political and industrial technology, in danger of severing itself from the nourishment of its past. Factory production caused human exploitation, child labour and mass misery. All those social problems mentioned were, among other things, a legacy of the Industrial Revolution. The most striking aspect of all was the division of the English society into wealthy, upper and poor people. The former lived in luxury, comfort and happiness whereas the latter, who were mainly women, experienced a bitter life of wretchedness, suffering and sorrow.

To express their great concern about the different social problems in the nineteenth century England, a great number of the Victorian social novelists condemned, through their writings, the social injustices and the attendant moral degradation of the period. They denounced the evils of the time and pictured the

life of the humble, thus creating the Social Novel. Among those Victorian social novelists, George Eliot shows great concern for the English women. She was chiefly concerned with exploring and trying to understand human motives in general and the women's in particular.

In Felix Holt, the Radical, George Eliot has been worried about the social situation of women in their moral development. Women, on the whole, have been very weak, idealistic, sensitive souls, and above all powerless in the world of action and decision making. On the whole, George Eliot tried, in her fiction to point out the way women were treated within patriarchal world of the nineteenth century. According to the nineteenth century men, women are only good for cooking, knitting and giving birth to babies. Politics, for instance, is an activity which must be carried out by men. This has been shown in *Felix Holt, the Radical* by George Eliot. Far from being a political novel, *Felix Holt, the Radical* may be considered as the social criticism of the situation of women, their inferior position as human beings in society. The novel helped within the processes of nature implicit in the passage of the year from Spring to Autumn. *Felix Holt, the Radical* is very much about the contrasting fates of two women, between the one who, at the beginning of the novel, found only a contracting prospect in the changing seasons as they came and went like an impressive machine someone and the other who sat waiting for Felix at the close of the novel.

Through this novel, we noticed that the female characters have suffered and were from the lower classes. Their decisions were influenced by men. They were not free to do or to say what they wanted. By choosing the mid-Victorian age, George Eliot recreated the truth of real events. During that era, women did not actually have right to vote. Their duties and ideas were not taken into account. The last words on a woman's social position in *Felix Holt, the Radical* came from Harold Transome ; and the thought of men about women at that time was expressed on page 389 of the novel as: "Harry's mother had been a slave –

was bought in fact."¹ Women were considered as goods. If they were to lead a comfortable life, they had to do a very good marriage and to reach this goal. They had to have grace, modesty and money.

George Eliot was one of the Victorian novelists whose great concern for women in nineteenth century England has been noteworthy in her writings. She was, moreover, known for her interest in these women who were living in complete powerlessness and forlornness. They could be accounted for by the bitter and miserable life she experienced in her childhood due to her family's social and financial difficulties. This may explain the reason why most of her novels often deal with her social backgrounds. Her whole career was, to a great extent, an attempt to digest her early shocks and hardship as a woman in a society ruled by men. As a matter of fact, George Eliot was for social reforms. That is why, among other things, she has severely denounced the women's social problems in nineteenth century England. She could hardly bear such social evils as selfishness and callousness; and her novel *Felix Holt, the Radical* served as a protest against the social and political abuses of her time.

This study, "women's lot in *Felix Holt, the Radical*" contains four chapters. Our aim for this research work is to show how women suffered in nineteenth century England. To achieve this objective, we divide the study into four chapters, structured as described below.

The first chapter deals with background to woman's position in *Felix Holt, the Radical*. This chapter will show that some women accepted their social conditions in nineteenth century England because they thought that it was natural and normal. The second chapter deals with other writers who discussed some feminist aspects which can enlighten my analysis. The third chapter is showing the female characters in action in the novel. At this stage, each woman's aspiration, fears, feelings, dreams, conditions and pains. The fourth and last chapter deals with George Eliot's general remarks and

¹ - George Eliot. *Felix Holt, the Radical*. Everyman's Library: Dent and Dutton. 1866. P. 389.

views in the novel. A critical focus is put on the unjust, inhumane and illegal aspects of the Victorian society both on the writer's perspective and on ours.

Chapter One: Social and Political Background to Woman's Position in *Felix Holt, the Radical*

1.1 Social Background to the Study

A quick glance through the book *Felix Holt, the Radical* enables the reader to examine on the situation of women in the book. My research work is mainly concerned with a woman's status, both social and political, in the actual historical period, plus a survey of a woman's worth, and her lot in the social and political.

A brief word about George Eliot's choice of the title for her book would not go amiss at this point. Why did the authoress name her work *Felix Holt, the Radical*? It might easily be contented that "Esther Lyon" or perhaps more probably "Mrs. Transome" could be equally, if not more easily justified than the actual title chosen. Do we, in fact, feel that the role of Felix Holt in the novel outweighs, either by volume or importance, Mrs. Transome's and Esther Lyon's roles? Indeed, is he not somewhat shallow and cold when compared with Mrs. Transome, for instance? However, as it is evident to us, George Eliot's choice of the title is highly meaningful.

The point that the era of *Felix Holt, the Radical* in the novel, and therefore the nineteenth century England is the world of men is brought him clearly after reading the novel and reflecting on it. The women in the novel are on the whole very weak, idealistic, sentimental souls, typically feminine and above all completely powerless. On, first, reading, the females' lives, it seems, form merely the back cloth to the action, they are the echo to the voice: the attractive but totally useless lower layer to life, and they are considered only when the men have time to consider them.

1.2 Political Background to the Study

In order to justify the counter argument, including the choice of the title, we might easily be tempted to say the considered political content of the book surmounts in importance any other consideration. However, *Felix Holt, the Radical* is not a mere political novel: because it contains, in the main, many social criticisms of which the inferiority of women is the most important hence the political content of the book is only a means to an end.

Nevertheless, let us look, for a moment, at the novel taking into consideration only the political scene and the woman's role in it. In nineteenth century England the suffrage at elections was extremely limited and only a relatively small percentage of men had the right to vote, but what is more relevant for us is the fact that no women had such a right; they were completely deprived of any political voice. Indeed, the idea of suffrage for women was not materialized for several decades after the period of this book. We are given the impression that this situation was considered to be thoroughly natural and acceptable to the vast majority of the female population. We do not ever see in Esther Lyon, one of the most educated of the women characters, a questioning attitude as to her rights during the elections in Treby Magna. Moreover, from the method of portrayal of the women characters we are given to believe that there was hardly a woman at the time with enough general intelligence and comprehension to vote, even if she has any aspirations in the direction. Thus, a woman's life within the framework of nineteenth century English society was left to be decided by men, through sheer female rather than approval.

In private life as well as public, the woman was deprived of all power. Throughout *Felix Holt, the Radical* in the lines of the narrative and in the dialogue especially, we see the woman playing second-fiddle to the man. She steps down when faced with his argument and she accepts unconstestingly his decisions. She is unable to exist as an independent, judgment-making body. How pathetic is all the small-talk, the petty romantic nonsense with which

George Eliot stuffs the mouths of the female characters? They are painted equally as stupid as they are considered to be by the society in which they live.

On reflection, the most striking and disquieting fact presents itself is the utter hopelessness of a woman's life; the monumental example being the life of Mrs. Transome. Thinking back, however, over all the various and varied female characters, Mrs. Holt, Mrs. Debary, Esther Lyon etc..., is there one amongst the lot of them who really fulfills or achieves something? Perhaps Denner Hickee, we might say, is redeemed somewhat from the sense of hopelessness. By a total resignation to her equally hopeless position, Denner has been able to accept her lot and determine to make the best of it, which is but very little. She can neither progress nor change in her stability so she just smiles instead of crying. And yet, our greatest and most lasting regret on shutting the book is for those poor women who do not and cannot accept the fate of their sex and who rebel against the social injustices and yet, who ultimately can do absolutely nothing without the permission of the men. This vivid impression of the bitter and frustrating battle in the women's hearts haunts our memory even after the very first associations with the book.

Thus having analyzed somewhat our initial impression and having acquired a rough, perhaps imprecise understanding of the woman's position in *Felix Holt, The Radical*, it is now time to look a little more closely at the actual text in order to justify or alter our "back cloth" of ideas. We shall, by examination of the book, either bear out or be forced to alter our initial conceptions.

1.3 Social and Political Context

First of all we shall consider the female's importance in the governing of the society of which she constitutes a member. In *Felix Holt, The Radical* there is much talk and ample detail – thanks to George Eliot's exhaustive research on the period – on realities of campaigning, persuasion, field tactics, public house talk and the hustling. What was the attitude, amongst all this activity, to the lack of power of women? George Eliot does not hesitate to write in full detail on aspects in relation to which we might suppose, indeed we know, a woman to

have been at considerable disadvantages in the Mid – Victorian age. As it is known, women at this time did not have right to vote, but even when George Eliot writes on the female attendance at an electioneering meeting we can see so obviously that the women of the period, at least according to the author's intentions, were, in the main, pretty, empty headed individuals who had come along rather to see than to hear the young and beautiful Harold Transome:

Places at convenient windows had been secured beforehand for a few best bonnets, but, in general, a Radical candidate excited no ardent feminine partisanship, even among the Dissenters in Treby, if they were of the prosperous and long-resident class. Some chapel-going ladies were fond of remembering that "their family had been Church"; others objected to politics altogether as having spoiled old neighborliness, and sundered friends who had kindred views as to cowslip wine and Michaelmas cleaning; other, of the melancholy sort, said it would be well if people would think less of reforming parliament and more of pleasing God. Irreproachable Dissenting matrons, like Mrs. Muscat, whose youth had been passed in a short-waisted bodice and tight skirt, had never been animated by the struggle for liberty, and had a timid suspicion that religion was desecrated by being applied to the things of this world. Since Mr. Lyon had been in Malt house Yard there had been far too much mixing up of politics with religion; but, at any rate, these ladies had never yet been to hear speechifying in the market-place, and they were not going to beg that practice.²

George Eliot makes an exceptionally pointed and telling remark on page 214 of *Felix Holt, the Radical* which might easily refer to a woman's use in politics and social life as well as in the home, when she says "it was one of those rectories which... rally feminine instinct and affection to reinforce the decisions of masculine thought"³. It is so obvious that it was accepted as natural for the men to make all the necessary decisions and for the women simply to approve them, not even as the result of intelligent discussion or logical reflection, but on the contrary the approval was to be shown through "instinct and affection". Could a woman be more reduced in personality and values?

²George Eliot. *Felix Holt, the Radical*. Everyman's Library: Dent and Dutton. 1866. P. 181.

³Eliot. *Ibid.* P. 274.

It is with distinct irony that George Eliot opens chapter eight of the book.

That talkative maiden, Rumour, though in the interest of art she is figured as a youthful winged beauty with flowing garments, soaring above the heads of men, and breathing work-thrilling news through a gracefully curved trumpet, is in fact a very old maid who puckers her silly face by the fireside and really does no more than chirp a wrong guess or a lame story into the ear of a fellow-gossip⁴

How well she emphasizes the fact women are the trouble causers, the underdogs and the bane of a man's life, and it is a passage which leads us nicely on to an examination of the social status of the "weaker sex", which, as we shall see, is no better than the political one, if not decidedly worse. Take for instance a small but a suitable example in chapter one. The coachman, when talking of Mrs. Transome, says, among his first revelations, "she was a picture; but her family was poor"⁵. In order for a woman to get anywhere in her life she had to marry above herself since there was just no other means for her She was powerless. However, in order to marry well she was to have certain attributes, grace, reserve, modesty and money. A woman is acquired and disposed of as any other article, in a more or less acceptable state according to unwritten social rules; she is never judged an equal and a companion. A woman without the requisite qualifications has to resign herself to the fact that she would remain forever a nobody.

However, even at this stage George Eliot is not satisfied, but she goes on to underline and reinforce the disquieting fact that the more pretty, affectionate and empty-headed a woman was, the more she would be protected by the men folk. This is clearly understood when she says: "her inspired ignorance gave sublimity to actions so incongruously simple, that otherwise they would make men smile"⁶

⁴George Eliot. *Felix Holt, the Radical*. Everyman's Library: Dent and Dutton. 1866. P. 97.

⁵Eliot. *Ibid.* P. 7.

⁶Eliot. *Ibid.* P.414.

If a woman had more than just a gain of intelligence and ambition, if she were not content with her position and her lot as a woman, she was in a more pitiful condition than her ignorant blissful neighbor, because she then realizes that she was doomed to a miserable and frustrating life, the cause of which is sex, cause of which being one which she cannot do anything about. The normal daily routine of nineteenth century English woman consisted of a few orders to the maid (which only served to reassure her of a potential power), a little light conversation with her fellow female sufferers (a conversation which revolved merely around the local gossip and scandal) and many hours of bitter boredom for the more intelligent among the sex. A soul destroying existence in which even the event of the passing of the carriage seemed worth considering:.... the elder matrons sat in their best gowns at the few cottage doors bordering the road, that they might be ready to get up and make their curtsy when a travelling carriage should come in sight"⁷. It is so easy to imagine these poor creatures with absolutely nothing better to do than to wait at their doors in the hope of seeing somebody important; on more remarkable an occasion than this for which to do their best gowns; and yet we are so often reminded of the fact that "the facts must be accepted as they stood"⁸.

A Study of the reaction of the male characters to the women in *Felix Holt, The Radical* is a lengthy affair and one which we shall embark upon later but since we are endeavoring to weave a background to the position of women in nineteenth century England and particularly in this book it will be significant here to mention the fact that, by the male population, women were not only presumed to be perhaps too illogical or weak-willed in order to be effective, but they were considered to be positively ignorant. For example we can take just one line of George Eliot's book, "presuming on Mrs. Transome's ignorance as a

⁷ George Eliot. *Felix Holt, the Radical*. Everyman's Library: Dent and Dutton. P. 9

⁸ Eliot. P. 12.

woman"⁹. An example which has is parallel in every chapter of *Felix Holt, the Radical*. Take a look at the great advantage which Esther Lyon possesses in her femininity since she is so much admired by men and women alike (allowing for a certain jealousy on the part of the average). Just what are the assets? "Esther had that excellent thing in a woman, a soft voice with a clear fluent utterance. Her sauciness was always charming, because it was without emphasis, and was accompanied with graceful little turns of the heads"¹⁰. And from the very mouth of Felix Holt: "A fine lady is a squired-headed thing, with small airs and small notions, about as applicable to the business of life a pair of tweezers to the clearing of a forest"¹¹. Even if Felix does not agree with "fine ladies" at least he expounds for us the accepted attributes of such a race. The terms of evaluation of women could not be much more shallow or useless without falling into complete and sustained indifference on the part of men.

It is interesting to note how the crude appearance and the lack of manners and social know-how in the make-up of Felix Holt, far from reducing any value he might have as a man, in fact add to it immeasurably. For in an old way they act in contract to his nobleness and seriousness of spirit, traits admirable in a male figure, whereas for a woman, exactly the opposite criteria are applicable. Her mind counts for nothing but all her judgment lies on a physical plane, and such laxity of person as seen in Felix Holt would be most definitely undesirable and not at all attractive. "A real fine-lady does not wear clothes that flare in people's eyes, or use importunate scents, or make a noise as she moves: she is something refined, and graceful, and charming and never obtrusive"¹².

The only man in the book in whom are to be found some redeeming features in his treatment of woman is Rufus Lyon, the small Dissenting minister.

⁹George Eliot. *Felix Holt, the Radical*. Everyman's Library: Dent and Dutton. P.31

¹⁰Eliot. Introduction. P. 64

¹¹Eliot. Ibid. Introduction. P. 66

¹²Eliot. Ibid. Introduction. P. 65

Yet because of this very fact, he is looked down upon and not understood. "Mrs. Muscat and Mrs. Nut wood applied the principle of Christian equality by remarking that Mr. Lyon had his oddities and he ought not to allow his daughter to indulge in such unbecoming expenditure..."¹³ Rufus Lyon allows himself to be influenced by his passion for two women, his wife and his daughter, which is more than can even be said for Felix Holt. Following the traditional order of things it is the woman who is expected to place all her hopes and fears in the hands of men and if she does not do so, she is not acceptable; such is the case for Felix Holt, but not for Mr. Lyon. Note the reaction of Mrs. Debarry when she's on the way to Mrs. Transome's house for the first time since Harold's return from abroad. Her deductions are typical of the mentality of the period. "We shall find her greatly elated, doubtless... She has been in the shade so long¹⁴."

The remarkable fact is that this woman expects Mrs. Transome suddenly to bloom again because of the very presence of a man, a decision-making, controlling body. The lack of such a man results in the insignificance of the woman whatever her personal qualities. The last words on a woman's social position in *Felix Holt, the Radical* should come from Harold Transome himself and yet again we shall see what women mean to men, especially if we take his statement within the context of its passage and try to understand what Harold was trying to convey to Esther by the words "Harry's mother had been a slave-was bought in fact¹⁵

1.4 Style

Thus having drawn out our various threads of justification of our impressions from the text itself, and having woven a backcloth and general foundation upon which to build, let us now consider for a moment, not exactly the content of the

¹³George Eliot. *Felix Holt, the Radical*. Everyman's Library: Dent and Dutton. 1866. A note on the Text. P.70

¹⁴Eliot. *Ibid.* Author's Introduction. P.84.

¹⁵Eliot. *Ibid.* P. 389.

book, not the text as a series of words, but the style, in which the book is written. George Eliot's construction is equally as important as the content, when it comes to considering the impressions we receive from the book. Does George Eliot treat her subject in a manner purposed to convey a certain idea, or is her way of presenting her material irrelevant to its effect upon the reader?

It seems perfectly obvious that Eliot sets out with the purpose of giving her book the tone of the attitude prevalent at this period in history. Looking simply at the way in which the female characters are made to speak, the things they talk about, their manner of reacting to various situations and comparing these with similar functions in the male characters.

Could anything give us a more complete picture of the mentality of this woman, than this succinct but detailed passage? All through the work Mrs. Holt's discourse is carried on in such a style as to complement and reinforce our first suspicions. The vein of her speech is illogical and ignorant and this style is pursued to such an extent that finally all sympathy which we might have felt for the woman in the beginning is almost totally destroyed leaving a residue merely of pity. The book is so rich in example of Mrs. Holt's annoying speech (along with similar examples of many other females) that it is an unprofitable exercise to analyze a particular passage at this moment. In a similar way Esther, in her femininity, has such a style of speech and action that she comes over as a whimsical creature with idealistic dreams and notions and altogether incapable of really grasping the serious and sensitive mood of another. Like all 'fine women', Esther is weak in situations, where such a reaction is considered to be feminine. When faced with a harsh word or an uncomfortable reality "she ran up to her bedroom and burst into tears"¹⁶.

George Eliot's orientated style in her treatment of individuals is equally applicable to her treatment of women on the whole and we can often detect a certain irritation, scorn or pity, in her words when we more into the petty social

¹⁶George Eliot. *Felix Holt, the Radical*. Everyman's Library: Dent and Dutton. 1866. P. 116.

world inhabited only by nineteenth century women. When the novel is introduced into a small part of it by Esther and Mrs. Transome, at one point, it is evident how even such a small number as two women together lapse into the shallow accepted mediocrity of female preoccupations:

But when they were together in the early days of her stay, the conversation turned chiefly on what happened in Mrs. Transome's youth – what she wore when she was presented at court – who were the most distinguished and beautiful women at that time the terrible excitement of the French Revolution – the emigrants she had known, and the history of various titled members of the Lingon Family¹⁷.

Even two women of above average intelligence fall into the usual habits of their sex since they don't know how to conduct themselves otherwise. Consider the following extract from the text – the occasion is irrelevant but what is important is the way in which we cannot avoid the so vivid impression of the mass of banal, tittle-tattle of the women who, it seems, are just incapable of reacting like intelligent, comprehending adults.

Mrs. Muscat, who had been a beauty, and was nice in her millinery as any Treblan lady belonging to the establishment, reflected that she should put on her best large embroidered collar and that she should ask Mrs. Tiliot where it was in Duffield that she once got her bed-hangings dyed so beautiful. When Mrs. Tiliot saw Mary Salt, the two ladies had been bosom friends; but Mr. Tiliot had looked higher and higher since his gin had become so famous; and in the year 29 he had, in Mr. Muscat's hearing, spoken of Dissenters as sneaks, - a personality which could not be overlooked¹⁸.

Whilst awaiting the debate, as this was in fact the occasion of the above gathering, yet another incident serves to show us the incredibly childish side of George Eliot's women. The incident, the disappearance of the young curate who was to debate with Rufus Lyon, caused something of a stir, especially among the more inquisitive females present and forced the following reaction: "But Mrs. Muscat though it would be nothing but right to have all the waters dragged,

¹⁷George Eliot. *Felix Holt, the Radical*. Everyman's Library: Dent and Dutton. 1866. P. 350.

¹⁸Eliot. *Ibid.* P. 221.

agreeing in this with, the majority of the church ladies”¹⁹. George Eliot, as we can see, portrays Mrs. Muscat’s feelings as being typical of the women. Females are portrayed as the stupid element in society, something to be indulged and pampered but completely ignored when it comes to serious matters. We get this impression equally through George Eliot’s method of presentation, as through what she actually says.

A conclusion to our analysis so far would be a realization of the utter powerlessness of women in all domains, political, social and emotional; a powerlessness which seems to be normal, when considering the female characters in *Felix Holt, the Radical* (perhaps not so in the real nineteenth century England) but none-the-less in certain cases a powerlessness which causes frustration, bitterness and heart-break.

¹⁹George Eliot. *Felix Holt, the Radical*. Everyman’s Library: Dent and Dutton. 1866. P. 226.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

2.1 Definition of Some Key Words

Patriarchy: It is the term used to describe the society in which we live today, characterized by current and historic unequal power relations between women and men whereby women are systematically disadvantaged and oppressed. This takes place across almost every sphere of life but is particularly noticeable in women's under-representation in key state institutions, in decision-making positions and in employment and industry. Male violence against women is also a key feature of patriarchy. Women in minority groups face multiple oppressions in this society, as race, class and sexuality intersect with sexism for example.²⁰

Matriarchy: It is a society in which women are in charge and are recognized as the heads of families with power, lineage, and inheritance passing, where possible, from mothers to daughters.

Femininity: It is the quality of looking and behaving in ways conventionally thought to be appropriate for a woman or girl.

Masculinity: It is the state of being a man or boy.

Matrilineal: It describes the line of genealogical relationships or descent that follows the female side of a family.

Patrilineal: It describes family relationships traced through the male line, or societies in which only such relationships are recognized.

Feminism: It is the belief in the need to secure rights and opportunities for women equal to those of men. It is also the movement committed to securing defending rights and opportunities for women that are equal to those of men.

Sexism: It is the discrimination against women or men because of their sex. It is also the tendency to treat people as cultural stereotypes of their sex.²¹

²⁰<http://www.Londonfeministnetwork.com/> "history and theory of feminism"

²¹<http://www.dicosencarta.com>

2.2 Patriarchal Dominance

Historically, the division between men and women has begun since the creation of the two creatures. According to mythology they are Adam and Eve who are created in the Eden Garden. Gender discrimination has begun with the Biblical narrative that places for the fall of humanity on Eve, not Adam. Firstly, the myth that Eve is created from Adam's rib. Secondly, the vision from God to men, God made a revelation to men. Thirdly, the declaration that the women are, borrowing Bressler's term, really "imperfect men"²². These imperfect and spiritually weak creatures, according to men, had made Eve picked the forbidden fruit and followed by Adam then. Furthermore Eve is suspected as the cause of Adam expulsion from the paradise, and women are regarded as the string of Satan to snare men to do the sin.

Another theory is patriarchy system which became different in every group of people and place. That is the evidence that patriarchy is determined by culture. This cultural system is debated constantly by feminists. They believed that the idea of distinction is not completely determined by biology but by the social construction as described by Ann Oakley: "Gender is not a direct product of biological sex....masculinity and femininity are defined social cultural and psychological attributes which are acquired through becoming a man or a woman in a particular society at a particular time"²³

The ancient Greek also abetted such gender discrimination when Aristotle, one of their leading philosophers and teachers, asserted that "The male is by nature superior, and the female inferior; and the one rules and the other is ruled"²⁴. In similar fashion, Schopenhauer said that: "women are directly fitted for acting as the nurses and teaches of our early childhood by the fact that they are themselves childish, frivolous and shortsighted; in a word, they are big children all their life long."²⁵

²²Bressler, Charles E. *literary criticism: an introduction to theory and practice*. New Jersey: prentice Hall. 1998. P. 181

²³Ann, Oakley. Jackson & Jones. 1998. P.133

²⁴Bressler. Op.Cit. P 180

²⁵Grinshaw Jean. *Feminist Philosophers: women's perspectives in philosophical tradition*. London: Building and sons Ltd. 1998. P 63

Since years ago, women were violently exploited by men because of the indispensable postulation of women as men's property such as wife belonged to her husband. As Kate Millet said: "traditionally, patriarchy granted the father nearly total ownership over wife or wives and children including the powers of physical abuse and often those of murder and sale."²⁶

For centuries after, theologians, philosophers, scientists, and others continued such gender discrimination. For example in *The Descent of Man*, Darwin announced that women are of a "characteristic of... a past and lower state of civilization."²⁷ Such beings, he noted, are inferior to men who are physically, intellectually, and artistically superior. Furthermore a prominent Greek general Meno, in the Platonic dialogue of the same name, sums up the prevailing sentiments about the respective virtues of men and women. He says:

First of all, if you take the virtue of a man, it is easily stated that a man's virtue is this—that he be competent to manage the affairs of his city, and to manage them so as to benefit his friends and harm his enemies, and to take care to avoid suffering harm himself. Or take a woman's virtue: there is no difficulty in describing it as the duty of ordering the house well, looking after the property indoors, and obeying her husband²⁸.

The philosopher Aristotle portrayed women as morally, intellectually, and physically inferior to men; saw women as the property of men; claimed that women's role in society was to reproduce and serve men in the household; and saw male domination of women as natural and virtuous. He had a hierarchical ruling structure in his theories.²⁹

²⁶ Millet Kate. *Sexual Politics*. London: Sphere Books Ltd. P2

²⁷ Bressler Charles E. *literary criticism: an introduction to theory and practice*. New Jersey: prentice Hall. 1998. P.181

²⁸ Meno. section71e: Plato. Retrieved 9 February 2015

Gerda Lerner claims that “through this patriarchal belief system passed down generation to generation, people have been conditioned to believe that men are superior to women. These symbols are benchmarks which children learn about when they grow up, and the cycle of patriarchy continues much past the Greeks”³⁰.

To sum up the roles and the position of women as determined by the patriarchy system, the sociologist Sylvia Walby has composed six overlapping structures that take different forms in different cultures and different times:³¹

1. The state: women are unlikely to have formal power and representation
2. The household: women are more likely to do the housework and raise the children.
3. Violence: women are more prone to being abused
4. Paid work: women are likely to be paid less
5. Sexuality: women's sexuality is more likely to be treated negatively
6. Culture: women are more misrepresented in media and popular culture

2.3 Other feminist writers

Although many 16th and 17th Century theorists agreed with Aristotle's views concerning the place of women in society, none of them tried to prove political obligation on the basis of the patriarchal family until sometime after 1680. But in the latter half of the 18th century, clerical sentiments of patriarchy were meeting challenges from intellectual authorities Diderot's *Encyclopedie* denies inheritance of paternal authority stating,

³⁰Lerner Gerda. *The creation of patriarchy*. New Jersey: Oxford University Press. "Symbols" . Chapter 10.

³¹Walby Sylvia. *Theorizing Patriarchy*. Cambridge: Polity Press. 1997.

...reason shows us that mothers have rights and authority equal to those of fathers; for the obligations imposed on children originate equally from the mother and the father, as both are equally responsible for bringing them into the world. Thus the positive laws of God that relate to the obedience of children join the father and the mother without any differentiation; both possess a kind of ascendancy and jurisdiction over their children...³²

Simone de Beauvoir wrote that "the first time we see a woman take up her pen in defense of her sex"³³ was Christine de Pizan who wrote *Epitre au Dieu d'Amour (Epistle to the God of Love)* in the 15th century.

The term feminism can be used to describe a political, cultural or economic movement aimed at establishing equal rights and legal protection for women. Feminism involves political and sociological theories and philosophies concerned with issues of gender difference, as well as a movement that advocates gender equality for women and campaigns for women's rights and interests.³⁴

Feminists and scholars have divided the movement's history into three "waves"³⁵. The first wave refers mainly to women's suffrage movements of the nineteenth and early twentieth century's (mainly concerned with women's right to vote). The second wave refers to the ideas and actions associated with the women's liberation movement beginning in the 1960s (which campaigned for legal and social rights for women). Second-wave feminists saw women's cultural and political inequalities as inextricably linked and encouraged women to understand aspects of their personal lives as deeply politicized and as reflecting sexist power structures. The third wave refers to a continuation of, and a reaction to the perceived failures of, second-wave feminism, beginning in the 1990s.

³²- "Encyclopedia, Paternal Authority" <http://quod.lib.Umich.edu/retrived> 1 April 2015

³³- <http://.info@icwc-aral.uz>.

³⁴- <http://.info@icwc-aral.uz>.

³⁵- <http://.info@icwc-aral.uz>.

Nowadays it refers to women's movement that struggles against women domination to change women position in the society. Wolf stated that the word "feminism", according to the dictionary means "One who champions the rights of women"³⁶. As for Culler, Jonathan in his literary theory *A very short introduction* in 1997 says that: "feminist theorists champion the identity of women, demand rights for women and promote women's writing as representations of the experience of women."³⁷

There are several types of feminism:³⁸

Liberal feminism: It asserts the equality of men and women through political and legal reform. They believe that women should have the same capacity as their male counterparts and should be given the same opportunities in political, economic and spheres. Women should have the right to choose, not have their life chosen for them because of their sex. Essentially, women must be like men (Betty Friedan). Issues important to liberal feminists include reproductive and abortion rights, sexual harassment, voting, education, "equal pay for equal work"³⁹, affordable childcare, affordable health care, and bringing to light the frequency of sexual and domestic violence against women.

Radical feminism: They believe that women can free themselves only when they have done away with what they consider an inherently oppressive and dominating patriarchal system. Some radical feminists see no alternatives other than the total uprooting and reconstruction of society in order to achieve their goals. According to Schulamit Firestone, women oppression has biological factor, due to women bond to birth process and raised children that keeps them in position depend on men in order to survive. Firestone explains that feminist movement should participate in "biological revolution"⁴⁰ that could free them from biological oppression.

³⁶ Hawthorn Jeremy. A concise Glossary of contemporary literary(2nd edition). London: Education Arnold. 1994. P8

³⁷ Culler Jonathan. Literary theory: A very short introduction. New York: Oxford University Press. 1997. P128

³⁸ <http://www.student.virginia.edu/uvanov/different.html>, accessed on 20 July 2008.

³⁹ Betty Friedan online <http://www.student.virginia.edu/uvanov/liberal.html>, accessed on 20 July 2008.

⁴⁰ Schulamit Firestone. 1983.

Feminist theology: It is a movement found in several religions to reconsider the traditions, practices, scriptures, and theologies of those religions from a feminist perspective. Some of the goals of feminist theology include increasing the role of women among the clergy and religious authorities, reinterpreting male-dominated imagery and language about God, determining women's place in relation to career and motherhood, and studying images of women in the religion's sacred texts.

Socialist feminism: In contrast to ideals of feminism which tend to focus on the individuals women, the socialist feminist theory focuses on the broadest of social relations in the community and includes the aspects of race, ethnicity etc. they believed that women must work side-by-side men in the political sphere. There must be coalition between the two and they must see each other as equal.

Chapter Three: A Woman's Fate and her Reaction to it in *Felix Holt, the Radical*.

3.1 Women's ill-treatment in the novel

We must now consider the female characters in the book individually and attentively: we must examine each woman's aspirations, fears, the path of her life and her fate. The woman who immediately springs to mind when thinking of *Felix Holt, the Radical* is Mrs. Transome. She is the richest character in psychological detail and complexity and she is the most complete and convincing of the characters, male as well as female, in the book. It would be more than possible to dedicate a whole chapter to Mrs. Transome alone; however we shall here restrict ourselves to the discussion of various, the most obvious, points in her make-up.

Mrs. Transome is one of the sort of women of whom we have spoken in chapter one. She is far more intelligent and sensitive than the average female in the novel and she reflects a great deal upon the lot of her sex, and consequently, upon her own unhappy fate. Her very awareness of her lack of power, of right, and within the realm of intelligence the lack of respect only serves to increase her consciousness of her misery and unavoidable fate.

Perhaps the most profitable way with which to tackle an analysis of Mrs. Transome is to follow her through the first chapter of *Felix Holt, the Radical* since it is in chapter one of the book that we are given one of the most penetrating and revealing insights into the mind of this woman. We meet Mrs. Transome as an impatient lady waiting in her home with her heart full of excitement, great expectations and apprehensions: "..... from one the doors which surrounded the entrance-hall there came forth from time to time a lady who walked lightly over the polished stone floor, and stood on the doorstep and watched and listened"⁴¹.

⁴¹ George Eliot *Felix Holt, the Radical*. Everyman's Library: Dent and Dutton. 1866. P.10.

From the very beginning of Mrs. Transome's nervous wait, we, as readers, realize just how hopeless all her expectations are. We see her, watching and listening in vain, and the very monotony of her life is somehow underlined by her return each time to the same room, the same hopes and fears. A hollow shell of a woman who has nothing left but her wishes, and all these placed in her youngest son. As we shall see, Mrs. Transome has twice in her life given herself and all her hopes over to a man, first lawyer Jermyn and then her son. Both times she was been bitterly deceived and has left cynicism to grow among the debris of her emotion. She is a faded being, merely the ashes of her former glorious self, for she cannot move without a man's permission, she cannot live without a man's force to back her, but men are not to be relied upon. Even her home reflects something of Mrs. Transome's state: "There was a great deal of tarnished gilding and dinginess on the walls and furniture of this smaller room Near the chair in which she seated herself each time she re-entered, there hung a picture of a youthful face which bore a strong resemblance to her own"⁴².

Mrs. Transome's life, since her younger, more carefree days, has been one long wait for the return of her youngest son, Harold. This woman even feels that she has sinned for the sake of his son in "the desire that her first, rickety, ugly, imbecile child should die, and leave room for her darling, of whom she could be, could be proud"⁴³. Now, however, Harold proves to be unworthy of Mrs. Transome's sacrifices.

For, just now, Mrs. Transome could not abridge the sunny tedium of the day by the feeble interest of her usual indoor occupations. Her consciousness was absorbed by memories and except, when she walked to the entrance-door to look out; she sat motionless with folded arms, involuntarily from time to time turning towards the portrait close by her, and as often, when its young brown eyes met hers, turning away again with self-checking resolution.⁴⁴

⁴²George Eliot *Felix Holt, the Radical*. Everyman's Library: Dent and Dutton. 1866. P.P.10, 11

⁴³Eliot. *Ibid.* Introduction. P. 19.

⁴⁴Eliot. *Ibid.* Introduction. P. 11.

It is singularly strange that all the time, in which we have before us the image of this old and majestic woman awaiting impatiently the return of her son, we share at the same time much of the apprehension which accompanies his return. How well we understand that Mrs. Transome is not only brimful of excitement, but also there is within her a very strong dose of fear which is shown by these words: “She sat, quivering and listening; her lips became pale, her hands were cold and trembling”⁴⁵. She realizes that no matter what her son is now her life will fall under his power, within his range of command, he being the man. Mrs. Transome hopes and prays that Harold will not have changed in disposition from the young, lovable son she remembers from fifteen years ago, and all the time she deeply dreads that he will be different, that she will no longer be able to communicate with the one person who still means something to her.

As all women, of the same era, Mrs. Transome is without any significant power, and yet she plays a sort of game in order to persuade herself that she is not entirely without authority. Her game consists of exercising a ridiculous control over her senile husband. She experiences a certain satisfaction when she sees him intimidated and cowering as a result of her very presence.

But when Mrs. Transome appeared within the doorway, her husband paused in his work and shrank like a timid animal looked at in a cage where flight is impossible. He was conscious of a troublesome intention, for which he had been rebuked before-that of disturbing all his specimens with a view to a new arrangement⁴⁶.

It is horribly pathetic that a woman with so much intelligence, and so much sensitivity, should be reduced in her leisure-time, to exercising such a heartless domination with respect to her poor, frightened husband. She really

⁴⁵George Eliot. *Felix Holt, the Radical*. Everyman's Library: Dent and Dutton. 1866. P. 12

⁴⁶Eliot. *Ibid.* Introduction PP. 11-12.

had little pure pleasure from her power, over him, in fact her actions only serve to make her bitterer, and yet she uses her husband as a means of revenge by annoyance on the whole male population; “she liked every little sign of power her lot had left her”⁴⁷. Mrs. Transome abhors the state into which she has fallen: a state from which she cannot escape without the help of Harold, and yet she knows full well that if things work out satisfactorily it will be by pure chance and not the result of any influence on her part. Harold will at least, by his very presence, win back for her the respect of her neighbors, even if her life remains equally as hollow and unrewarding as previously. This is shown in the following terms: “... to no longer tacitly pitied by her neighbours for her lack of money, her imbecile husband, her graceless eldest-born, and loneliness of her life; but to have at her sided a rich, clever, possibly a tender son”⁴⁸.

Thus, by the end of a relatively small number of lines at the beginning of chapter one, we are presented with an almost complete picture of Mrs. Transome’s state of mind. We understand the fears and anxieties of a woman who fears above all the unknown, unknowable and unreasonable. She desperately hopes that everything will work out to bring her the happiness and peace of mind for which she craves, and yet all the time she is dreadfully conscious of the fact that if things do not finish as she would wish she is absolutely powerless to alter them. The crucial moment finally arrives: “She heard herself called “Mother” and felt a light kiss on each cheek; but stronger than all that sensation was the consciousness which no previous thought could prepare her for, that this son who has come back to her was a stranger”⁴⁹.

As if this was not enough heart-break, enough punishment for one woman, Mrs. Transome is also aware that Harold bears a strong resemblance to Jermyn with whom she had an extra-marital affair in the earlier days, and who is in fact Harold’s father. “...For through the likeness to herself was no longer,

⁴⁷ George Eliot. *Felix Holt, the Radical*. Everyman’s Library: Dent and Dutton 1866. P.26.

⁴⁸ Eliot. Loc. cit.

⁴⁹ Eliot. Ibid. Introduction. P.13.

striking, the years had overlaid it with another likeness which would have arrested her”⁵⁰.

How full of meaning are Mrs. Transome’s words: “Everything is changed, Harold”⁵¹. It is so true that everything has changed for this old woman. She no longer possesses even her hopes and dreams, and she is totally overtaken by/filled with disillusionment and total deception; and she bears her grief alone in the face of Harold’s insensitivity; “she took care that they should be silent tears”⁵². The narrator pointed out that: “Mrs. Transome has not the feminine tendency to seek influence through pathos; she had been used to rule in virtue of acknowledged superiority”⁵³. To what purpose does Mrs. Transome guard even this that last vestige of strength? What is the point of trying so hard to retain the pride and dignity of her younger days, to keep her honour as a woman, since nobody, not even her son, pays her enough attention to notice her suffering, let alone to care about it. Mrs. Transome’s qualities are not appreciated by those around her: she is ignored.

It is at this point in the book that we first really strongly feel the presence of a guilt complex in Harold’s mother, the reasons for which are easily understandable. She needs "to feel that the doubtful deeds of her life were justified by the result”⁵⁴ but she has a rude awakening when faced with her son: “Her life been like a spoiled shabby pleasure-day, in which the music and the processions are all missed, and nothing is left at evening but the weariness of striving after what has been failed off”⁵⁵.

The cold fact finally and painfully dawns in Mrs. Transome’s breast that she has sinned and suffered for nothing. Harold Transome does not deserve the torment which his mother has undergone; he is not even aware of her pain. What can Mrs. Transome salvage from the wreckage resulting from Harold’s return?

⁵⁰ George Eliot. *Felix Holt, the Radical*. Everyman’s Library: Dent and Dutton 1866. P. 1.

⁵¹ Eliot. Loc. Cit

⁵² Eliot. Loc. Cit

⁵³ George Eliot. *Felix Holt, the Radical*. Everyman’s Library: Dent and Dutton 1866. P. 14

⁵⁴ Eliot. Ibid. Introduction P. 19

⁵⁵ Eliot. Ibid. Introduction. 20

Although she no longer means anything to her son, and she no longer understands him nor does he understand her, she has the pleasure of seeing her son admired in political circles and respected by her friends. Even this small hope however, is not to be realized. Harold's change is absolute-he is not a Tory but a Radical. This is expressed in the following words:

Here was a distinct confirmation of the vague but strong feeling that her son was a stranger to her. Here was a revelation to which it seemed almost as impossible to adjust her hopes and notions of a dignified life as if her son had said that he had been converted to Mahometanism at Smyrna....⁵⁶

After this last great blow Mrs. Transome has no fight left in her and all she could think was that "any conception of herself and her feelings was excluded from her son's inward world"⁵⁷. It was better to ask no questions, but silently to prepare herself for anything else there might be to come. The long-awaited meeting is over and we find Mrs. Transome alone with her grief, her bitterness and her painful realization: "I shall count for nothing. I was foolish to expect anything else"⁵⁸.

Mrs. Transome now has to learn to live with her past, and her conscience. She has to find a new philosophy upon which to base her life; some sort of reasoning which will justify some part her past actions; otherwise she cannot live with herself. The philosophy upon which she decides is closely linked with her views upon the female sex. She becomes very pessimistic and puts the failure she has suffered down to the necessary fate of women. Looking back upon her life Mrs. Transome sees it as complete, ended, there is nothing else for her now and seeing it as a whole she realizes just how pathetic it has been. As a result,

⁵⁶ George Eliot. *Felix Holt, the Radical*. Everyman's Library: Dent and Dutton 1866. P.15.

⁵⁷ Eliot. *Ibid.* Introduction P.17.

⁵⁸ Eliot. *Ibid.* Introduction.19.

She had begun to live merely in small immediate cares and occupations, and, like all eager-minded women who advance in life without any activity of tenderness or any large sympathy, she had contracted small rigid habits of thinking and acting, she had her "ways" which must not be crossed, and had learned to fill up the great void of life with giving small orders to tenants....⁵⁹

How a brutal reflection! It is too late to alter what had happened and what is happening and she has not the power to change the course of the future. All such a woman can do is to lament her fate and sex. Mrs. Transome knows exactly what she is and she holds for herself a measure of distaste accompanied by the knowledge that even in the future ".....There's no pleasure for old women, unless they get it out of tormenting other people⁶⁰".

Thus we see how in one chapter only George Eliot succeeds in presenting so expertly one of her leading, female figures. Mrs. Transome, a sensitive, intelligent and understanding woman, is doomed to misery and frustration. In her own words "The best happiness I shall ever know will be to escape the worst misery"⁶¹.

Chapter one of *Felix Holt, the Radical* ends on this note of despair and yet Mrs. Transome cannot be left at this point for she is an important character throughout the entire book. We shall take a very brief look at her through the pages to see what from her bitterness takes. In doing so we notice that she is continually telling others, notably Harold, that she has "old fashioned ideas"⁶². And that she cannot change. For Mrs. Transome, it is the world that changes around her, that imposes upon her a regime which her nature finds alien and insupportable. Her aims and principles remain immutable but because reality falls so short of them and results in deception, disappointment and pain, Mrs. Transome has become very embittered. She has to remain inactive, silently suffering the blows which life gives her. This woman is equally frightened by

⁵⁹ George Eliot. *Felix Holt, the Radical*. Everyman's Library: Dent and Dutton 1866. P.24.

⁶⁰ Eliot. Loc.cit.

⁶¹ Eliot. Ibid.Introduction.P.27.

⁶² Eliot. Loc.cit

Harold's ruthless spirit and lack of respect for tradition, particularly concerning his relations with Jermyn. She was disappointed by her son Harold and Jermyn. This is expressed by these words:

Mrs. Transome was not observing the two men; rather, her hands were cold, and her whole person shaken by their presence; she seemed to hear and see what they said and did with preternatural acuteness, and yet she was also seeing and hearing what had been said and done many years before, and feeling a dim terror about the future⁶³.

The future of which Mrs. Transome is thinking is entirely in her son's hands. It is only he who can change things for the best and for the worse. Jermyn would not voluntarily upset the relationship between himself and Harold Transome, and Mrs. Transome knows that she can influence the outcome of their affairs in no way since "she was of little consequence to either of them"⁶⁴. Harold had robbed rather than relieved his mother of all responsibility in matters appertaining to the estate, putting down its previous bad management to his mother's natural weaknesses as a woman. All Mrs. Transome is left with is her embroidery, her fine gown, and the grand Transome Court: Mrs. Transome felt the fatal threads about her, and the bitterness of this helpless bondage mingled itself with the new elegancies of the dining and drawing rooms....⁶⁵.

Harold does not understand his mother and makes no effort to do so. Mrs. Transome, for her part had dreamed that with the renewed presence of her son her happiness would once again blossom; but instead she finds herself in the company of a man of whom she is afraid, whom she cannot manage, and who holds no sympathy for her. She resents greatly the fact that she was expected to be contented with her "cushions and carriages"⁶⁶. And forever on her mind

⁶³George Eliot. *Felix Holt, the Radical*. Everyman's Library: Dent and Dutton 1866. P.33.

⁶⁴Eliot .Loc.Cit.

⁶⁵George Eliot. *Felix Holt, the Radical*. Everyman's Library: Dent and Dutton 1866. P.103

⁶⁶Eliot.Ibid.P.106.

were the words "I have no power over him-remember that-none"⁶⁷. However, in spite of the many grounds which Mrs. Transome has for experiencing a considerable degree of self-pity, this one emotion which does not seem to enter into her feelings at this point. It is true she already laments her fate as a woman, and yet it is not until later on in the action that she really becomes fatalistic; here, Mrs. Transome still takes a much more self critical approach to life and her past behavior and she still feels very strongly. We see the white face of the old lady waiting eagerly at the door for the result of an interview between Jermyn and Harold. She is agitated and apprehensive, but when the door finally opens neither of the two men communicates even one hint of what has passed between them to Mrs. Transome. George Eliot stresses repeatedly in the narrative that men's affairs are private, and are communicated to women only when through fit, and, if not communicated, they must not be asked for. She shows us so clearly that women's rights were vastly inferior to those of men in England at the time. Mrs. Transome "felt herself loveless"⁶⁸ but she could appeal to nobody for understanding and sympathy, neither her husband nor her son.

After the very first few pages of the book where Mrs. Transome still retains some of the hopes and strength of her personality, she gradually lapses into a somewhat fatalistic philosophy, and becomes thus more and more self-pitying, uttering such words as "I must put up with all things as they are determined for me,"⁶⁹. And at every turn George Eliot underlines the total lack of power of this unhappy woman:

She had composed herself to go through this task. She saw there was nothing better to be done. After the resolutions Harold had taken, some sort of compromise with this oddly-placed heirs was the result most to be hoped for; if the compromise turned out to be a marriage-well, she had no reason to care much: she was already powerless⁷⁰.

⁶⁷ George Eliot. *Felix Holt, the Radical*. Everyman's Library: Dent and Dutton 1866. P.106.

⁶⁸ Eliot. *Ibid.* P.310.

⁶⁹ Eliot. *Ibid.* P.320.

⁷⁰ Eliot. *Ibid.* P.322.

The only person with whom Mrs. Transome still retains a shred of communication is Denner Hickee, her maid. The relationship, between these two women deserves to be studied separately but for the moment we can use a brief examination of the conversation which passes between them to highlight some of the points already made concerning Mrs. Transome. There are many moments during the progression of the dialogue when the reader is uncertain as to whom the thought behind the words belongs, the speaker or George Eliot herself. This ambiguity arises above all when the conversation turns upon the lot of women. Mrs. Transome is talking about Esther Lyon and her son Harold when she says:

Not true that she will ever master him. No woman ever will. He will make her fond of him, and afraid of him. That's one of the things you have never gone through, Denner. A woman's love is always freezing into fear. She wants everything, she is secure of nothing. This girl has a fine spirit-plenty of fire and pride and wit. Men like such captives, as they like horses that champ the bit and paw the ground: they feel more triumph in their mastery. What is the use of a woman's will? – If she tries, she doesn't get it, and she creases to be loved⁷¹.

Old Mrs. Transome continues into some deep passages on the subject of her misery and disillusionment with life, her false hopes and her inevitable disappointment. She ends up with a statement which is somewhat remarkable for the way in which it is calculated. "Ah, then, you are a happy woman, Denner; you have loved somebody for forty years who is old and weak now, and can't do without you"⁷². She says that a man should become materially dependent upon her. It is a futile desire to be loved and accepted as a valuable personality in her own right.

Mrs. Transome has by now then come to regard her fate as something of a misfortune, not as a result which was necessarily pre-determined by her own

⁷¹ George Eliot. *Felix Holt, the Radical*. Everyman's Library: Dent and Dutton 1866. P-P.345-346.

⁷² Eliot.Ibid.P.347.

actions, but as something which could have been so different if only all had been against her from the start, from, in fact, her very birth:"If I sinned, my judgment went beforehand that I should sin for a man like you"⁷³.

It is true that this woman and mother never quite shakes off the feelings of guilt from which she has suffered for so long, and yet we now get the impression that Mrs. Transome tries to integrate these feelings into her bitterness, and her new outlook: she tries to neutralize them by insisting to herself that she has simply had more than her share of ill-fortune. Things need not have turned out in the way that they do and she can perhaps have even brilliantly succeeded in life in spite of, or even because of, her "sin" if only she had been born male perhaps. Nobody listens to her, no not even her son and she has no power to avert the impending scene between Harold and Jermyn about which she seizes by dread"I do care. It makes me miserable. That is the extent of my power – to feel miserable"⁷⁴.We are faced with a lady who learns by bitter experience to distrust and despise all men. She loathes them as the cause of her acute suffering and yet she says "I would not lose the misery of being a woman now I see what can be the baseness of a man"⁷⁵. It is evident; just how much cancerous hatred has eaten away this woman's heart. In the final analysis we realize that Mrs. Transome at last feels deeply sorry for herself. All the fight has been knocked out of her and she is left as nothing more than "part of the old furniture"⁷⁶.

At the end of *Felix Holt, the Radical*, after Jermyn's declaration of his parenthood of Harold there is the scene, which immediately follows this revelation, between Harold and his mother. Harold, who cannot and does not hope to understand the poor creature standing before him and who doesn't consider for one moment how much she must have suffered, is merciless. And yet once again a gleam of hope shines in the eyes of Mrs. Transome. She sits alone in her room waiting for her son to realize what she has gone through,

⁷³ George Eliot. *Felix Holt, the Radical*. Everyman's Library: Dent and Dutton.1866.P.372.

⁷⁴Eliot.Ibid.P.369

⁷⁵Eliot.Ibid.P.371

⁷⁶Eliot.Loc.Cit.

waiting for him to come to her and bring her comfort, that sensation which has eluded her for many years. At this stage we have a striking impression that the book has already gone full cycle. Here is Mrs. Transome once again waiting with hopeful impatience for Harold, her son, and once again her emotions are strongly tinged with apprehension and dread. She walks to and from her window now as she had walked to and from the door then, just before Harold's return from Smyrna, and she imagines to herself the sound of his steps outside the dooly, as before, when the sound was one of horses' hooves upon gravel. And thus the time flows on without the arrival of her son, and as the moments flee from her, Mrs. Transome's bitterness finds a voice, "Men are selfish. They are selfish and cruel. What they care for is their own pleasure and their own pride"⁷⁷. "I am old, and expect so little now-a very little thing would seem great. Why should I be punished anymore?"⁷⁸. Even poor Mrs. Transome's last wish that night, when in the presence of her son, (which we must add was the result of forceful persuasion on Esther's part, and not the result of spontaneous sympathy) was to be thwarted. She says, speaking of Esther, "If that dear thing will marry you, Harold, it will make up to you for a great deal".⁷⁹

In this way Mrs. Transome fades out of the book and leaves us dissatisfied. Her life has been so empty, her "sin" so futile, and her hopes all unrealized.

When discussing Esther Lyon directly after analyzing Mrs. Transome we are aware of a distinct modification in the depth of the personality with whom we are dealing. Whereas the latter is a psychologically complicated character full of internal struggle and even searching for the meaning in her life, the former. Esther is painted far more simply and has a more superficial, less reflecting mind. Esther is even found at times to be little more than unconvincing. She resembles, at her worst, a doll, beautiful but unthinking, and her sources of sensitivity are obviously limited. Considered as a major character

⁷⁷ George Eliot. *Felix Holt, the Radical*. Everyman's Library: Dent and Dutton. 1866. P. 435

⁷⁸ Eliot. *Ibid.* P. 436

⁷⁹ Eliot. *Ibid.* P. 437

in the novel, Esther lacks drastically the depth of personality which is to be found in old Mrs. Transome. Esther teaches us little new about the feelings prevalent among the women of her day, but she does serve to show us that these feelings were general among all ages and classes, even if the degree of their influence upon the lives of women varied greatly. Esther acts upon other characters only indirectly and we, as readers, never feel that she will in fact change the course of history which ever decision she decides to make. Esther's life progresses as the result of influences from outside, according to the particular exterior force that her path has followed. It must be remembered that it is not by any forceful good in Esther that her fate is determined but it is by the influence of Felix Holt that she is reserved for a pleasant end.

From the very first reference to Esther by her father Rufus Lyon, we understand that this young woman is spoilt in the habit of having much her own way, and is consequently selfish and capricious. On presentation, Esther in fact appears intellectually conformist, rather shallow and insignificant to both us and Felix, in that her head is filled with romantic notions and little else her chief aim in life being to end up a "fine lady". Having already looked into Esther's femininity and the weaknesses associated with the female sex in our first chapter, we can see that this thought has repercussions throughout the text. What in fact then seduces Felix? It cannot have been Esther's intellectual powers since it appears that they are rather limited; moreover Felix and Esther do not see eye to eye even on reading materials. She cannot by any means have astounded him with great realism and worldly knowledge since the world of Esther Lyon is particularly narrow and idealistic containing clearly modest ambitions only. Perhaps the fact that Esther is after all beautiful, witty, critical and weak helps to attract Felix for it all that a man looks for in a woman at that time. It is true that Esther's sharp wit and quick responses help to add certain liveliness to otherwise mundane conversations, but these two young people had so little in common that their union is somewhat surprising. The idea behind all Esther's actions was that

"A man with any chivalry in him could never adopt a scolding tone towards a woman – that is, towards a charming woman"⁸⁰.

In chapter 22 of *Felix Holt, the Radical* Esther's weakness for passion comes into play and we see an unintelligent woman rendered completely impulsive and adolescent by her passion to be noticed and loved. Felix, in contrast, never allows his passion to get out of control but he subjects his heart to the rule of his head. He never lets all his principles and ambitions be even momentarily threatened by their subordination to sentiment. Each encounter with Felix gives Esther an incredible amount of food for thought, and she passes all her time upon an analysis and re-analysis of what had passed between them whilst: "It was quite true that Felix had not thought the more of Esther because of that Sunday afternoon's interview which had shaken her mind to the very roots"⁸¹.

The influence of others upon Esther is fundamental to her personality. It is all to the good that purely by chance she chooses to be most influenced by Felix Holt. Her reaction to the disclosure of the details of her birth by her father, is in fact very noble, but not as the result of some degree of understanding on her part, but because the news, in the form in which it had been given, is very convenient to accept it that moment. Had the same thing happened before the advent of Esther's feelings for Harold, her reaction would surely have been far less laudable. In the various conversations which occur between these two young people, Esther and Felix, each conversation is notably one-sided. Esther acts as the tentative questioner and Felix as the authoritative leader of the discourse. Esther is always aware that Felix is trying to filter her out of his mind and she has "the sense that she was utterly trivial to him"⁸². Esther conforms to the traditions of womanhood and cultivates her feminine superficiality believing that she is not expected ever to be serious. This is shown by these words: It is difficult for a woman ever to try to be anything good when she is not believed in

⁸⁰ George Eliot. *Felix Holt, the Radical*. Everyman's Library: Dent and Dutton. 1866. P. 160.

⁸¹ Eliot. *Ibid.* P. 213

⁸² Eliot. *Ibid.* P. 242

– when it is always supposed that she must be contemptible⁸³ Esther's great desire to be loved makes her willing to modify her habits and change her principles in order to attain this end. She herself realizes that she has, no strong personality and her weaknesses are easily exploited, and yet she never really goes into any deep self analysis, and she feels that she is worthy of Felix's love. Let us report this in the author's own words: "If she might have married Felix Holt, she could have been a good woman. She felt no trust that she could ever be good without him"⁸⁴.

Esther knows that given the necessary conditions she can easily sink into a life as hurtful and unrewarding as Mrs. Transome's. If Felix chooses to exclude her from his life, Esther had no defense against such a fate. The following words show that: "He was an influence above her life, rather than a part of it; some time or other, perhaps he would be to her as if he belonged to the solemn admonishing skies, checking her self-satisfied pettiness with the suggestion of a wider life"⁸⁵.

Esther could have found herself as Harold Transome's wife. She could so easily have been won over by the attractive life at Transome Court. However she has recognized the strength and goodness in Felix and she realizes that it is this force which she herself lacks and needs in order to make her a complete person. However these thoughts are fully appreciable by Esther only during certain moments, and most of the time she allows herself to drift along with the tide of her life and under the influence of others. She is portrayed as a creature who quickly forgets and who thinks of little else other than her immediate occupations and sensations. Whilst in Transome Court, Esther does not seem particularly overcome by the fact that Felix is languishing in prison since she is too occupied with what is happening to her. Esther does eventually become tired; however, with her life among the Transomes; not because the capacity to criticize such an existence comes naturally to her but because she has acquired

⁸³ George Eliot. *Felix Holt, the Radical*. Everyman's Library: Dent and Dutton. 1866. P. 288.

⁸⁴ Eliot. Loc. Cit

⁸⁵ Eliot. Ibid. P. 329

such a capacity for judgment through her association with Felix Holt. Esther succeeds in weighing the good and the bad by using a comparison based on Felix. Had Felix Holt never entered into Esther's life she would surely have found little to dissatisfy her in Transome Court. It is for this very reason that we must consider that the fact that Esther chooses Felix, instead of Harold, does not redeem her. Esther wanted to be loved and to marry but she could no longer be contented with a marriage to Harold Transome since she had already recognized in another more of the qualities essential to her personality. When Esther eventually visits Felix in prison she is filled with the dread of finding him changed. This emotion is completely egoistical since Esther fears to find herself once more alone in her superficial world out of which she is incapable of escaping.

In the end Esther wins Felix's love, and she only too willingly subordinates herself and her past ambitions to him. Esther Lyon is neither a good woman nor a bad one. In her young life she is completely devoid of both extremes, with no active force of good or evil in her personality; later on, under the happy influence of Felix, all ends well for her since he encourages all goodness to manifest itself. George Eliot seems to have made nothing of this woman: she is merely a pawn in life's great chess-game, whose survival or destruction depends, not upon herself, but on the various moves of the others.

Mrs. Transome and Esther are obviously two of the main female characters in this book, and the only two who we can study in any depth. However we might take a look also at Felix Holt's mother since she is the typical woman of the proletariat whereas Mrs. Transome is an aristocrat by birth and an aspiring, middle-class maid. We have already discussed Mrs. Holt's introduction to the reader as being particularly derogatory but what of her first action? Mrs. Holt, we are told, was much disposed to reveal her troubles and consequently directs her steps towards the home of the dissenting minister. Rufus Lyon however is none too enthusiastic about Mrs. Holt's visit and he expresses his feelings by the following words: "Mistress Holt is an another who

darkens counsel by words without knowledge, and angers the reason of were heavier to bear than this woman's folly"⁸⁶.

From which we understand that this woman's presence is particularly hard to bear. At this stage let us look upon the book and reflect. Here we are faced with three women, at least two of whom are suffering at the hands of men. Mrs. Transome suffers because her son does not understand her, dismisses her as a fussy old woman and disappoints her in his conduct. Mrs. Holt is suffering exactly the same hardships, modified a little by a certain filial affection on the part of Felix but the pain is none-the-less real than those of Mrs. Transome's struggles take place inside herself, hiding her tears, biting her tongue and growing quietly more bitter, Mrs. Holt talks to anyone and everyone of her disappointment in her son. She complains of his lack of understanding and her consequent suffering in such a way that all the resentment is kept on the surface and is not left to rot away her sentiments. These different reactions results purely from the different social class' modes of behavior.

Mrs. Holt's speech is noticeably crude in the sense that it is straight forward and earthy, lacking the refinement and sophistication of the class superior to her own. She is a living example of all the working class defects and she feels consequent need to defend every decision: "...and that was what I used to say to my friends when they wondered at my marrying a man from Lancashire...."⁸⁷.

Like all women of the time, Mrs. Holt's chief complaint is that she is completely powerless in the face of men, notably her son. It is a miserable fate, she feels that a woman carries bears and suckles a child, sacrifices all for him during his youth and yet sees him grow up into an unlistening dictator unconscious or uncaring about his mother's wishes. This is shown by these words: "Mr. Lyon, he's masterful beyond everything and he talks more than his

⁸⁶George Eliot. *Felix Holt, the Radical*. Everyman's Library: Dent and Dutton.1866. P.49

⁸⁷Eliot. *Ibid*.Introduction.P.50

father did”⁸⁸. “....but Felix talks so wild, and contradicts his mother. But it’s my belief he says first one thing and then another only to abuse his mother”⁸⁹. Felix has stopped his mother selling the quack medicine in which his father believed so much, an action which his mother finds extremely difficult to accept. Here also we can note a difference in reaction on the part of the two women. Mrs. Transome feels firstly that her misery has been brought about as the result of her own evil actions, but she goes on to modify her ideals into the belief that chance played an important role in the outcome. Mrs. Holt, however, constantly considers Felix’s waywardness’s some sort of punishment by God, a punishment for which she can find no justification. Let us report this by her own words: "And why this trouble should be sent on me above everything else....”⁹⁰.

Mrs. Holt can understand nothing of her son’s ideals and consequently nothing of his actions. She is ashamed and bewildered by the way in which he dresses and by the work which he has chosen to do, and she says by way of explanation, "It isn’t for want of cleverness he looks like a poor man, Miss Lyon”⁹¹. Felix seems to have none of the goals which his mother had learned to be worth aspiring to during her lifetime. He does not care for a well-paid job, an elegant suit, the manners of the day, or even it seems, for one of the oldest traditions, to take a wife – a fact which is completely beyond the understanding of his mother. Poor Mrs. Holt’s only way of explaining things to herself, of making them more acceptable, is to attribute everything to divine providence. She feels all she does, and all that happens to her happens as a result of some supreme design, even in such a small case of her fright at the election riots. Then, “She thanked God in His wisdom for making her live up a back street”⁹². Moreover, when it comes to giving evidence in her son’s favour after the election incident, Mrs. Holt would not underline the important details which

⁸⁸George Eliot. *Felix Holt, the Radical*. Everyman’s Library: Dent and Dutton.1866. P.51.

⁸⁹Eliot.Ibid.Introduction.P.52.

⁹⁰Eliot.Loc.Cit.

⁹¹ Eliot.Ibid.P.207

⁹² Eliot.Ibid.P.285

would act for Felix, but she keeps going off at tangents in her prattling way and trying to make the one point which seems important to her, that it is a judgment on her son for shopping the sale of the pills and elixir. George Eliot has total control over the portrayal of her characters, and Mrs. Holt is a humorous character all through the book, not because of herself, but in spite of herself. We cannot help but mock the woman a little even in our exasperation with her, and yet she is no more nor no less than Mrs. Transome. Both are powerless, both are dissatisfied, both complain and it is only their position in society which separates them.

After studying much Mrs. Holt and after putting up with much of her "unprofitable discourse"⁹³, we finally see visit Transome Court to "get to speak"⁹⁴ in the right quarter with the intention of asking for a little financial aid for herself and for job during the absence of her son Felix Holt. Once again she rambles on in her moaning, groaning, and tiresome fashion with here and there few words and a simple reflection on a woman's lot, such as "But if everybody's son was guided by their mothers, the world, ud be different"⁹⁵. Poor Mrs. Holt honestly believes that Felix purposely proposes to make her undergo all the hardships and deprivations which she feels that he intends to suffer himself. By so doing "Felix never meant to harm anybody but himself and his mother"⁹⁶. "The last reference we have of Mrs. Holt is at the wedding between her son and Esther Lyon when she feels herself to be receiving "Some reward"⁹⁷.

The three women of whom we have spoken all come from different environments and walks of life, all find themselves under the influence and will of men, restricted in their freedom and complaining of their fate.

Having discussed the lives of the main female characters in *Felix Holt, The Radical*, their fates and their reactions, their thoughts and their conclusions, we shall now go on to discuss the attitude of the women in the book to other

⁹³George Eliot. *Felix Holt, the Radical*. Everyman's Library: Dent and Dutton.1866. P.336.

⁹⁴ Eliot.Ibid.P.383.

⁹⁵Eliot.Ibid.P.382.

⁹⁶ Eliot. Ibid.P.383.

⁹⁷ Eliot.Ibid.P.442.

women. Similarly, we shall consider the attitude of the men to the women, both analyses being important to a discovery of the exact position of women in the nineteenth century English society.

3.2 Women Attitudes towards Women in the Novel

We very fleetingly make the acquaintance of Mrs. Debarry and yet we gather something of her feelings on women, especially on Mrs. Transome, from her remarks concerning the reactions which Harold's return from Smyrna should evoke in his mother. Mrs. Debarry expects the old lady to be thoroughly elated and to be brought out of the "shade" and into affairs again by the presence of her son at Transome Court. Moreover, once she knows of Harold's change of politics, she says: "We know now why his mother seemed so uneasy: I should think she reflects a little, poor creature"⁹⁸.

It is obvious that Mrs. Debarry expects a woman's humour to be influenced above all by the man in her life, and she expects her to take the limelight and to leave it only according to the time, being so indoctrinated into the traditions of the country, would have agreed with her.

Esther is particularly upset by appearances since she has little knowledge of either women or men. All her judgments are based on visible data and although, for example, she sees the suffering undergone by both Mrs. Transome and Mrs. Holt, she finds sympathy for the former merely because she finds her more honourable, discreet, and majestic than Mrs. Holt and therefore, for Esther, more worthy of consideration. As for Felix's mother, Esther is merely embarrassed by her direct manner and complaining tongue. She dislikes any lack of refinement in a woman and dismisses the crude with obvious awkwardness. So the following quotation may be a good illustration: "And in spite of the almost solemn memories connected with Mrs. Holt, Esther's first shudder was

⁹⁸George Eliot. *Felix Holt, the Radical*. Everyman's Library: Dent and Dutton. 1866. P.90.

raised by the idea of what thing this woman would say, and by the mortification of having Felix in any way presented by his mother”⁹⁹.

When Mrs. Transome meets Esther for the first time, the old lady prepares herself to be extremely critical. She is pleasantly however, and what is interesting to notice are the criteria by which Mrs. Transome judges Esther. These criteria are the very ones which society has laid down, the physical and compartmental requirements. Esther, the old woman decides that she is sufficiently superficial and would be acceptable among the aristocracy. It is ironic that a woman who abhors the fact that she should be judged by such values, judges others. During the course of the friendship between these two women however, Esther begins to see a little through the shining varnish of Transome Court life, and in doing so she realizes that Mrs. Transome is not as happy as she could appear to be. Esther, however, does not grasp the fact that this unhappiness, the grief and misery, which are apparent in the old woman’s face and voice, are caused by men. It is through no fault of her own that Mrs. Transome is dissatisfied with her life to all accounts she is a rare beauty, a woman full of grace and elegance, not simple of mind, and of a penetrating insight and extraordinary understanding. The dissatisfaction results from the very fact that Mrs. Transome does have all these attributes at the same time as being a woman.

A woman of the day did not need the more subtle qualities; indeed they were not to be desired. Esther doesn’t really seem to understand just how deep and destructive the problem was, and all she saw was its results. She doesn’t have the same degree of comprehension as the older woman, and yet she feels that all is not well. It is on purpose that the narrator said that: “The sense that Mrs. Transome was unhappy affected Esther more and more deeply as the growing familiarity which relaxed the efforts of the hostess revealed more and more the threadbare tissue of this majestic lady’s life”¹⁰⁰. The impression that

⁹⁹ George Eliot. *Felix Holt, the Radical*. Everyman’s Library: Dent and Dutton. 1866. P.380

¹⁰⁰ Eliot. *Ibid*. P.426

Esther would be perfectly satisfied with her cushions and embroidery if Felix Holt were at her side, is quite strong. There is not the same moral battle or principle in life as there is for Mrs. Transome, or indeed for Felix Holt. In fact, she would very much like to persuade Felix to accept the luxuries with her, but his whole way of thinking is alien to such an action. One of the most detailed and interesting relationships between two women is that between Denner Hickes and her mistress. Neither of these two women really understands the reasoning of the other, but they both know that they understand one another when it comes to emotion. Denner knows when Mrs. Transome is suffering and tries her hardest to comfort the old lady; she often knows, too what causes the suffering even if she doesn't understand why. Mrs. Transome can safely reveal her innermost thoughts to Denner – never in so many words, but by more subtle and discreet means – without the anxiety as to their being passed on, and yet not with the certitude of them being thoroughly understood. Denner, for her part, has full comprehension of Mrs. Transome's worries as a mother and about her past affair, but she doesn't grasp the full implication of the various events. Denner considers each situation and applies her own philosophy to it, then she does her best to persuade her mistress that all is, in fact, not as dramatic as she would imagine. Mrs. Hickes is completely devoted to her mistress and feels the bondage between them the more strengthened because of the intimate trust which is placed in her. Mrs. Transome's maid is presented to us as a "small, neat, exquisitely clean old woman."¹⁰¹ Who should not have wished that her labour should be saved at the expense of any sacrifice on her lady's part? After all, Mrs. Transome has so little pleasure left in life that she might as well keep the joys of being a lady as long as this was possible.

Denner, as we have said already, is resigned to her fate, and therefore happier in her existence than her mistress. Her regard for Mrs. Transome is one verging on worship. This is pointed out by the following word: "There were

¹⁰⁰ George Eliot. *Felix Holt, the Radical*. Everyman's Library: Dent and Dutton. 1866. P. 22.

different orders of being – so ran Denner’s creed – and she belonged to another order than that to which her mistress belonged”¹⁰².

The important thing about these two women is that both the maid and the lady feel the same inferiority, the same lack of liberty, and powerlessness as all women felt, and yet the one comes to terms with these feelings and the other continually struggles with them. Yet again we see two women from totally different backgrounds, but with the same problems by the very virtue or vice of their being women and with the only thing in common between them being a deep understanding of the sufferings of their sex and thus of each other. The following quotation shaved that:

There was a tacit understanding that Denner knew all her mistress’s secrets, and her speech was plain and unflattering: yet with wonderful subtlety of instinct, she never said anything which Mrs. Transome could feel humiliated by, as by a familiarity from a servant who knew too much. Denner identified her own dignity with that of her mistress...¹⁰³“and then Mrs. Transome knew perfectly that Denner had divined her thoughts ”¹⁰⁴.

Mrs. Transome feels that her whole life has been “*full of fears*”¹⁰⁵ and now there is nothing left for her as an old woman. Denner’s philosophy however is extremely different. She feels that everyone is given an equal chance in life, but this chance depends on what happens to him or her in a chain of events. The events are linked and each depends on which goes before which leads eventually to a bad or a good end. Thus Denner is never really destroyed by a piece of bad link since she feels that she might always gain in the end. Her own description of her theory for life expresses extremely well what we are trying to say by the use of an image: “I look upon it; life is like our game at whist, when Barks and

¹⁰²George Eliot. *Felix Holt, the Radical*. Everyman’s Library: Dent and Dutton.1866. P.23

¹⁰³Eliot. Loc.Cit

¹⁰⁴George Eliot. *Felix Holt, the Radical*. Everyman’s Library: Dent and Dutton.1866. P.24

¹⁰⁵Eliot. Loc.Cit

his wife come to the still-room of an evening. I don't enjoy the much, but I like to play my cards well and see what will be the end of it"¹⁰⁶. Mrs. Transome's misery is acute "yet saves in a bitter little speech or in deep sigh heard by no one besides Denner"¹⁰⁷, she suffers in silence. Why does no one else notice that the old lady is unhappy? Why is Denner the only person who ever hears her sighs? Denner is the only one to hear. When Esther comes to Transome Court, she too understands the hidden misery of Mrs. Transome's life. It is only the woman who notices such misery; the men are ignorantly blissful of all that goes on in their partners' minds. The women realized immediately, for they are all in the same boat and all feels the same frustrations more and less deeply. Only those concerned themselves take notice of the pain of others. If Mrs. Transome is a lady and something to be loyal to for Denner, Denner for Mrs. Transome is one of the last remaining symbols of humanity and comfort.

Before Harold's return she is perhaps too a symbol of Mrs. Transome's magnificent past, her rights as a lady, but now that she has all the comforts Denner becomes above all a valuable listener, a kindred spirit. Someone cares for Mrs. Transome even if that someone is only the maid, when everyone else is too preoccupied or not interested enough anyway. "If she was important to any one, it was only to her old waiting-woman Denner"¹⁰⁸. George Eliot uses an image when describing these two women which exactly conveys to us the comfort which Denner represents for her mistress. "The sensations produced by Denner's presence were as little disturbing as those of a favorite cat"¹⁰⁹. Denner was there to be talked to, to be reassuring, yet Mrs. Transome feels that "you (Denner) will never understand what I suffered."¹¹⁰ No one can understand whose awareness is not as acute as Mrs. Transome's. Mrs. Transome is a woman who looks back upon the years with bitterness and resentment and who finds her lot difficult to support. Denner is an old woman who looks back

¹⁰⁶ George Eliot. *Felix Holt, the Radical*. Everyman's Library: Dent and Dutton. 1866. P.24

¹⁰⁷ Eliot. *Ibid.* P. 103

¹⁰⁸ Eliot. *Ibid.* P. 310

¹⁰⁹ Eliot. *Ibid.* P. 344

¹¹⁰ Eliot. *Ibid.* P. 345

upon the years with an approach which falls somewhere between opportunism and fatalism but which gives rise to a certain optimistic philosophy. From an old maid to her old mistress who shares their sorrows, we have two women, who suffer from their sex, and it is this suffering which joins them together in sympathy: “The small quiet old woman obeyed, as she had always done. She shrank from seeming to claim an equal share in her mistress’s sorrow”.¹¹¹

In conclusion we can see that women were so conditioned as to judge other women, by the same value as men used, physical and family values, and yet between all women who reflected upon life a little we have an inevitable bond of sympathy and understanding. Each woman, in no matter what social position, knew that she suffered immeasurably through being a woman.

The attitude of the population of Treby Magna is one of not wanting to be troubled with the fair sex, consequently the more bird-brained and unthinking a woman is, the less complicated and more pleasant life is. A woman was generally considered to be a burden, and one not to be taken on until one was in a boring enough stability for her to be an asset, and certainly not to be considered if one were still trying to get somewhere in life. Let us examine some of the reaction of the chief male characters to their female counterparts.

3.3 Men Attitudes towards Women in the Novel

The first impression we have of Harold Transome is that his ambitions make him cruelly blind to his mother’s hopes and fears. The very fact that she is a woman makes her hardly worth considering to him anyway. We have already looked at chapter one of *Felix Holt, the Radical*. Through Mrs. Transome’s eyes, now let us look at Harold Transome through the same pages. Harold’s greeting to his mother after fifteen years of separation consists of “a light kiss on each cheek”¹¹² and it is in the same moment that the terrible truth dawns on Mrs. Transome that her son is now a stranger. It is obvious from the first that Harold

¹¹¹ George Eliot. *Felix Holt, the Radical*. Everyman’s Library: Dent and Dutton. 1866.P.434.

¹¹²Eliot.Ibid. introduction.P.13.

does not share the deep sentiments of his mother. He does not experience the same bitter disappointment at their meeting and he remains insensitive to the immense gulf which has produced itself between them.

When Mrs. Transome tells Harold that “everything is changed”¹¹³ she means far more than Harold understands, for he doesn’t see what has happened to their relationship. Even in the first few moments after his arrival at Transome Court Harold cannot spend his time on sentimentalities and his eyes wander over all the room taking in its state and his tongue wanders over many subjects except those which his mother wants to speak of. He does not ask after his mother’s feelings on his return to England but he is very curious as to the affairs of the estate. Mrs. Transome shed some silent tears:

“So, by the time Harold came from the library again, the traces of tears were not discernible, except to a very careful observer. And he did not observe his mother careful; her eyes only glanced at her son their way to the North Loam shire Herald...”¹¹⁴ How marvelously George Eliot shows the insignificance of Harold’s mother for him, in telling us that Harold only glanced at his mother in passing, the aim of his regard being the local newspaper. After only a very short while in the house then, Harold Transome shows just how brutal his lack of sensitivity makes him; his brutality being confirmed by his statement. “Gad. What a wreck poor father is.” “Well, it’s a slow and easy death.”¹¹⁵ Harold did not ever notice his mother whilst quenching his thirst for local political information. Mrs. Transome remained dazed and disappointed in the face of this son, the fact of which he was either ignorant, or of which he preferred to be ignorant, and so he goes on to hammer the last nail into the coffin when she says without tact or gentleness “I’m a Radical”¹¹⁶. Consider for a moment the lot of his poor woman Mrs. Transome. She has placed all her hopes in her younger son. She even wished the death of his brother that he might succeed; she wants

¹¹³ George Eliot. *Felix Holt, the Radical*. Everyman’s Library: Dent and Dutton. 1866. P.13.

¹¹⁴ Eliot. *Ibid.* Introduction P.14.

¹¹⁵ Eliot. *Ibid.* Introduction P.13.

¹¹⁶ Eliot. *Ibid.* Introduction P.15.

him to be something grand, but above all the wishes to be near to him in affection and understanding. However, when son comes back from abroad after fifteen years, he is not even interested in his mother's state of mind or health. He cannot be bothered with her emotional scenes and he considers her only as an old woman whom he must pamper Mrs. Transome is powerless against the change in her son; powerless against her own fate which is so dreadfully linked with her son's career. As a mother she has nothing, as a wife she has no more, and as a woman she has misery as her punishment. Harold is completely unconscious of his mother's problems and anxieties; he does not really care. He just wants a trouble-free time as far as all women were concerned, he does not relish the complications and awkwardness which he considers to be inevitable from the female quarter: "Yes, let us go, said Harold, throwing down the newspaper in which he had been rapidly reading almost every advertisement while his mother had been going through her sharp inward struggle".¹¹⁷ As a loving mother Mrs. Transome has been counting the months and days to Harold's return and she tries to remind him that she would like a little of his attention now that he is at home, though Harold's intention is to go off and visit his uncle. "Your uncle thought I ought to have you to myself in the first hour or two. He remembered that I had not seen my son for fifteen years".¹¹⁸ All she receives by way of response however is "Ah by love; fifteen years – so it is".¹¹⁹ An exclamation which shows just how little he has thought of his home and family while he's been away. His mother is not someone whom he has missed and longed to see.

Like most men in the book, Harold Transome has never felt the need of female companionship. He likes his independence too much and he does not intend to change the situation. "His busy thoughts were imperiously determined by habits which had no reference to any woman's feeling."¹²⁰

¹¹⁷ George Eliot. *Felix Holt, the Radical*. Everyman's Library: Dent and Dutton. 1866. P. 15.

¹¹⁸ Eliot. loc.cit.

¹¹⁹ Eliot. Loc.cit

¹²⁰ Eliot. Ibid. Introduction P. 12.

Harold moreover makes known straight away his feelings on marriage. As we know, young Harry's mother is a slave, a situation which suits Harold very well since the woman would not have expected to have any say whatever in his affairs, and would run nicely to and fro in compliance with his orders: "I hate English wives; they want to give their opinion about everything. They interfere with a man's life. I shall not marry again".¹²¹

Mrs. Transome has always been used to a certain amount of responsibility expectantly concerning the Transome estate and it is a role which she enjoys, being an active and intelligent woman. Harold, however, has other ideas as to his mother's occupations. He cannot conceive of a woman managing affairs of any sort and he soon resolves to take the work completely out of his mother's hands and leave her to the pursuits of ladies: "You've had to worry yourself about things that don't properly belong to a woman."¹²² You shall have nothing to do now but to be grandmamma on satin cushions."¹²³ Harold is now lord and master at Transome Court and he seems to alter things without consulting anyone, not even his mother, or perhaps it would be more accurate to say, particularly not his mother.

It is only natural that the old lady should interest herself in her son's life overseas, but "he volunteered no information about himself and his past life at Smyrna, but answered pleasantly enough, though briefly, whenever his mother asked for any detail."¹²⁴ Behind the brief utterances which pass from Mrs. Transome to her son we denote a tone of self-pity and bitterness. She tries to reason with Harold at one stage but when Harold replies to her with the following statement poor Mrs. Transome is powerless in the evidence of his will:

¹²² George Eliot. *Felix Holt, the Radical*. Everyman's Library: Dent and Dutton. 1866. P. 17.

¹²³ Eliot. *Ibid.* Introduction P. 28.

¹²⁴ Eliot. *loc. Cit.*

Women, very properly, don't change their views, but keep to the notions in which they have been brought up. It doesn't signify what they think – they are not called upon to judge or to act. You must really leave me to take my own course in these matters, which powerfully belong to men. You shall have a new carriage and a pair of bays all to yourself; you shall have the house done up in first – rate style, and I am not thinking of marrying. But let us understand that there shall be no further collision between us on subjects in which I must be master of my own actions.¹²⁵

Whatever Mrs. Transome herself might think, Harold is the man and Harold's word goes. Mrs. Transome here echoes a sentiment which we have already mentioned, and which came from Mrs. Holt's lips. The words are different but the meaning is the same when Mrs. Transome says: "I don't know who would be a mother if she could foresee what a slight thing she will be to her son when she is old."¹²⁶ Mrs. Transome is doomed to be the beautiful doll of Transome Court, to be put on show and cosseted, but not to be considered as far as feelings are concerned. When she has the affairs in her hands she "allowed things to go wrong,"¹²⁷ a fact which is set down by Harold "simply to the general futility of women's attempts to transact men's business,"¹²⁸

Harold cannot bear the thought of any female interference, since for him a woman can do nothing but interfere, and cannot possibly help since she knows nothing anyway. "Western women were not to his taste: they showed a transition from the feeble animal to the thinking being, which was simply troublesome."¹²⁹ The only time when Harold feels he must take his mother into his confidence concerning his affairs is when he considers visiting and wooing Esther, "but he needed his mother's assistance and it was necessary that he should both confide her and persuade her,"¹³⁰ otherwise she would have known nothing of his designs. Harold feels no sincere consideration for his

¹²⁵ George Eliot. *Felix Holt, the Radical*. Everyman's Library: Dent and Dutton. 1866. P.35

¹²⁶ Eliot. Loc. Cit.

¹²⁷ Eliot. Loc. Cit

¹²⁸ Eliot. Loc. Cit

¹²⁹ Eliot. Ibid. P.318

¹³⁰ Eliot. Loc. Cit.

mother as a being with an energetic, thinking mind, but he would rather not have the bother of another brain to deal with; he much prefer merely to occupy himself with the physical side of his mother's welfare.

We shall once again turn from Harold's attitude to women as a son, and shall consider his attitude as a lover or husband. This is a mode of behavior which differs little from the one we have just discussed, since for Harold Transome all women could be easily categorized and ranged on the same shelf.

Harold Transome regarded women as slight things, but he was fond of slight things in the intervals of business; and he held it among the chief arts of life to keep these pleasant diversions within such bounds that they should never interfere with the course of his serious ambition.¹³¹

Women, for Harold, should not be particularly intelligent; indeed it appears that an intelligent woman would have been something of an oxymoron for him. He considers them neither to be gifted in business or logic, and a woman so gifted is someone to be avoided at all costs since she would want a say in the rightful affairs of men. Harold has little or no respect for the female race and he treats all women as things to be pampered, cosseted and cared for materially, but as things incapable of dealing with any responsibility. Indeed even when he decided in his own mind that he would like to marry Esther he does not envisage any difficulty or obstacles in the accomplishment of his desire. Women, for him, were to lay themselves completely open to male persuasion, fall into agreement with male wishes, and obey men's orders, without showing a will of their own "and it had never entered into that mind that the decision did not rest entirely with his inclination."¹³² Even the fact Harold has it in his mind to marry Esther, does not mean that at last he has found something worthy in a woman for "to be deeply in love was a catastrophe not likely to happen to him,"¹³³ it is

¹³¹ George Eliot. *Felix Holt, the Radical*. Everyman's Library: Dent and Dutton. 1866. P. 161.

¹³² Eliot. *Ibid.* P. 353.

¹³³ Eliot. *loc. cit.*

merely a marriage of convenience. Esther is unconstructive and discreet enough to make a marriage to her not too disagreeable, and at the same time, such a marriage would be a good business more. Harold sees immediately that he is capable of governing Esther and his courtship is charming but determined, as are all his actions “No, pray”, said Harold, with that kind of entreaty which is really a decision.”¹³⁴

It is obvious when pursuing the subject of the male attitude towards the female sector of society, in nineteenth century England, that Harold Transome’s ideas are very typical of the time. Men in general regarded a wife as a burden, a woman as a liability rather than an asset, and if they really had to take a woman on them they would rather have an empty-headed, pretty little thing that would not interfere in their affairs. They wanted wives who would be contented to stay at home sewing, and who would be one hundred per cent dependent on and obedient to, her husband, the master.

Felix Holt has already ruled the possibility of women out of his life, when still a young man at an age when young men’s thought normally turns in that direction. His ambitions do not allow for the pastime of courtship and he is determined to fight against any natural impulses in order to aid the triumph of his aims and principles. It is interesting to note that for all men, a woman and unlimited success are incompatible, with the one ruling out the other. “Thank you; I’ll stay, said Felix, not from any curiosity to see the minister’s daughter...”¹³⁵ However Esther does succeed in making an impression on Felix Holt, if not an altogether good one since he noticed in her “things, in short, that suggested a fine lady to him, and determined him to notice her as little as possible.”¹³⁶ It is here that we find the biggest difference between Felix’s point of view and the current male idea of the time. Felix accepts the traditional criteria for judging a fine lady as does everyone else, but even so he wants no part for it. Felix believes in sincerity and the absence of false mannerisms but he

¹³⁵ George Eliot. *Felix Holt, the Radical*. Everyman’s Library: Dent and Dutton. 1866.P.61.

¹³⁶Eliot.Ibid. IntroductionP.62.

doesn't even think of finding a woman with these qualities since they all aim at other targets. Consequently, he interest himself little in such young women as Esther Lyon, and when he does finally address a word in her direction it is only to remark with disgust on her choice of authors. In our first chapter what Felix Holt thinks about women in general is pointed out. To him, fine women in particular are a very good image. He has the same ideas on marriage as others; it is an institution certainly troublesome and definitely incompatible with ambition for he says:

I'll never marry, though I should have to live on raw turnips to subdue my flesh. I'll look back and say: I had a purpose once – I meant to keep my hands clean and my soul upright, and to look truth in the face; but pray excuse me, I have a wife and children – I must lie and simpler a little, else they'll starve...¹³⁷

Although Felix accepts women for what they are at this moment in the novel and although he judges them by the same standards as others do. He realizes at the same time that they should fight for their personality and their rights. When Felix expounds these to Esther, the impression is strong that here is George Eliot herself speaking: "If a woman really believes herself to be a lower kind of being, she should place herself in subjection; she should be ruled by the thoughts of her father or husband. If not, let show her power of choosing something better".¹³⁸ Felix had almost a horror of falling in love in the same way that Harold Transome has but even more deeply, since Felix is fearful for his principles as well as his ambition. He has chosen to live his life according to noble ideals and to try to do something constructive to help his fellow man; therefore he does not want either his will or his results ruined by a woman as shown here: "Men can't help loving them, and so they make themselves slaves to the petty desires of petty creatures. That's what women a curse: all life is stunted to suit their littleness".¹³⁹

¹³⁷ George Eliot. *Felix Holt, the Radical*. Everyman's Library: Dent and Dutton. 1866.P.68.

¹³⁸Eliot.Ibid.P.113.

¹³⁹Eliot. Ibid.213.

The attitude which Felix took towards his mother, however, differed from that which Harold showed to Mrs. Transome. Both of them are resigned to a woman's pettiness, irresponsibility and superficiality and both treat their mothers with these notions in mind, either consciously or sub-consciously, and yet Felix's thought is to protect his mother from her own stupidity whereas Harold thinks first of all of protecting himself and his affairs from his mother's interference. Harold's motive is thus essentially selfish whilst Felix's based on a genuine concern for the other person.

Felix has a lot more to think about than to worry his head with women's problems and consequently his affectionate affair with Esther occupies much less of his time than it does hers. It does not take first place in his hierarchy of values, as it would have done in many other young men's. Felix can stand back from his affections and look at situation coolly. As a matter of fact, the narrator pointed out that: "He had thought a great deal of Esther with a mixture of strong disapproval and strong liking, which both together made a feeling the reverse of indifference; but he was not going to let her have any influence on his life."¹⁴⁰ Before Felix could accept Esther he would like to alter her into "the woman whose beauty makes a great task easier to men instead of turning them away from it."¹⁴¹ Any other woman would be unacceptable to Felix but is an attracted enough to Esther to want her to change. A woman was, after all, expected to alter to suit men's wishes and not vice versa. As their relationship progresses Felix finds himself more and more attracted to Esther yet "he felt that they must not marry – that there would ruin each other's lives."¹⁴² He knows what he wants and he realizes that in order to reach his goal he must be ruthless with himself and deprive himself of many things which could be quite dear to him, Esther included. However Felix did consider Esther's emotions when making his decision and he realized that, being a woman, she would be much less in control of herself than he was, and thus, she would be far less strong

¹⁴⁰ George Eliot. *Felix Holt, the Radical*. Everyman's Library: Dent and Dutton. 1866. P.213.

¹⁴¹ Eliot. Ibid. P.244.

¹⁴² Eliot. Ibid. P-P 288-289.

emotionally when it came to supporting his resolution. The following quotation is good evidence. "Felix felt for Esther's pain as the strong soldier, who can march on hungering without fear that he shall faint, feels for the young brother – the maiden cheeked conscript whose load is too heavy for him."¹⁴³ He knew only too well his weaknesses and limitations and he was decided to avoid anything or anyone who would encourage their growth. "He was reasoning thus that he realized that "it would be better for him to look at the busy doings of men than to listen in solitude to the voices within him."¹⁴⁴ Felix's task however is made measurably easier by Esther's willingness to conform to his every desire in order to approach the idea of a woman which Felix finds acceptable. Felix is not prepared to make any sacrifices when it comes to his ambitions and aims, not for Esther, nor any woman, and had Esther not voluntarily fallen in with his desires, their friendship would have been cut out of Felix's life like a cancer, before she can contaminate his ideals or his work.

The reactions of lawyer Jermyn to women once again accord with our findings so far. All three men fall, with individual modifications, into the accepted pattern of men's behavior. Mrs. Transome, as we know, had given herself, body and soul to the lawyer many years beforehand and Jermyn too "at five-and-twenty he had written verses, and had got himself wet through in order not to disappoint a dark-eyed woman whom he was proud to believe in love with him."¹⁴⁵

Now, however, Jermyn finds himself in no position to study the cares of this same woman, and any reminder of that past affair is troublesome, the fact of it could prove to be inconvenient, and according to his traditional "right" as a man, he chooses to ignore the woman who once sacrificed so much for him, and his only wish regard to Mrs. Transome is that his past relationship with this lady should never cause him any bother. Had things been different perhaps Jermyn's attitude towards the old woman would not have been so merciless "but a family

¹⁴³ George Eliot. *Felix Holt, the Radical*. Everyman's Library: Dent and Dutton. 1866. P.289.

¹⁴⁴ Eliot. *Ibid.* P.290.

¹⁴⁵ Eliot. *Ibid.* P.105.

man with grown-up sons and daughters, a man with a professional position and complicated affairs that make it hard to ascertain the exact relation between property and liabilities, necessarily thinks of himself and what may be impending.”¹⁴⁶ It is for these reasons that Mrs. Transome finds herself as powerless with Jermyn as she does with her son. Even Jermyn does not reflect upon the suffering and discontent of his ex-mistress, all he is worried about is avoiding any unpleasantness between Harold and himself. It is a hard heart that he conducts his affairs with Mrs. Transome, thinking little of the woman except as another factor in the situation. Nobody takes the trouble to inform Mrs. Transome about events for which she feels a particular concern, even Jermyn who knows the woman must be fretting and pining to know what has passed “did not want to speak to Mrs. Transome”¹⁴⁷ and does all to avoid “disagreeable interview.”¹⁴⁸ Their past affair for Jermyn and the present result, is merely a bad business man oeuvre and “the strong bent of his mind was to go on arguing each memory into a claim”.¹⁴⁹ Jermyn could successfully and completely detach himself from the human and emotional side of the affair, a gift which is not rare among men, and can treat this affair in human relationship as a business asset or liability, and nothing more. The writer clearly showed this in the following statement: “So many things were more distinctly visible to him, and touched him more acutely, than the effects of his acts or words on Mrs. Transome.”¹⁵⁰ In taking a brief look at one or two very minor characters we shall get a more general impression of these same sentiments. Sir Maximus Debarry does not understand his wife’s remarks about the inevitable concern of Mrs. Transome with regard her son and grandson, and he shrugs the matter off with the words: “look my dear; women think so much of the minutiae.”¹⁵¹ Christian’s

¹⁴⁶ George Eliot. *Felix Holt, the Radical*. Everyman’s Library: Dent and Dutton. 1866. P.105.

¹⁴⁷ Eliot. *Ibid.* P.310.

¹⁴⁸ Eliot. *Loc. Cit.*

¹⁴⁹ Eliot. *Ibid.* P.366.

¹⁵⁰ Eliot. *Ibid.* P.373.

¹⁵¹ Eliot. *Ibid.* P.28.

attitude also follows the familiar plan, for, when talking of Wycliffe's marriage he says that "He made a fool of himself with marrying"¹⁵² and that his wife, Annette's Leduc is "one of your meek little dialyses, who have a will of their own once in their lives – the will to choose their own master."¹⁵³ And when talking of Annette's eventual fate he says with cynicism "there's no knowing what a woman will not do."¹⁵⁴ To add one more to the long chain of men's much guarded superiority over women we hear the man in the pub saying: "I've been a forced to give my wife a black eye to hinder her from going to the preaching. Lords-a massy, she thinks she does not know better nor me, and I can't make heard nor tail of her talk."¹⁵⁵

Thus, the natural thought of men for women, the traditional power which the former exercise over the latter, and the consequent scale of importance in qualities which men create for women, are common to all walks of life, to all social classes, as we have seen in the same way that the woman's inferiority does not change whatever her social position.

3.4 A Feminist Character in the Novel

As we have hinted earlier, there is in fact one man who does allow himself to be influenced by women, but an unhappy example that it is, it only shows us that the man's career does in fact take a return for the worse as a direct result of his association with a woman, and it is to be remembered above all that in this era in England, a man was judged on his social and professional success and not on his humanity and generosity of spirit. Had Rufus Lyon existed today perhaps he would have been judged differently since our values have changed somewhat from the nineteenth century ones. Did George Eliot share modern values? I rather feel she did. She did in fact reject traditional ones, and that cannot be argued, and it seems strongly probable that she felt that the happiness of a man

¹⁵² George Eliot. *Felix Holt, the Radical*. Everyman's Library: Dent and Dutton. 1866. P.220.

¹⁵³ Eliot. Ibid. P.202.

¹⁵⁴ Eliot. Ibid. P.230.

¹⁵⁵ Eliot. Ibid. P.125.

should weigh more heavily than his position in society Rufus, in fact, one of the most well-balanced, understanding and intelligent creations of Eliot. He is also exceptionally sensitive to life and allows his emotions more rein than was acceptable in society at the time. He ends up satisfied and contented, even if he is still only an unknown Dissenting minister with a small congregation. He is one of the only characters who end up happy. Harold Transome, Mrs. Transome, Jermyn, the Debarrys have got nothing out of life apart from a considerable amount of anxiety. Perhaps they don't end up in dire misery, but it is doubtful that they feel the positive force of happiness as well. Rufus Lyon's fate is somewhat contrary to tradition since he has done that terrible thing of being overcome by his love for a woman. And yet he ends up blissfully satisfied in life.

In his judgment of women, Mr. Lyon is fair. He looks at them as people with feelings, joys and fears, with intelligence and ignorance as might have any man, and he conducts himself accordingly. His process of judgment is quite straightforward and free from many of the traditional pre-conceptions and prejudices. He has not yet perhaps reached the considerable point of treating women as absolute equals, and he still goes on about 'weaker vessels' etc. , and yet he sees in a woman a being worthy of a certain respect and consideration. In his younger days he has given up all he has for a young French woman with whom he has been in love. He leaves his home, his parish, his career, everything, in order to indulge this one great passion, and is consequently looked down upon by his fellow men. Indeed, the writer explained his actions in the following words: "Once in his life he had been blinded, deafened, hurried along by rebellious impulse, he had gone astray after his own desires..."¹⁵⁶

To succumb to passion in those days was the height of ignobility, a fact of which Rufus Lyon is only too aware since he refers to the struggle between head

¹⁵⁶ George Eliot. *Felix Holt, the Radical*. Everyman's Library: Dent and Dutton. 1866. P.154.

and heart as “enduring a horrible assault of Satan”¹⁵⁷ and “a terrible crisis”.¹⁵⁸ Passion wins however, and he dedicates his life to Annette and her baby, Esther, of whom he is not the father. Throughout the whole of *Felix Holt, the Radical* we encounter the same male attitude, in all forms in all places, in all minds. Rufus Lyon’s first thoughts about the disappearance of Annette’s first husband show us clearly how all male minds worked when it came to females. The writer emphasized that “His ignorance and suspicions as the history and character of Annette’s husband made it credible that he had a plan for convincing her of his death as a means of freeing himself from a burthensome tie.”¹⁵⁹

The idea came so readily and acceptably even to the mind of Mrs. Lyon, that we can deduce from this the fact that women are just considered as objects to be enjoyed when convenient disregarded when not convenient, and got rid of when necessary.

In her relationship with her daughter, Esther also, Mrs. Lyon permitted her natural generous spirit to triumph as it had done in the past and she is “automatically obedient”¹⁶⁰ to the desires of his only child. Esther’s feelings and needs were taken into consideration by her father and her wishes were gratified whenever possible. In the eyes of the population of Treby Magna however, Rufus Lyon has made grave faults which have ruined his potentially brilliant career. He dies an insignificant dissenting minister when he could have been so much more: His failure to climb the social ladder is attributable to one thing: women. He is socially handicapped by his attachment to Annette, and now he is severely criticized for his conduct towards his daughter. And yet he has the last laugh, since Esther turns out to be an upright and worthy individual, and she marries a man for whom Rufus personally holds a great deal of esteem

¹⁵⁷George Eliot. *Felix Holt, the Radical*. Everyman’s Library: Dent and Dutton.1866. Author’s introduction.P.76.

¹⁵⁸Eliot. Ibid.Author’s introductionP.75.

¹⁵⁹Eliot.Ibid. P.149.

¹⁶⁰Eliot.Ibid.P.225.

whereas the aim is to end up with social position which often entails unhappiness; Mr. Lyon's fate is at the opposite end of the scale.

Thus we have seen clearly what place women hold in men's hearts and in nineteenth century England and in the book in question. The picture which George Eliot paints for us is none to inviting.

Chapter Four: George Eliot, A Feminist or Not?

4.1 The Utopian and Dystopian View of George Eliot

After having first studied our initial impressions with regard to the question of women in *Felix Holt, the Radical*, and having backed these impressions with detailed evidence from the text of the book itself, let us now look finally at George Eliot's own message to her public. Although our deep studies of the novel, the analysis of the lives and fates of the female characters, and the reaction of both the sexes to women, we have been sure of some 'message' to the reader. The very fact that this subject can be studied in this particular book means that the exposition of the problem is important in it.

Our first impressions when reading *Felix Holt* for the first time were all tied up with the internal struggles of the women, notably Mrs. Transome, and the total exclusion of the feminine sex from the business and action of the day. The problem of the woman shines through almost every chapter, and George Eliot makes use of each and every possible occasion in order to show how in just and cruel the oppression of her sex can be. Eliot uses various methods of communication to her reader, many of which we have already touched upon, indirectly if not directly, the most common being to put complaints straight into the mouths of her characters. Sometimes, however, she does speak through the narrative and here and there she makes a definite moral judgment on a situation. Obviously, nearly all the examples in the text of some sort of judgment on women's lot could be cited as George Eliot's own words, since she is after all the author of the book. And many such passages which could easily be used in this chapter have already been cited in our discussion of the various characters. George Eliot's views on women of her time though do appear in the book clearly as her own thoughts. First of all she criticizes the life which a nineteenth century Englishwoman leads, and is expected to lead by the society which dictates to her. It is on the whole a soul destroying existence according to George Eliot. She then goes on to criticize in particular the lack of all forms of

power for women, especially their lack of power in the face of men. Eliot attacks the traditional attitudes and beliefs about women and she criticizes men for following blindly in the same path as their fathers, a path which leads to brutality and is the cause of much heart-break. The last stage in George Eliot's criticism and the most important is to try to show women the error of their ways. She wants them to stop being petty and conforming to the rules and desires of men, for they will never better their position by doing so. She wants to see intelligent women becoming as respectable as their male counterparts, and above all she wants to destroy the despair and fatalism which surround the female spirit.

George Eliot sees clearly just how futile and wasteful a woman's life can be. She has stepped back and examined the utility of ladies' nineteenth century occupation, and she has found absolutely nothing of worth. She wants to say how stupid it is to follow the traditional pattern of women, and how ridiculous the life we choose is if we do fall into line. With astonishing perspicacity, Eliot has seen through the farce of aristocratic life, and the world to which society was aspiring. Even when she speaks of Mrs. Transome's daily routine, she uses a particular example in order to illustrate and mock a whole world. This is well illustrated in the following statement: "A little daily embroidery had been a constant element in Mrs. Transome's life, that soothing occupation of taking stitches to produce what neither she nor anyone else wanted, was then the resource of many a well-born and unhappy woman."¹⁶¹ The author complains bitterly about the fact that half the human race in England at least is wasted due to simple prejudice and custom. Women remain always under the thumbs of men, so what good therefore can a woman see in having ambitions which overreach that which she will be permitted to do. This is why a woman contents herself with her embroidery and small occupations, for she might as well make the most of the few things which are offered to her as recreation. It serves a woman no good to strive after better things since her path is already blocked by a masculine will; therefore she accepts her lot and falls into the niche which

¹⁶¹George Eliot. *Felix Holt, the Radical*. Everyman's Library: Dent and Dutton. 1866. P. 85.

society has chipped out for her. As Esther says: "A woman can hardly ever choose in that way; she is dependent on what happens to her. She must take meaner things because only meaner things are within her reach."¹⁶²

A woman is responsible for what happens to her. She can do nothing herself; she can set nothing in motion. All the action in life and in the book passes between men, with no consideration taken of the women. All a woman can do is to try and persuade her man to a certain mode of conduct, but of course, if she decides otherwise, or if he doesn't even listen, then she is rendered ineffective and powerless.

Powerlessness in woman is one of George Eliot's main protests, for power is the moving force behind all alteration of condition, and without it women would remain forever in their hopeless position. The feminine lack of power was due to their subordination to the men. This situation was exceedingly to escape from, for tradition for a difficult change since this state of affairs appeared "natural" to both sides. Moreover, it was in the interests of men to keep women as the underdogs, naturally, and since the men had all the power any reversal of the position was nigh impossible. If a woman felt strong enough to stick out for her rights she was immediately rejected by the whole of society, under the influence of men, of course. So what was to be the outcome of the situation? Already in chapter one of *Felix Holt, the Radical* we feel this very lack of power in the person of Mrs. Transome. George Eliot's remarks just after the return of Harold Transome to the home run as follows: "An hour seemed to have changed everything for her. A woman's hopes are women of sunbeams; a shadow annihilates them. The shadows which had fallen on her were the presentiment of her powerlessness."¹⁶³

We have heard so much about the hard resolution of men but George Eliot mentions it time and time again. This question must have been so important at this point in English history. Imagine a woman with all her faculties

¹⁶²George Eliot. *Felix Holt, the Radical*. Everyman's Library: Dent and Dutton. 1866. P-P. 245-246.

¹⁶³Eliot. *Ibid.* introduction P. 22.

and the good gifts of nature in abundance, and who is perfectly capable of reasoning logically and coherently and of having her own intelligent point of view; imagine such a woman I say, being faced with a man who will not even listen to her. Consider her state of mind that he listens she can absolutely do nothing she is powerless. This powerlessness is expressed in the following terms: "His will was impregnable. He was a rock, and she was no more to him than the white clinging mist – cloud."¹⁶⁴ All the while, George Eliot is trying to make us understand that a woman's fate was in everyone's hands but her own. She had to sit and wait to see what others by their actions, had decided for her and the refrain which accompanies this idea runs throughout the book disguised by variety of words but the meaning is always the same. "After all, she was a woman, and could not make her own lot."¹⁶⁵

Mary Ann Evans is not satisfied with criticizing alone which, to her, does not seem right. She wishes to alter things and to render them more just, more equal, more tolerable. In her lifetime she does what she can firstly by setting a personal example, and secondly by attempting the rousing of others to her cause. She broke with tradition, the unwritten laws of society and even her family; in order to do what she thought was right. She acted as a separate mind and an intelligent woman who has a will and reason of her own. She was not intimidated by the unknown and if somebody needed to make the first move, she would do so. Apart from this, Eliot had long sight and clear sight, and realized that women must try to stop the false and superficial ways into which they have fallen, they must put an end to the dreadful waste of potential each-time a woman succumbs to the will of a man, and they must fight for their personality. Women must fight for justice and right, and must no longer continue in the fatal lethargy of routine and tradition. Most of all George Eliot abhors the pettiness and squabbling which the position of women in society encourage; for this

¹⁶⁴George Eliot. *Felix Holt, the Radical*. Everyman's Library: Dent and Dutton.1866.P.237.

¹⁶⁵Eliot. *Ibid.*P.376.

smallness of mind and ways only brings down more scorn and distaste on female heads.

She did not dare to ask questions, and yet she had not resisted the temptation to say something bitter about Harold's failure to get returned as a Radical, helping with feminine self – defeat, to exclude herself more completely from any consultation by him. In this way poor women, whose power lies solely in their influence, make themselves like music out of tune, and only more men to run away.¹⁶⁶

We think that if only a woman can see her position as a whole and can realize that it needs honour, respect, ability and if she can strengthen her part in order to alter it, instead of seeing only the frustration and succumbing to bitter little ineffective stabs at men and society, then she will surely get somewhere in her quest for justice and recognition. The greatest mistake that these women make is to believe that they cannot change their situation. It is all they have ever known, it is the way of things, it is tradition, and therefore it is untouchable and unchangeable. The fact that women are so used to being treated as second-class citizens without rights means that they expect nothing else and even if the though crosses their lot is not all it might have been, they do not know how to set about changing it. Any bending of the traditional rule seems impossible, merely because it is traditional. This is well illustrated in the following statement: “It was the way of women and all weak minds, to think that what they had been used to was inalterable.”¹⁶⁷

What gave George Eliot this amazingly detached insight into the problems of her sex? What first aroused her curiosity into the subject of the woman's position in society? This woman was brought up in the quiet countryside as one of an ultra-evangelical family of five. The family was peacefully happy with

¹⁶⁶George Eliot. *Felix Holt, the Radical*. Everyman's Library: Dent and Dutton. 1866.P.304.

¹⁶⁷Eliot. *Ibid.*P.100.

each member living his slow and contented life. Mary Ann was quite young however when her peace of mind became disturbed and disquieted because of intellectual and spiritual problems which assailed her soul. She soon discovered that her intelligence and sensibility was a serious handicap in a woman. It was a situation from which no good could come in the society of her day.

Already as a young woman, even in the context of her family life, Mary Ann Evans was beginning to feel the frustration and misery of her sex. Society however was not going to break the will of this girl as it did of many others but she was determined to overcome the difficulties in her path and to succeed in life. She knew only too well that a man could have broken loose from the old manor house and could have rushed into the battlefield of life, ready, with all his young enthusiasm and energy, to make or break his personality. But what could a girl do? Picture for yourself, some years of this outwardly peaceful and monotonous existence in which however enclosed within the breast of this young woman, there was ever the battling down of other instincts and desires, the passionate hunger and thirst for other kinds of mental nourishment than those which her family life afforded her. She was discontent with the usual occupations of women. They were insufficient for the satisfaction of her mind and she desperately needed an outlet for the mental energy and willingness to learn which were pent up inside her.

George Eliot has very unsettled adolescence and during her inward struggles she loses her religious faith and is influenced greatly by new friendship and ideas. It is not until her union with the scholarly George Henry Lewes however that George Eliot finds the final courage to break with tradition entirely.

She was already made a great step by thinking her religious views out for herself, an action which, in a woman, was little short of revolutionary at the time. But now, when she chooses to live with Lewes, she really turns her back on all the part of life in which she does not believe sincerely, and resolves to

follow her conscience, be such its path conventional or otherwise. It is at this point too that George Eliot first becomes conscious of her creative powers, and as we can see, she uses her gifts to spread her ideas throughout the nation, to expose the inequality and injustice in society and call for action to save those of her sex. It is ironic that when her *Scenes of Clerical life* appeared on the market, George Eliot remaining an unknown writer, her buying public did not even consider the possibility of the author not being a man. How could a female possibly enter into the sphere of men? And the conviction went out, that they were not written by a woman.

4.2 George Eliot as a non activist feminist

George Eliot has contradictory attitudes to the position of women: her own struggle for a literary career coupled with the materialistic world view gave her an acute understanding of the oppression women endured under a patriarchal system. But at the same time she felt that women had a distinctive psychological makeup which meant they could exercise a special beneficent moral influence in social life. She would not admit woman's full equality with man because she felt that the complete emancipation of her sex might coarsen the feminine nature. What is reflecting in her fictional writing, often marring the unity of her presentation of female characters¹⁶⁸. In *The Mill On the Floss*, Maggie Tulliver is clearly struggling for some personal identity other than the strictly "feminine" one her brother Tom insists on. However, by the end of the novel Maggie has apparently found fulfillment in passive submission to Tom's male superiority¹⁶⁹. One of Eliot's greatest achievements as a novelist is her determination to take the bitch seriously. With Mrs Transome she probes the usual stereotype of the evil woman to show that she is as much victim of a repressive patriarchal society as is the more attractive character Esther Lyon. But she does not carry through her sympathetic understanding of the bitch character. Mrs Transome does change but as is implied by the comparison to Esther, it is only to be removed from one role, the bitch and placed immediately in another, the good woman.

¹⁶⁸<http://hdl.handle.net/2429/33040/> "treatment of women in the novel of George Eliot"

¹⁶⁹George Eliot. *The Mill on the Floss*. London. Everyman's Library: Dent and Dutton: New York. 1972.

George Eliot reversion to traditional images of the feminine character is contrary to the feminist perspective.

Furthermore George Eliot shared the feminist movement's intolerance of the exclusion of women from educational and professional opportunities as well as its resentment at the inequalities between men and women inscribed in legal and political institutions. Not only did she meet some of the most influential campaigners for female rights; almost every woman with whom she was close from the 1850s onwards was active in the women's movement. Yet Eliot's support for reform was as cautious as it was ambivalent. At the height of her fame she still refused to take a radical stance on the issue of women's rights partly on the grounds of its complexity, and partly out of a belief that pronouncements on the "woman question" did "not come well" from her. Her reluctance was in part the result of her compromised social position as the partner of George Henry Lewes and a fear, perhaps that support from a woman who had lost social respect would endanger rather than promote the female cause. Early feminist criticism was largely hostile to Eliot, disliking her conservative portrayal of women. Yet one key effect of having set her novel back in time is that the women she depicts are even more restricted socially and economically than those of her own age, so that the frustration of ambition is brought into sharper focus¹⁷⁰.

4.3 The Actual Current Status of Women in the world and in Benin

After many decades of struggle, women have made considerable progress towards equality with men. Their efforts have been rewarded although much remains to be done. Since the industrial revolution, women in Europe and in the North America have been on a more equal footing with men in most cases. Then they can compete in the workplace for jobs that were once traditionally held by men. Middle and upper classes were increasingly confined to the home with little to do except take care of their children. Both working-classes and bourgeois women insisted on change and they contributed to the success of

feminism. But this success is not total because they continue to fight for equal rights. In other countries, women are still treated without dignity. Women in the third-world, generally live in a state of subjection and misery. Most of their energy is consumed by a hard and unrelenting struggle for sheer survival. In most of the underdeveloped countries, boys are favoured over girls because parents consider sons as guarantees for their economic security in the age. That's why in most African countries, parents especially the fathers do everything to have a boy even if they have to be unfaithful. Furthermore and in many poor countries, women have few rights and are early given away in marriage without their consent. Back-breaking work and constant pregnancies then keep them weak and dependent¹⁷¹.

In Benin, the constitution stipulates the respect for gender equality but the reality shows the contrary. Despite the ratification in 1992 of the International Convention on the elimination of all discriminations against women, the latter still have inferior access to employment and development. In 2004, a code of persons and family was enacted which improved women's rights to inheritance, marriage and property ownership and forbid forced marriage. But because of the lack of awareness, traditional law is often practised in rural area instead of the code of persons and family. The women's legal rights initiatives (WRL) helped sponsor legislation to protect women from sex harassment in the workplace. For employment, United Nations' statistics show that in 2008, only 58.5% of women in Benin participated in the labour force¹⁷². The programs of microcredit initiated by the current government permit to Benin women to run their own small businesses but it are not sufficient. Although women in Benin have right to vote since years, there are few who are interested in political affairs. In education, the illiteracy rate of women is higher than that of men. But, through the program "Gratuité de la scolarisation des filles"(program of girls' schooling free of charge in Benin education system), many girls can have access to education.

¹⁷¹ <http://acelebrationofwomen.org/2010/10/the-status-of-women-in-the-world-today/>

¹⁷² <http://www.genderindex.org/country/benin> accessed on 15th July 2015

Conclusion

To round off, we can say that George Eliot's female characters in *Felix Holt, the Radical* undergo the law of a society in which the position of women is a century miserable one. They are oppressed and dominated by men. A woman has no political rights whatsoever politically. She has no rights in her house and she lives as the shadow of her husband or her father. A woman is definitely powerless and she is expelled from the world of decisions, hence she takes no actions. She has only to obey and to keep quiet in so far as she was said to have no good ideas because according to nineteenth century men, she is shallow, uninteresting and futile. If, as Mrs. Transome did, a woman felt the need for something more in her life than that which was granted to her by society, if she could not support inequality, injustice and oppression with regard to her sex, then she was doomed to a life full of misery and suffering. Once she realized the powerlessness of her position, she could no longer feel any other emotion than bitterness, frustration and despair. A woman living in nineteenth century England, and in the world of Treby Magna, surely felt deep in her heart that "God was cruel when he made women"¹⁷³. But in her youth George Eliot herself decides to go against tradition and wishes of her entire family in order to live, out of wedlock, with George Lewes. She never regrets her decision and in sticking to her principles she strikes a mighty blow for the liberation of women.

We could say that women are powerless in all domains, political, social and even the one of emotion; they are powerless on the whole. And this situation is well described by George Eliot's creatures in *Felix Holt, the Radical* through her female characters. The consequences of this powerlessness are frustration, bitterness and heart-break.

According to Mrs. Muscat in *Felix Holt, the Radical*, a woman should never get the upper hand and most women of the time, being indoctrinated into the traditions of the country would have agreed with her.

Most of the women in nineteenth century England thought that their powerlessness, their suffering and their weaknesses were "natural" and they could not do anything to prevent them. It is therefore in the order of things that those women should undergo the superiority and the supremacy of men. Thus some male characters mainly Harold did not want women to interfere into men's affairs. When he returns from his father's house, he treats his mother mercilessness.

Through *Felix Holt, the Radical*, George Eliot attacks the traditional attitudes and beliefs about women. In so doing, she goes against the fact that the submissive state of women is not at all something which is "natural". She criticizes the society of her time through the different attitudes of the male characters of the book. Yet, she tries to show that women also some blame. She then seems to ask them to be more active in every field in order that they could change their conditions as human beings in the society. The status of women varies significantly across the world today. However, we can generally show that women's status has been expanded from what it traditionally was in the past. Women earlier had the status of household worker alone; but now they are bread earner and house keeper together.

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