

Fight for Opportunities or Back to Old Ways: George Eliot's Ambivalent Attitude Towards Female Images in a Patriarchal Society in *Adam Bede*

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Abstract

The Victorian era in which George Eliot lived was an age of collision between tradition and modernity, an era in which women suffered from craning their necks up to look at men for a long time. Women began to reflect on their own objectification in a patriarchal society, seeking a perspective from which they could stand on equal ground with men. Influenced by bourgeois empirical philosophy, Eliot advocated for harmony and equality of social roles. In this article, it analyzes Dinah, who broke the traditional image of women and chose to preach, but also who finally accepted women's natural occupations and assisted men. Also, there was a character of Hetty, originally created by the author as an object of desire for men, showing a sense of despair. What led the author to create such a contradictory female character - Dinah? And why there was a Hetty with a tragic end? The article aims to respond the novel, *Adam Bede*, is a product of the limitations and influences of Eliot's living era, also the realization of Eliot's willingness to merely reflect people and events in her mind like a mirror, and present images of them flawlessly, mainly through the comparison of two different female roles of Dinah and Hetty, and the comparison of Dinah herself.

Keywords: patriarchal society, female image, transcendence, compromise, contradiction

1. Introduction

1.1 About George Eliot and *Adam Bede*

Born into a middle-class business family in Warwickshire, she began her literary career in her thirties through translation work. Influenced by religion from an early age, she was still highly skeptical, considering various aspects of social reality. She excelled in depicting characters' appearance and inner thoughts in great detail, with works possessing a profound artistic power and deep moral reflection. *Adam Bede*, published in 1859, is Eliot's first novel, based on a true story told by her aunt. It vividly depicts the tumultuous changes in the lives of ordinary people in the English countryside under the backdrop of industrialization, focusing on the protagonist Adam's journey from innocence to maturity. The work explores the conflict between individual desires and moral responsibilities, reflecting the complexity and variability of human nature, as well as revealing the distortions in certain aspects of the traditional social value system at the time, such as inequalities between classes and genders.

1.2 Summary of This Article

Although the title of the novel is named after the male protagonist, the content actually revolves around two female characters around *Adam Bede*, talking about the drastically different images of Dinah and Hetty. As the main female character in *Adam Bede*, Dinah perfectly embodies Eliot's breakthrough in a patriarchal society, but it also raises questions among post era audiences: is Dinah's ultimate compromise an irreversible outcome of a patriarchal society? This article takes *Adam Bede* as an example to explore the social roles portrayed by George Eliot, aiming to respond that the contradictory female images in the novel are the product of the limitations and influences of Eliot's living era.

2. Fight for Opportunities

2.1 Dinah's Preaching Behavior

Diana's public preaching was considered rebellious at the time, but it had a certain progressiveness. The

transcendence of the traditional female image by breaking the silence and injustice of women in a patriarchal society. In the Victorian era, there was an awakening of women's self-awareness, where women themselves were beginning to reconceptualize their self-worth deep down inside and re-evaluate their traditional roles and expectations. This awakening of self-awareness was also reflected in a profound understanding of gender equality, which inspired women to pursue equality and affirm their own power. Also, novelists have also come up with brand new female images with independent mind, such as Sue portrayed by Thomas Hardy in *Jude the Obscure* - a challenger who cried out for freedom and pursued equality in the Victorian era¹; in William M. Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*², a new female character who is vain, snobbish, yet dares to declare war on the society hierarchy; and Charlotte Bronte's rebellious *Jane Eyre*³, who became a household teacher through her diligence and breakthroughs. Among the many new female characters, the female protagonist who appears as a governess is particularly typical. However, George Eliot did not imitate this typical image, instead shaping Dinah as a rare female preacher, as preaching has long been seen as a male-dominated professional field. On the one hand, Eliot herself was influenced by religious thought, so her novels can be thought of as the religious world, where God is everywhere and shapes the actions of her characters. At the climax of *Adam Bede*, Hetty was sentenced to be hanged for abandoning her baby and causing its death. At the same time, she became mentally numb and cold-hearted due to fear and despair, and refused in any way to tell the truth of the incident and admit her guilt. Upon hearing about Hetty's situation, Dinah immediately went to the prison to visit her. In the prison, Dinah felt inspired by God's mercy, believing that God's mercy calls for the salvation of Hetty's desperate soul. Eventually, through Dinah's preach and persuasion, Hetty faced up to her wrongdoing. From the plot of Dinah saving Hetty, it can be seen that, even though the author Eliot does not believe in God, still holds deep sympathy and understanding for all devout religious feelings; even though she cannot fully accept Christianity, she also cannot completely abandon God and religion. In her works, her questioning and reliance on God coexist and intertwine. On the other hand, a governess only influences one family, but a preacher can change the hearts and minds of many male and female believers. It is evident that Eliot's intention is to break the silence of women in a patriarchal society, and yearns to break through the restrictions of female influence.

2.2 No Gender Distinction in Sin

In *Adam Bede*, the author describes Hetty's beauty as not only captivating men, but also captivating all intelligent mammals and even women. This perfect reproduction illustrates the objectification of female imagery in a patriarchal society. Women are objects, men are always ready to choose; women are slaves, men are masters; women are commodities, men are consumers. The tragic age makes women labeled with desire and erotic feeling. In such a society, the meaning of women's existence is firstly to satisfy men's desires, assist men's success, and only then living for themselves, and sometimes not even for themselves. Therefore, we often see female images with distorted values in the patriarchal society. In the cool and pure dairy farm, the soft colors of the mixing of the bottles and jars harmonize perfectly with Hetty, and also bring out the best in each other. Her beauty is enchanting, drawing you closer to admire her, unwittingly captivated by her charm. Like a calf with a white spot on its forehead, her innocent and adorable demeanor will touch you unexpectedly. However, her innocent beauty is an asset but also a weakness attaching to herself. Hetty's innocence was exploited by the wayward nobleman Arthur, she was captivated by his splendid appearance and gentlemanly facade. Hetty's beauty, which aroused instinctual desires, her vanity, and her submissive mentality planted the seeds of sin for her tragedy. However, one aspect that led to the tragedy was Hetty's vanity and ignorance of the societal hierarchy at the time; on the other hand, it was Arthur's position of advantage that led to her seduction.

2.3 Severe Attitude Towards Gentlemen of Superior Status, Like Arthur

The influence of the religious concept: as a man sows, so let him, reaps on George Eliot determined the fate of the characters. Eliot believed in an irresistible order of cause and effect in social, ethical, and religious realms: good people will eventually have a good ending, while evil people cannot escape their deserved punishment. Adam and Dinah were kind and helpful, embodying the ideal in the novel. According to the belief in cause and effect, their endings were very satisfactory. However, Arthur did not heed the warnings of others, violating the ethical laws of cause and effect, leading to his reputation being ruined; Hetty disregarded emotional connections between people, showing coldness towards family and disdain for Adam's love, being only immersed in her own personal world, going against the laws of cause and effect in societal relationships, ending up lonely and exiled, ultimately dying in a foreign land. From the personalities and fates of these four characters in the novel, Eliot's

¹ Liu, P. P. (2008). The Awakening of Women's Consciousness: On the Image of Su in *Jude the Obscure*. *Times Literary*, 3, 50-51.

² Ji, Y. P. (2014). Deep Interpretation of Becky's image in *Vanity Fair*. *Mangzhong Literature*, 13, 97-98.

³ Jin, L. Y. (2011). On the Images of Two Female Teachers in Victorian Family Novels - Becky and Jane. Master's dissertation, Guangxi Normal University.

idea of retribution for one's actions is well reflected. After Hetty was sentenced to exile, Eliot arranged for Arthur to undergo trial and self-exile. Arthur did not inherit the family inheritance and, like Hetty, repented and sought redemption for his sins in a distant land. Apparently, in Eliot's view, Arthur and Hetty must bear equal responsibility for their sins, as there is no social hierarchy in the face of sin. It is also the evidence that Eliot's pursuit of transcending female roles is based on the progress of traditional women themselves, rather than feminism that surpasses male roles. What she admires is a harmonious social order of complementarity between men and women, where the gender can develop equally. It is a breakthrough from the narrow opposition of male dominance and female dominance.

2.4 Mrs. Poyser Says Her Say

2.4.1 Witty and Sharp-Tongued Mrs. Poyser

The expression of Mrs. Poyser's remarks on the social status of men and women is indeed George Eliot's own inner cry, a cry for women of that era. In the novel, there is a debate between Mrs. Poyser and Bart about men and women. Mrs. Poyser expressed her views on the hypocritical male-central thinking: I know what kind of wife men like, a poor little fool who, no matter whether a man is right or wrong, smiles at him like the sun in a picture. If he kicks her, she must thank him. Most men want a wife like this, they need a fool to bring out their intelligence.

2.4.2 Mrs. Poyser: The Center of Her Humble But Loving Home

Eliot often depicts the different reactions between Mrs. Poyser and Mr. Poyser in the face of threats and oppression in her novels. Mr. Poyser is submissive, while Mrs. Poyser is often firm and unyielding. As a married woman, Mrs. Poyser stands beside the four main characters, expressing her unique female opinions. She boldly and cleverly satirizes the hypocrisy of men, courageously and fearlessly arguing with them, appearing more like Eliot's own embodiment.

3. Back to Old Ways

3.1 Dinah: The Product of the Bounded Compromise

Eliot's Dinah is gentle, pure, and patient, meeting the expectations of female character traits in a patriarchal society. Even though Adam was initially attracted to Hetty's physical attributes, it was in his interactions with Dinah that he gradually developed a fondness for her. This fondness was based on Dinah's tenderness and kindness in caring for and comforting Adam's mother after his father's death, and on Dinah's purity that was not clouded by desire like Hetty. When Dinah was deprived of the right to preach, she compromised with her emotions, it was a kind of patience as well as helplessness. Just like the most brave and independent women, they will not succeed after deviating from the path of marriage and family. The women in Andrei Tarkovsky's films⁴, after attempting to escape from an unhappy marriage and seeking so-called true love, women ultimately found themselves back in marriage, returning to the confines of male dominance, once again becoming tools for reproduction and accessories of men. In the movie *Return*, the gentle mother, in *Banished for Love*, the paranoid wife, or in *Yelena*, the tender housewife who murders her husband, when these women play the roles of wives or mothers in their families, they are gentle, virtuous, and competent full-time homemakers. However, the moment they break away from their families and rid themselves of male dominance, these women become sensitive, suspicious, oppressed, and confused. It is not difficult to see that women who have been oppressed by male-dominated society for a long time find it difficult to be independent and free. Women yearn for both equality in identity and freedom in rights, yet they are also influenced by a patriarchal society. Therefore, the character of Dorothea created by Eliot has a paranoid view on love, marriage, and family, and it is precisely this paranoia that leads to Dorothea's compromise.

3.2 Evident Influence of the Bible on Eliot

The *Bible's* admonition to women are reflected in many parts of the book, such as in the sermon where the pastor urges women to endure until the end, and they will conquer; to wait until the end, and they will receive the crown. The attempt is to persuade women to have a character of patience and silence, which will eventually be rewarded by God and men. George Eliot resist against this sermon: Dinah refuses Seth's proposal. This is an embodiment of Eliot's unique feminine view. She believes that a fulfilling marriage should be based on true love, not on obediently marrying a man she does not love. This is her denial of the complete submission of women to men and the loss of self in the *Bible*. However, Eliot's resistance does not go all the way. Eliot's portrait of women in a patriarchal society is concessive. In the novel, Dinah does not really preach for women's right to

⁴ Guo, F. (2013). Initial Exploration of the Artistic Features of Andrei Tarkovsky's Film. *Russian Learning*, 6, 29-31.

work, but suddenly received a divine calling to preach. God is the master of Dinah's entire spiritual world, and Dinah's mind is deeply imprisoned under the religious theocracy in the name of God. And this kind of religious theocracy comes out in the wash after Dinah got married: it is actually the religious theocracy and patriarchal ideology born under the influence of the man-dominated society. It is this thought that makes Dinah give up preaching work and accept the natural occupation of women in a patriarchal society, that is, marriage, and being a good wife and mother. This also demonstrates the ambivalence of George Eliot. She acknowledges and advocates the equality of men and women in the face of sin, but does not advocate the absolute equality of gender status, but emphasizes the self-sacrifice of women in marriage⁵ to achieve men's ambitions, and defines women as men's auxiliaries.

3.3 Mrs. Poyser: Constrained by the Patriarchal Social Order

When the respected landowner Mr. Donneighan came to the Poyser's household and expressed that he wished them to rent out the hunting farm. Both Mr. and Mrs. Poyser were reluctant when hearing that. As the conversation unfolded, Mr. Poyser obediently sat down as instructed by the landowner, while Mrs. Poyser remained cold and aloof. When Mr. Donneighan proposed the idea of renting the farm, Mr. Poyser's mind went blank and panic began to be panic. But at this moment, Mrs. Poyser could not contain herself and suddenly interjected, "Sir, if I may speak, because even though I am a woman, even though some men may think women are foolish, even if men are the ones writing contracts to sell the female soul, she still has the right to speak..."⁶ Mrs. Poyser bravely stepped forward to express her dissatisfaction, but she did so by labeling herself as inferior to a man. This is a fact that Eliot, living in a patriarchal society, could not resist. In her consciousness, all of women's cries are bound by male power, and the prerequisite for speaking out is making a certain compromise.

4. Conclusion

As we have explored, Hetty is a traditional female image objectified in a patriarchal society, a limitation of yearning for female equality and independence. Dinah and Mrs. Poyser expressed their desire to enjoy freedom in the Victorian era, endeavoring to make their voice heard, striving to fight against the patriarchal production, trying to get rid of its constraints, hoping to move towards a perfect and independent image. All that, Eliot tries to awaken female consciousness through Hetty's tragedy, as well as Dinah and Mrs. Poyser's fighting.

On the one hand, Eliot thinks about the awakening of women in a patriarchal society; on the other hand, she is unable to escape the traditional concepts formed by long-term nurturing in a patriarchal society - the obsessions with love, marriage, and family. What she pursues is the equality of gender roles in society, is the mutual respect between the sexes, rather than the overthrow of male power and the subsequent looking up. It is more accurate to say that she is still confined within the cage of a patriarchal society. Women in George Eliot's era began to have the awareness and ability to open the cage, but they are still seeking freedom and independence within the patriarchal society's walls.

The findings of this article will serve as a reference for the similar and further study of George Eliot and her works. Paving the way for the research of both the author and the Victorian era.

The article limited to the book *Adam Bede*. There is a lacking of analogical studying with Eliot's other books and the common feature of that period works.

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⁵ Wang, Y. Y. (2008). Transcending the traditional meaning of marriage - the unique significance of marriage in *Adam Bede*. *Anhui Literature*, 9, 211.

⁶ George E. (1984). *Adam Bede*. Hunan People's Publishing House

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Authors contributions

This paper is written by the author Zhang Miao alone. Through the literature review method, the existing research results are sorted out and summarized, and the research background and research problems are clarified. The case analysis method is used to deeply analyze the specific literary works and reveal their inherent laws and characteristics. Using empirical research methods, collect and analyze data to verify theoretical viewpoints. In addition, authors build analytical frameworks to systematically organize ideas and analyze problems.

Theoretical discussion and empirical analysis: It not only conducts in-depth analysis of the style, theme and structure of literary works, but also conduct cross-disciplinary research from the perspectives of literature and society, culture and history.

Innovative contribution: Through interdisciplinary research, he has broadened the horizons and fields of literary research.

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