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LIVING WITH LIMITATIONS: JANE AUSTEN'S *EMMA* AND GEORGE ELIOT'S *MIDDLEMARCH*

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ABSTRACT

Literature in its reflective function has continued to offer a record of history, culture, and conditions of living that inform the artistic productions of a given space and time. This is particularly true as it concerns women in 18th and 19th century England. The restricted space for women at the time in question may look far too distant and remote from the present realities of the world, given that education for the girl child in most parts of the world today is a given norm, except for what is known about fundamentalist organizations, such as Boko Haram or the Taliban in Afghanistan. From the framework of social identity theory, this paper argues that Jane Austen's Emma (1816) and George Eliot's Middlemarch (1871-72), though coming from different literary epochs, shed light on the construction of gender that predisposed women to the private domain. In both novels, the heroines are characterized to reveal their limitation as the result of the prevailing social categorization and educational system. In conclusion, the heroines' failure to reach their aspired goals aligns with the conventions of the time that set boundaries for the biological females, making it impossible for them to find any other fulfilment outside marriage.

Keywords: gender, conventions, heroines, limitation, education, marriage.

Introduction

In its reflective function, literature offers a record of history, culture and, conditions of living that underlie artistic productions of any given place and time, as indicated in Hippolyte Taine's idiom of "race, milieu, and moment" (Dobie, 2009: 14-15). Looking through the lens of fiction at the conditions of women in the past, the present-day reader may be shocked at some of the things taken for granted today. Such a thing as education for the girl child in most parts of the world today is a given norm, except, of course, for what is known about fundamentalist organizations like Boko Haram or the Taliban policy in Afghanistan. According to a recent statement by UNESCO, the Taliban in Afghanistan has since 15 August 2021 "launched their grim campaign to erase women from public life," through decrees that violate the rights of girls and women to education (UNESCO, 2025). The country's separatist educational policy for males and females declared four years ago that schools were to remain closed to females, barring them from formal education beyond primary six. The UN and most nations have condemned this as an anachronistic act of socio-cultural injustice on account of the limitations and the disadvantages such a policy poses to the female gender. Thus, the prevailing policy of the Taliban state of Afghanistan that removes women from the public domain has inspired this paper as the two novels of this study focus evoke something similar pertaining to the gender.

Looking at Jane Austen's *Emma* (1816) and George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871-72) in the light of the relationship between literature and society, we realize that the two novelists, though writing during different literary periods, uphold a similar vision of women. Their works are notable for their strong realistic strain. Writing gave them a medium to be taken seriously on the gender subject, on the issue of the limiting social circumstances of women in their time and society. Speaking about the Victorian period, Abrams and Harpham (2005: 225) explain that "much writing of the period, whether imaginative or didactic, in verse or in prose, dealt with or reflected the pressing social, economic, religious, and intellectual issues and problems of the era." In this age during which George Eliot wrote, Long (2003: 455) points out that literature moved from the purely artistic standard of art for art's sake and acquired a moral purpose, meant "to sweep away error and to reveal the underlying truth of human life." He further adds that this strong tendency to teach, analyze, and explain solutions to the problems of life common among Victorian writers reaches its climax in George Eliot, with her *Middlemarch* rated as the classic realist novel.

Much as Jane Austen belongs to the Romantic period, she is still credited with depicting a realistic view of her society. William Wordsworth himself is quoted to have said that Austen's novels, which lack his own kind of imagination, offer "an admirable copy of life" (Alexander, 2007: 253). Her novels are placed in the rank of common life novels, and she is said to have done for the English novel what the Lake poets have done for English poetry and that is to say that she has refined and simplified the English novel, "making it a true reflection of English life" (Long, 2003: 437).

The Theoretical Framework

The social identity theory (SIT) explains how people see themselves through their individual traits and social group relationship. The main creator of the theory, Henri Tajfel, is cited to have defined social identity theory as "the part of an individual's self-concept which derives from their knowledge of their membership of a social group together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership" (Jose, 2025: "Social Identity Theory …"). This theory helps us to understand how people relate with the social world as they put themselves and others into groups, connecting, comparing and connecting with their identified groups in relation to others. The theory, thus, enables us to make sense of what goes into the shaping of human behaviours. An individual's identity goes beyond the individual traits to include traits shared with a recognizable social group. This theory has been helpful not only in explaining such social issues like prejudice or discrimination, but also in making sense of how people in the world are grouped according to "race, gender, nationality, religion, age and social class" (Jose, 2025: "Social Identity Theory…"). The social identity theory, therefore, becomes a suitable instrument in interpreting the writers' delineation of the heroines' inabilities to rise above their social category in spite of their strong personal impulses. Indeed, social identification theory enables one to understand how the heroines in the novels end up short of their vision and potentials. In line with this theory, one would rightly conclude that the two exceptional heroines in Austen's *Emma* and Eliot's *Middlemarch* succumb to their allegiance to their social category against their personal impulses, which is a testimony to how strongly social categorization influences or rather represses behavior and self-concept.

Through the historical epochs, the English society has steadily recorded positive transformations in science, technology and other varied fields of human endeavours. An epigraph on the Victorian Age, taken from Thomas Carlyle's "Past and Present", adumbrates the feats of this era:

> Mountains old as the creation, I have permitted to be bored through; bituminous fuel stores, the wreck of forests that were green a million years ago – I have opened them from my secret rock chambers, and they are yours, ye English. Your huge fleets, steamships, do sail the sea; huge Indies do obey you; from huge New England's and Antipodal Australia comes profit and traffic to this Old England of mine (quoted in Coombes, 1982: 175).

All these great transformations are achieved by the male gender category, barring the female. We make sense of this phenomenon by looking at the social categorization prevalent at the time. Thus, women are cut out for other roles different from the glorious attainments of the Victorian times.

Gender, Education, and Upbringing

In their realistic strain, Austen's *Emma* and Eliot's *Middlemarch* feature heroines living with situations that limit their potentials. The heroines occasionally become deluded, building castles in the air by attempting to reach for realities beyond what is open to their sex. But their delusions result in conflict between their personal aspirations and actuality. And in the end, they settle down to the status quo, to live with social codes that bring them short of their aspired goals in life. In the novels, marriage becomes a central theme through which the problems of social, educational and occupational disabilities placed upon women are explored. Thus, Jane Austen and George Eliot, writing in two adjoining epochs, successfully transpose the reality of women in their time and society into art.

Tajfel's social identity framework sheds light on the experiences of women in Austen's *Emma* and Eliot's *Middlemarch*, particularly regarding how social groups and societal norms influence female identity in patriarchal contexts. Both Emma Woodhouse and Dorothea Brooke are placed within strict gender category and class frameworks that dictate their roles and restrict their self-definition. Emma's identity is closely linked to her status as a wealthy woman in Highbury, yet this connection confines her to expectations surrounding domestic life and marriage, leaving little opportunity for other forms of self-discovery. Similarly, Dorothea's aspirations for intellectual growth are at odds with the restrictive gender roles of Victorian society, and her efforts to break free through marriage only deepen her reliance on conventional structures. For both characters, identity is negotiated within the confines of their social circles. Tajfel's theory offers insight into how these protagonists confront societal constructs that shape and restrict them. Their challenges are not solely individual but signify the profound impact of group norms on women's identities and trajectories during their respective historical periods.

Concerning the status of women, we would definitely concede that so much has changed today for women in the English society, nay, in the whole world. But it has not always been so. It has taken rigorous struggles through history to address the social inequalities between the sexes. In the 18th century, the efforts of Mary Wollstonecraft are well documented. In her article "A Vindication of the Rights of Women", she demands rights for women, declaring

that: "it was the education and upbringing of women that created their limited gaze." She also goes on to say that both sexes have contributed to the inequalities, and that both, therefore, need education for necessary changes in social action ("History of Feminism", n.d.). We can appreciate Wollstonecraft's demands for women's rights, as again we bring to mind that Jean Jacques Roseau had in 1762 published his book *Emile,* in which he offered the concept of the ideal man and woman. This book was widely read throughout Europe and was a major influence on people's thoughts at the time. In Roseau's *Emile,* the ideal woman is created in the image of Sophie, "lovely, docile and only educated enough to suit the desires of her husband" (Shelton, 2017: "Extraordinary Novels by Extraordinary Women…"). Thus, most Victorian ladies were modelled after Sophie's image, in which was ingrained the seed of femininity and domesticity for women.

In no other milieu is it truer of the dictum that a woman's education ends in the kitchen than in the Victorian era. On the education of women in the 19th century, Shelton (2017: "Extraordinary Novels by Extraordinary Women…") further states:

> Education in the 19th century was intended to undermine women's intellect and mold them to men's ideals …. Most women learned only the skills that would help them attract husbands, such as music, drawing, needlework, and minimal reading, writing and math for domestic purposes. These talents were intended for men's benefit only, and women's education stopped short of true sufficiency at home.

The life of no less a personage than Queen Victoria herself exemplifies the 19th century middle-class concept of femininity and domesticity: she had nine children, presenting a kind of femininity which centred on the family, motherhood, wifehood and respectability. In such a position, it is, therefore, not surprising that in a letter to Sir Theodore Martin in 1870, she is quoted to have described Women's Rights as the "mad, wicked folly of Woman's Rights" (History of Feminism, n.d.). Commenting on the subordinating circumstances of women, Richard Altick's book *Victorian People and Ideas* reveals that "women could enter the female colleges of Cambridge and Oxford in 1869 and 1879 respectively but could not take degrees until 1920-21" (quoted in Thompson, 2017: "Fatal Marriages in George Eliot's Middlemarch …"). In the light of all these, we can better appreciate the common grounds for the two novels as having to do with the limitation of women as a fact of the social and educational system available at the time.

It can be said that both Austen and Eliot had broader education than many women of their time. Born on December 16, 1775 and died on July 18, 1817, Austen was educated mainly at home amidst a family whose chief entertainment was literature. Tutored at home and irregularly at school, she started writing early in life, in her 20s and wrote six novels in all, which were published anonymously. Her authorship was made public after her death. Out of all her novels, *Pride and Prejudice* is the most famous, but *Emma* is the masterpiece (Roundtree, 1967: 5). On the other hand, George Eliot, whose real name is Mary Ann Evans, lived for sixty-one years, from 22 November 1819 to 22 December 1880. Eliot, unlike Austen, began writing fiction rather late in life, when she was nearly forty, and she rose to take a leading position among English novelists of her time. She had gained success before the public learnt that she was a woman. She wrote seven novels, most of which are set in provincial England and are known for their realism, intellectualism and psychological insight. She lived ahead of her time,

rising above "the burden and complexity of womanhood" to "reach beyond the sanctuary and pluck for herself the strange bright fruits of art and knowledge" (Woolf, 2017: George Eliot). Thus equipped, she was able to dissect the society of her time to delineate female characters whose tragedies resulted from defective social conventions.

Heroines and Marriages

Austen's *Emma* and Eliot's *Middlemarch* deliberately revolve around the theme of marriage, delineating heroines bound to a destiny at home. Marriage is placed at the heart of the matter to foreground the social, educational and occupational disadvantages against women who, despite their ambitions, are to move no further than the limited spaces society has constructed for them. A plot summation throws light on the thesis that the heroines in both novels live with social limitations that negate, as well as atrophy, their personal dreams and potentials.

Although Austen never married herself, her novels were preoccupied with the subject of young girls in courtship, leading finally to marriage. Her works avoided the great events of the time; but instead, she is said to have "concentrated upon the eternal mixed quality of humanity – of human relationships – exemplified in the provincial society about her" (Roundtree, 1967: 6). In the class-stratified society of Highbury, the heroine, Emma Woodhouse, enjoys power, audacity and authority backed by her wealth and nobility; and with an income of thirty thousand pounds, she has nothing to bother her in the world; thus, she "seemed to unite some of the best blessings of existence; and had lived nearly twenty-one years in the world with very little to distress or vex her" (Austen, 1966: 37). Her sister Isabella, with her husband and children, lives away in London, and her devoted governess and friend, Miss Taylor, has just been married to Mr Weston; therefore, Emma is left alone with her father, Henry Woodhouse, an elderly, fussy valetudinarian. Reigning as the mistress of the grand, comfortable, upper-middle-class home, Emma is convinced that she will never marry, and imagining herself gifted in making love matches, she claims success for match-making Miss Taylor and Mr Weston, and then goes ahead to find an eligible match for Mr Philip Elton, the village vicar. She then befriends and adopts seventeen-year-old Harriet Smith, and sets about to marry her to Mr Elton. But Emma's plans fail as Elton expresses affection for Emma herself rather than Harriet. Elton then goes to town and hurriedly marries Augusta Hawkins, a vain, talkative woman whom he barely knows. Emma takes a romantic interest in Frank Churchill and considers marrying him, totally unaware of his secret affair with Jane Fairfax. Much later on, Frank reveals that he has been engaged with Jane; and it is at the moment of crisis, when Harriet reveals that she has been interested in George Knightley, that Emma is shocked to discover that she is in love with George. George declares his love for her; and Emma, who has earlier said she will never marry, blinded as it were by wealth and comfort, finally finds her destiny in marriage. Harriet, in turn, marries Robert Martin. Thus, in a plot driven by marriage, the question of who loves whom is finally resolved, and all the eligible are paired off. Marriage takes a central place: the story begins with Miss Taylor/Weston's marriage, progresses with Elton/Augusta's marriage, and ends with a harvest of nuptial ties between Emma and George, Martin and Harriet and Frank and Jane.

Eustace Palmer (1986:51) rightly acknowledges that the limitation of subject as well as space in Austen's works is "deliberate and does not necessarily reflect a lack of personal awareness by Jane Austen of the forces at work in her society." She has, rather, worked in line with a chosen style in which the big issues of the day become unnecessary to her purpose. In contrast

with Austen's slim world, Eliot's *Middlemarch* is a multiple-plot novel with a vast canvas and a large cast. The major strand of the plot features Dorothea Brookes, the heroine, through whose life themes such as education and the status of women, the nature of marriage, and attrition of ideals by experience are explored.

Orphaned early in life, young, ascetic, idealistic, and ardent Dorothea Brookes and her sister, Cecelia, are raised by their Uncle Mr Brooke, who never marries because to him, marriage is a noose; and he has never loved anyone well enough to be put in a noose. Cecelia, worldly and full of common sense, gets conventionally and comfortably married to Sir James Chettam, an amiable and handsome baronet whose offer Dorothea has rejected to marry the Reverend Edward Casaubon, a rich, cold, heartless, pedantic, middle-aged scholar who, until his death, is engrossed, unsuccessfully, with writing a book, *A Key to All Mythology*. Against all kindly dissuasions, Dorothea is motivated into this union in order to enjoy an intellectual life denied her sex. On the other hand, Casaubon marries Dorothea because he needs her young eyes for his much reading. Dorothea displays an intellectual ability which is out of the ordinary, leading to her uncle's comment that "young ladies don't understand political economy" (Eliot, 2000:13). Expectations fail as Dorothea discovers her husband for what he is: cold and selfish. She discovers, too, that the book project is doomed to failure. But rather than rebel against him, she pities and cares for him – all in her belief that "marriage is a state of higher duties", and not for "mere personal ease" (Eliot, 2000: 33). Casaubon's health degenerates, and before he dies, he adds a codicil to his will to the pain that Dorothea will lose her inheritance from him if she should marry Will Ladislaw, his cousin, whom he has banned from visiting his home, in his suspicion that he is trying to woo Dorothea to gain access to his fortune. Dorothea later marries Ladislaw anyway.

Linked to the Dorothea story is the story of Dr Tertius Lydgate, an idealistic young doctor with new, advanced ideas about medical reforms. Rosamond Vincy, the famed town beauty and the very best of Mrs Lemon's school for young ladies, marries Lydgate, but their marriage fails because of her greed and self-centredness, and because her husband Lydgate is enslaved by her beauty. Before Bulstrode arrives in Middlemarch, he corruptly accumulates wealth by pawn broking and receipt of stolen goods in London, marrying his boss's widow and defrauding her grandson, who turns out to be Ladislaw. Mr Raffles blackmails Bulstrode, who kills him by altering Lydgate's prescriptions. Both Bulstrode and Lydgate are ruined by this scandal. Rosamond's brother, Fred Vincy, loves Mary Garth, the daughter of kind-hearted, honest, industrious Caleb Garth, who is an estate agent. Mary agrees to marry Fred only on the condition that he abandons his genteel profession of the clergy class to take up a more suitable and practical career as a land agent.

In the final section of the novel, the protagonists' lives are summarized: Fred and Mary, happily married, live to be good, happy, old and rich. Lydgate dies prematurely at 50, leaving a rich inheritance for Rosamond, who thrives in her vanity, but never fails to respect Dorothea for assisting her and Lydgate in the sharpest crisis of their life. Will Ladislaw, blissfully married to Dorothea, ends as a Liberal MP for Middlemarch, and Dorothea is happy to be a mere wife, mother, and minor benefactress doing unhistoric acts for the good of others.

Aspirations and Fixed Destinies

In both *Emma* and *Middlemarch*, the heroines are well-centred and drawn to portray the status of women as something predicated on the prevailing educational system and social conventions. The heroines attempt to pursue higher aspirations, entering areas conventionally considered the domain of men, but they ultimately fail and yield to the generally accepted status quo. Dorothea, created in the image of Saint Theresa of Avila, is a personality endowed with greatness. In her community, she is spoken of as being remarkably clever; her sister Cecelia lives in habitual awe of her and her principles; and her uncle, Mr Brooke, is anxious that her reason may take her too far. What is more, Ladislaw reveres her, seeing in her a greatness that he can never measure up to:

> For the moment, Will's admiration was accompanied with a chilling sense of remoteness. A man is seldom ashamed of feeling that he cannot love a woman so well when he sees a certain greatness in her: nature having intended greatness for men. (Eliot, 2000: 321)

In her own part, Emma is the social paragon, assuming the male task of ruling other people's lives. She decides not to marry – an unusual thing for a young lady of twenty-one. With her wealth, she is unafraid of being an old maid, believing that "it is poverty only which makes celibacy contemptible to a generous public" (Austen, 1966:109). Her ample financial resources place her at the centre, and in her secure economic status, she draws her powers, giving her a sense of immunity to marriage. While Emma thinks herself to be above marriage on the strength of her wealth, Dorothea sees marriage as a sort of improvement scheme for her intellect. In the manner of the deprived, she seeks to marry someone older than she is, someone who can even teach her Hebrew and lift her above the limits of knowledge allowed her sex. Her marriage to Casaubon, old enough to be her father, provides her a means of flight from limitation. She is drawn to him for his much learning, nursing dreams of their union as capable of eliminating what she sees as the trivialities of women's lives: "It would be my duty to study that I might help him the better in his great works. There would be nothing trivial about our lives" (Eliot, 2000: 23). Dorothea's marriage to Casaubon ends in tragedy for which reason Roberts (2000: XIX) remarks that Dorothea is mildly rebuked for "seeing a spouse in the light of a mentor."

Marriage is given as the sole means through which women may find fulfilment. The pity of women's lives then is that for one like Dorothea, with all the grandeur of her personality and character, the highest vocation available to her is no other than marriage, a mundane opening in relation to her super endowments. Eliot, thus, most befittingly depicts her in the metaphor of the latter-day St. Theresa, robbed of an epic life:

> Many Theresa's have been born who found for themselves no epic life wherein there was a constant unfolding of far resonant action…these latter born Theresa's were helped by no coherent social faith and order which could perform the function of knowledge for the ardently willing soul.…Here and there is born a Saint Theresa, a foundress of nothing, whose loving heart-beats and sobs after an unattained goodness tremble off and are dispersed among hindrances, instead of centring in some long-recognizable deed. (Eliot, 2000: 3-4)

Dorothea still returns to marriage even after her sad experience with Casaubon. She remarries Ladislaw, who is below her class and ardour, both in character and in intensity of personality.

Many feminists have expressed their disappointment at the fate of Dorothea. The instance is given of Florence Nightingale and Kate Millet, who in separate centuries have "both remarked on the eventual subordination of Dorothea's own dreams to those of her admirer, Ladislaw" (Middlemarch, n.d.). While Ladislaw glories in his lofty position as an MP, Dorothea ends up only as a wife, mother and minor benefactress, thus:

> Many who knew her thought it a pity that so substantive and so rare a creature should have been aborted into the life of another, and be only known in a certain circle as a wife and a mother. But no one stated exactly what else that was in her power she ought rather to have done. (Eliot, 2000: 686)

Through an authorial commentary above, Eliot tends to underline that there are no other options open to her heroine than becoming a wife and a mother. And that is the very point on the subject of the limitation of women. In the given circumstances, Dorothea makes the best out of an existing social order. However, Virginia Woolf is bothered that Eliot's heroine does not find what she seeks, in contrast with Eliot's own life. About Eliot's heroines generally, Woolf (George Eliot, n.d.) comments:

> The ancient consciousness of woman charged with suffering and sensibility and for so many ages dumb, seems in them to have brimmed and overflowed and uttered a demand for something – they scarcely know what – for something that is perhaps incompatible with the facts of human existence. George Eliot had far too strong an intelligence to tamper with those facts, and too broad a humour to mitigate the truth because it was a stern one. Save for the supreme courage of their endeavour, the struggle ends for her heroines, in tragedy, or in compromise that is even more melancholy. But their story is the incomplete version of the story of George Eliot herself. For her, too, the burden and the complexity of womanhood were not enough; she must reach beyond the sanctuary and pluck the strange bright fruits of art and knowledge.

Eliot may have created the kind of heroines Woolf talks about in the foregoing comments on purpose, given the functional utility of literature and the intellectual currents, ideas and assumptions of her time, as inherent in the social theory of literature. Thus, contrary to her own life's experience, she delineates pathetic heroines in faithfulness to the moral purpose of art among Victorian writers – to teach and erode errors with a view to bringing about positive reforms in society. In this context, therefore, Eliot highlights the big error of fixing the destinies of women through marriage. Dorothea's image successfully evokes anger at such an existing social condition, justifying the need for reforms. Eliot rather creates the heroines to reflect the age in loyalty to the issue of "time, moment, and milieu." What is more, she could not have created radical heroines much like herself, for in view of the development of women's social and literary history, she belongs to the feminine phase category, spanning between 1840 and 1880, where one is made to understand that "female writers imitated the literary tradition established by men, taking additional care to avoid offensive language or subject matter" (Dobie, 2009: 106).

Both Austen and Eliot express a similar vision on the limitations of the female gender, on the disadvantages of having women confined to the home, away from public life. Her economic power and her initial plans to shun marriage notwithstanding, Emma ends up in the arms of George Knightley. She refrains from the attempts at breaking the social norm, surrendering,

as Thomas Roundtree (1967: 81) rightly points out, to the "point of fitting properly into her social milieu". As her matchmaking efforts fail, she comes to recognize the narrow scope of even a wealthy woman to change her place or daily routine. And the question is, what is there for Emma other than matrimony? What else can she do? From the underpinning of social identity categorization backed by her training and upbringing, no member of her gender is admitted into the other professions: She can neither be a lawyer like John Knightley, nor a farmer like George Knightley and Robert Martin, nor a curate like Mr Elton. Thus, with all her wealth and nobility, the only option open to her is the marriage vocation. One can very well describe her circumstances with that famous sentence of Austen's in *Pride and Prejudice* (3) – with slight alteration, changing 'man' to 'woman', and 'wife' to 'husband' – "It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single WOMAN in possession of good fortune must be in want of a HUSBAND"

The two heroines in the novels at last come out of their ideals, abandon their lofty dreams and come to terms with reality. Aspirations at last give way to actuality. Ideals suffer attrition under the weight of social convention. Expounding on the determining acts of Dorothea's life, we again come across a pertinent authorial commentary that valorizes the social identity theory:

> They were the mixed result of a young and noble impulse struggling amidst the conditions of an imperfect social state, in which great feelings will often take the aspect of illusion. For there is no creature whose inward being is so strong that is not greatly determined by what lies outside it. (Eliot, 2009: 688)

One of such "conditions of an imperfect social state" referred to in the foregoing quotation lies in the problems of women's education, which lead to the atrophy of the heroines' dreams. Although rich, Emma lacks the kind of education to enable her to achieve her aspirations towards celibacy. The only kind of education she has received comes from home, from her governess, Miss Taylor. She has received just enough for housekeeping, which is in line with the social lore that restricts a girl's education to the home. Austen exposes much of Emma's follies as resulting from idleness of mind, from having too much money and too little to do. Austen has thus deliberately chosen her heroine. And in any case, Emma's follies are forgivable because they represent the vacuum in her intellectual formation. The discontentment of Dorothea, which motivates her to a marriage with Casaubon, makes a loud statement about the educational disabilities placed on women.

In *Emma*, a flawed educational system is, thus, illustrated with Mrs Goddard's school, described as a place "where girls might be sent out of the way and scramble themselves into a little education without any danger of becoming prodigies (Austen, 1966: 52). And in *Middlemarch,* the example is given of Mrs Lemon's school, which advances the femininity ethos, teaching young girls how to be ladies, like getting in and out of a carriage. Incidentally, Rosamond Vincy, famed for her beauty, is the very best of Mrs Lemon's. Roberts (2000: xix) explains what Eliot does in the characterization of Rosamond, thus:

> She is simultaneously defended as the logical product of a particular, historically definable type of education that teaches women to see themselves as dependent and ornamental, and condemned for not absorbing enough of its spirit to dedicate herself uncritically to her husband.

We may, therefore, construe Lydgate's tragedy as Eliot's punishment for his crime of seeing women only in relation to their beauty, seeing women as ornaments. He falls for Rosamond's beauty and becomes utterly ruined by the pressure from the demands of such beauty's requirements. He has a fatal marriage, and upon his premature death at fifty, Rosamond remarries an elderly and wealthy physician who can fund her vanities. Hence, Lydgate once addresses her in the metaphor of a basil plant – meaning "a plant which has flourished wonderfully on a murdered man's brains" (Eliot, 2000: 686). In contrast with Rosamond, Dorothea spurns the obsessive preoccupations of her sex with trifles of outward looks and beauty and reaches for something beyond "that toy-box history of the world adapted to young ladies which had made the chief part of her education" (Eliot, 2000:70). Through the characterization of Dorothea, Eliot makes a demand for something denied the female gender category.

Conclusion

From the foregoing, we would conclude that Austen and Eliot, two of the great literary minds the world has ever known, have made eloquent contributions to the gender dialectics through fiction. In their artistic recreation of the society of their days, both writers have explored the situation of the female gender, decrying the social and educational limitations which bring them short of their human abilities. The two novels present an interesting record and analysis of the disadvantages of women that the novelists saw in their days. The novelists' concerns for women in the 18th and 19th-century English society remain relevant to the global world today. Education for women still remains a challenge in some places in the world, as the prevailing educational policy in Afghanistan and the radicalized Islamic ethos of Boko Haram in Nigeria reveal. It is, therefore, delusive to presume that the struggle for women is over and done with. As it were, the struggle continues, and literature remains a tool for addressing the issue of gender discrimination

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