

## Female Education in George Eliot's Novels

### -- The Enlightenment to Chinese Female Education in the Post-poverty Era

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#### Abstract

George Eliot is a famous Victorian female writer in England. Her works reflect the thinking on women's education. This paper will analyze the problems of women's education reflected in it, compare the current situation of Chinese women's education, and explore the Enlightenment of its feminism and educational thought to Chinese women's education in the post poverty era.

#### Keywords

George Eliot; Female Era; Post poverty Era.

#### 1. Women's Education Embodied in George Eliot's Novels

As one of the most influential novelists in the 19th century, George Eliot (1819-1880) often pays attention to middle-class women in her works, especially their family education, school education, social education and self-education in various social environments. Haoying Song (2019) believes that George Eliot's observation and reflection on Victorian women's education in the novel shows her unique views on how women's education affects women's personal choice and even their ultimate personal destiny, and reveals Eliot's understanding of education [1]. Eliot's novels are divided into early and late stages. This paper will take the early representative works *The Mill on the Floss* and *Middlemarch* as examples to explore the female education and feminist views contained in them.

Maggie, the heroine of *The Mill on the Floss*, was lively, lovely and intelligent since childhood, but she was incompatible with the social requirements for women at that time. "She's twice as clever as Tom. It's too clever for a woman." [2] On the contrary, Tom, as the son of the family, has high-quality educational resources. "I would like Tom to get a good education, an education that will enable him to make a living in the future." [2] Maggie's family believes that girls do not need to receive school education, let alone read too many books. The society and family constantly educate Maggie that women should always maintain a good image in line with the mainstream aesthetics, learn some manual work and do their "duty" to teach their husband and children. It is worth noting that in the novel, it is not only the male characters who scoff at Maggie's appearance, but also the female characters such as Mrs. Tulliver who hits Maggie again and again. Considering the differences between the family roles of father and mother, the influence of women in the family on children will be huge. Maybe because of social pressure and family role constraints, as women, they can't understand Young Maggie. In the final analysis, the social environment makes them numb and be like men, they value boys over girls in the allocation of school education resources. Family education and social education have repeatedly shaped Maggie's world outlook during her childhood, which will make her become the second Mrs. Tulliver unconsciously, and then continue to affect the next generation, and the society will continue such a vicious circle. Parents' preaching and the pressure of public opinion are the fundamental reasons for forcing girls to make changes. However, public opinion will not

change by itself. To change the implicit impact of wrong social education on children, someone must come forward to point out the hidden regulation of society connivance ---- female inferiority is totally wrong and meanwhile, correct the misleading family education, so as to cultivate the next generation who can correct social education.

Dorothea, the heroine of *Middlemarch*, is a talented, ideal and enthusiastic character. However, in the restricted social environment, although women themselves are very excellent, if they want to realize their own value, their ability will be restricted by gender. The reason for Dorothea's failure lies in her lack of proper family education and school education. "The sisters were about twelve years old and had lost their parents. Since then, according to a narrow and chaotic plan, I am now an English family and later educated in a Swiss family in Lausanne. Their guardian is their single uncle...". The school education of the two sisters has always been mixed; In the family, single uncles can't give girls enough attention and necessary guidance. In addition, in the small town of *Middlemarch* where she lives, she is biased against women, let alone pay attention to women's education. Therefore, Dorothea believes that in order to realize her life value, she must find a husband who can change her. Looking for a husband with this view of marriage doomed Dorothea's marriage to be a tragedy. Because she holds the wrong view of marriage, she bases her achievements on men. -she eventually falls into the traditional female model because of various limitations.

## **2. The status, similarities and differences of women's education in Victorian Britain and contemporary China**

### **2.1. Situation of British Women's Education in the Victorian Period (1837-1901)**

In the early stage, under the influence of the industrial revolution, the capitalist mode of production changed from family handicraft to large-scale machine production, which brought about the separation of production activities and family activities. Since then, men have entered the field of social production, while women are imprisoned in the family. As their contribution to the family economy have reduced continuously, their status gradually declined, and finally became the dependency of men. [3] The task of making money to support the family was completely handed over to the man.

Influenced by the concept of women's employment at that time, middle-class women had no economic status. At that time, their education was mainly aimed at marriage and religion. Due to the rich personal experience and the increase in the number of single women, more and more women begin to realize the necessity of self-reliance. They are eager to find a job that can support themselves. Education became a hot spot in the society at that time. Some middle-class women who were interested in education reform began to reform the traditional women's education.

The Education Act of 1870 was implemented, which stipulates that all boys and girls aged 5-12 should attend school all day. During this period, women took a key step in striving for the right to education, making a qualitative leap in women's education in terms of education form, education goal and education content. Women's education is no longer to cultivate a good wife and mother, but to enable women to participate in society; The education content pays more attention to the education of culture and skills; The government has established a public education system and established the principle of universal compulsory education system. Women at all levels enjoy the right to education. [4].

### **2.2. Current Situation of Female Education in Poor Areas of China**

Since the Reform and Opening up, China's education has developed rapidly. The Compulsory Education Law was promulgated in 1986 to implement the nine-year compulsory education

system. However, due to the large gap in regional economic development, there has been an imbalance in China's educational development. Since then, the regional differences in education have been widely valued by the society.

Women's education has long been discriminated against and neglected in the history of Chinese education. In 2010, female illiteracy accounted for 15.7% of the labor force in key poverty alleviation counties, while male illiteracy accounted for only 5.5%. [5] It can be seen that the education level of women in poor areas is significantly lower than that of men. In this regard, in the stage of targeted poverty alleviation, the state emphasizes "poverty alleviation first and wisdom support", especially for poor female vulnerable groups. The Symposium on "poverty alleviation through education and women's development" held in 2020 emphasizes that in the post poverty era, we should adhere to the principle of gender equality and ensure that ethnic minority women and girls in remote and poor areas have equal access to educational resources.

### **2.3. Similarities and Differences Between the Two and Its Values**

The Industrial Revolution in England and China's Reform and Opening up are considered to have brought huge social changes to both countries. When the economy keeps developing rapidly, the lack of education has become an urgent social problem. However, considering different historical periods these two social upheavals have taken place, there is a big gap between the development degree of the two, simultaneously, the target groups of education reform vary as well. The Victorian era has focused on middle-class women, aiming to solve the unbalanced distribution of education resources between the sexes in the middle-class. As for China, after the reform and opening-up, China is now in the era of poverty alleviation where female education in developed areas has been developed and population quality has been improved accordingly. Additionally, the promulgation of Compulsory Education Law narrows the gaps between development speed and talent supply in backward areas. However, female education in poor areas has not been paid enough attention to, and traditional preferences for sons are still deeply rooted. As a result, the Chinese government began to pay attention to education problems for women in poor areas.

In a word, the situation of women's education in the Victorian Period of Britain and the current situation of female education in the contemporary poverty-stricken areas of China share several similarities—the reform of women's education in the UK during the Victorian Age highly overlapped with the emphasis on women's education in China's education poverty alleviation policy. Therefore, the educational thoughts for female in the Victorian Age is considered to have certain referential values to solve the problem of female education in the impoverished areas of China in the post-poverty era.

## **3. Enlightenment to Chinese Female Education in the Post-poverty Era**

The reason why China should pay special attention to women's education in the process of poverty alleviation is because it's an effective way to stop the intergenerational transmission of poverty. In Eliot's early novels, she emphasized that women are more likely to shape children's personality and values than men, because they spent more time with their kids and played the role of "supporting husband and educating children". Therefore, the importance of female education in the post-poverty era needs to be stressed. Only by improving the quality of women, can the level of family education be fundamentally improved.

### **3.1. To Cultivate Women's Sense of Independence**

Eliot's novels represent the reality of Victorian England where it is generally believed that women's whole life is dependent on men, highly consistent with the current situation of women in poor areas in China. Women themselves can neither have any access to formal schooling nor receive proper family education. Correspondingly, they cannot realize that they have the power

to change such a situation. Nine-year compulsory education policy has dramatically reduced the number of illiterates in China, especially among women, however, the situation in poor areas still remains grim. The society does not require women to become high-quality people and it is still widely believed that women should be back in their families rather than entering the society after their schooling.

Eliot herself is a good example of breaking through numerous prejudices against women who eventually has made great contributions to English Literature and feminism. In *Middlemarch*, however, the character Dorothea she created lives a totally different life. The huge contrast in between is meant to trigger people's reflections on women's education---the prejudice women encounter is not only what men imposed on women but also stems from women's own misconceptions. For a long time, women have been used to viewing themselves through men's eyes, and regulate themselves by standards men set for them, which in turn unintentionally limit themselves in the delineation of gender---women are inferior to men. Therefore, if women want to achieve genuine independence and equality, they'd better reflect on their own and advance to their new position.

In other words, it is not only the male elders that are responsible for the family preference for sons, the female elders are equally inescapable. If women want to be truly independent, they ought to be guided correctly and truly understand that women themselves can achieve their value in life. Only in this way, can women break through the ideological barriers of prejudice and usher in a social environment where men and women are truly equal.

### 3.2. To Establish A Correct View of Marriage

In Victorian times, women were not expected to achieve professional success, which is still a reality in China. In developing areas, compulsory education only increases the enrollment rate of school-age girls, who are able to access primary education simply because of its low costs and compulsion. However, most parents and even children themselves do not understand the values of education.

As a matter of fact, many wrong perceptions of education stem from their wrong view of marriage. What must be corrected is that it is education rather than marriage that can fundamentally change the lives of women in poor areas. Women's destination and goal is not marriage, but their own work and career. Marriage is a choice, while a career is what truly control and direct a woman's destiny. Only when people realize what career and personal development mean to women, will people be willing to pay for education and understand why girls need to receive education from the bottom of their hearts.

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