

George Eliot's Concept of Tragedy in *Adam Bede*

Mithlesh Bhiwani

Abstract

The Novel *Adam Bede* has shown the quality of George Eliot as a writer. Though the novel is named after a male character, the center of attention is a woman named Hetty Sorrel who is condemned by the Victorian Society for the murder of her baby. She desires to have a husband who would shower her with all the wealth. She abhors working on the farm and dreams to live a life of wealth. At times she is regarded as innocent and childlike and at times as a vain person. She uses her beauty to gain anything she desires. She is often compared to Dinah Morris, her cousin who is a complete contrast to her character. Though her act of infanticide is considered to be a crime but she is also regarded as victimized by many critics. Critics believe that Hetty was treated as a mere plaything for Arthur Donnithorne who could not resist her beauty and was attracted to her at his first sight. Hetty is eventually punished for crime.

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Paper

George Eliot has both been criticized and appreciated for her intellectual and rational approach towards life, in spite of her having been brought up in an orthodox and conservative Christian family. There are some scholars like **George** Levine who call Marry Ann Evans as an atheist and even an iconoclast who revolted against the Catholic church and the concept of god. But, there are other few scholars like F.R. Leavis and Elizabethan Drew who contend that Marry Ann Evans might have disowned the traditional religion and god, but her revolt is more intellectual and rational than moral.

That is why, the central thematic stream in almost all the novels of George Eliot in general, and *Adam Bede* in particular, is her invariable endeavour to harmonize the static and dynamic, traditional and enlightening, the common and the ideal as well as the heart and mind, so that the chief defining and governing motif in her novels is conservative- reformative impulse and this is what Dorothy Ven Ghent means when she says: “A novel for George Eliot is not merely for entertainment, rather it is an instrument for making man nobler and better”

So, in all of George Eliot’s novels, we find a strong current of moral conflict which the novelist translate beautifully in terms of individual,

aspiration and repressive environment. George Eliot did not believe in art for art's sake, rather she believes in art for life's sake, and this is what Leslie Stephen means when she says: "George Eliot believes that a work of art must exercise an ethical influence and, if we yield to temptations and sin, suffering and nemesis are sure to follow."

This is what we find in the character and personality of Hetty Sorrel of *Adam Bede*, a beautiful girl, but her beauty is deceptively soft because besides her beauty, she has a core of hardness as is the case with Maggie Tulliver of *The Mill on the Floss*, who is sensitive, wild and recurrent child of pitted against the repressive and the

conservative and repressive society of St. Ogg's.

Being a beauty, Hetty is vain, tainted, frivolous as well as conscious of the fact that she has a large number of admirers. She knows very well that Adam Bede, a carpenter by profession, loves her from the innermost core of his heart, but as he is unable to provide her the luxuries of life and the fineries of whom Hetty often dreams, so she is fascinated towards Arthur Donnithorne, a lieutenant, capable of fulfilling Hetty's dreams. Hetty's momentary surrender to her impulses results her yielding to the temptations, so her vanity, weaknesses and egoism brings her nearly to gallows as the novelist herself puts it as follows: "to sit in a

carpet parlour and always wearing white stockings, to have some large beautiful ear rings, to have Nottingham lace round the top of her gown and something make her neckerchief small nice”

Hetty is more dependent on her uncle and aunt, Mr. and Mrs. Poyaser, and for her emotional and psychological support on Dinah Morris, the Methodist, as George Eliot herself was which makes the novel, *Adam Bede*, as a close self-portrait of the novelist herself as says Leslie Stephen. But, after losing all the hopes of Arthur ever returning to her when she gets a farewell letter from Arthur, she turns to Adam for her emotional fulfillment when she thinks only of her own desires, well-being

and of gratification, so egocentric and self-centered is she.

George Eliot has portrayed beautifully Hetty and Arthur as the creatures of weak moral fibre who are unable to resist their temptations resulting in sin followed by intense pain, suffering and punishment. Consequently, Hetty is destined to face great pains and her lovely dreams come to an end in her own tragedy as the novelist remarks : there is no despair so absolute as that which comes with the first moment of our first great sorrow.

George Eliot has made a powerful psycho-analytical study of Hetty’s mind after she gives birth to a premature child at Sarah Stone’s house. She tries to escape from her shame by

abandoning her child in the wood as the novelist also remarks that she wandered alone, often thought of committing suicide, but her delight in life causes her to break out in hysterical joy over that fact that she was still on the familiar earth.

In this way, we find that the delineation of Hetty Sorrel by the novelist is neither the observations from life nor a true recasting of experiences by the imagination; rather it is the personal fantasy of George Eliot in the novel, is punishing herself as she suffers for the sins which George Eliot has committed and, for which, to her, perhaps unconscious dismay, she herself was never punished.

In this way, a momentary surrender to impulses causes Hetty's misfortunes and sufferings, and this is what is the central concern of George Eliot as a novelist when she says that the conduct of a person is not three-fourth of life as is suggested by Matthew Arnold, rather it is the four-fourth of life and, same is the central vision of *Adam Bede* where Hetty Sorrel have revolted against the orthodox religion and church

Here the novelist seems to emphasize the fact that our needs determine our deeds and, that is why, Eliot might have revolted against the orthodox religion and church but, at the same time, she has an unflinching faith in the human values. This is what David Cecil means when he admires Eliot's

novels for the human qualities of right-wrong, truthfulness, chastity, industry and self-restraint just as Hetty Sorrel finds herself on a wrong wicket when she suffers from an acute psycho-spiritual dilemma.

That is why, George Eliot is a novelist known for her intellectual perception in to the inner deep recesses of socio-cultural milieu and inner mindscape of the characters so as to bring out the essential morality of the society as well as the authentic substance of the man which makes her novelist a superb artistic expression of the sociological dimensions and psycho-spiritual nuances of life.

Although there are some scholars like John Ruskin who has called all the

novels of George Eliot in general, and Adam Bede in particular, as an expression of literary disease which minutely celebrate the trivial and the insignificant.

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