



Cappadocia University
School of Graduate Studies and Research
Department of English Language and Literature

**GENDER PERFORMATIVITY IN
GEORGE ELIOT'S *MIDDLEMARCH* AND
THOMAS HARDY'S *TESS OF THE D'URBERVILLES***

Gülcan DURAN

Master's Thesis

Nevşehir, 2023

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ABSTRACT

DURAN, Gülcan. Gender Performativity in George Eliot's *Middlemarch* and Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, Master's Thesis, Nevşehir, 2023.

This thesis aims to examine the depiction and performance of gender roles in George Eliot's *Middlemarch* and Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, using Judith Butler's theory of performativity as the primary lens for analysis. The novels are analysed not only as Victorian texts reflecting the dominant gender ideologies of their time but also through the lens of contemporary gender theory, thus bridging the historical and the modern in a comprehensive discourse. Building on Butler's argument that gender is a social construct that is repeatedly performed and reinforced through social norms, this study explores how the female characters in these novels challenge or reinforce gender norms through their performances. Therefore, the introduction discusses the representation of women and gender roles in the selected novels and contextualises them within the Victorian era. It also engages with the ongoing academic debates on sex and gender, bringing together various perspectives that emphasise the socially constructed nature of gender. The first chapter focuses on gender roles in George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, showing how women are forced to conform to a predetermined model of femininity. It emphasises how limited opportunities and education are crucial to women's identities, lives, and destinies. The second chapter analyses the struggles of women oppressed and exploited by men and social structures in Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. Through an in-depth analysis of Tess's life and the challenges she faces, this chapter shows how gender roles are imposed and maintained by social norms and how non-conforming women are marginalised as a result. This thesis reveals how writers of different genders reflect, with slight variations, the normative gender roles in the Victorian male-dominated society and portrays gender identity as unstable, artificially constructed and inseparable from historical context.

Keywords

George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, Thoms Hardy, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, Judith Butler, Performativity, Patriarchy

ÖZET

DURAN, Gülcan. *George Eliot'ın Middlemarch ve Thomas Hardy'nin Tess of the D'Urbervilles Adlı Romanlarında Performatif Toplumsal Cinsiyet*, Yüksek Lisans Tezi, Nevşehir, 2023.

Bu tez, George Eliot'ın *Middlemarch* ve Thomas Hardy'nin *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* romanlarında toplumsal cinsiyet rollerinin tasviri ve performansını, Judith Butler'ın performatiflik teorisini temel alarak incelemektedir. Romanlar, yalnızca dönemlerinin baskın cinsiyet ideolojilerini yansıtan Viktorya metinleri olarak değil, aynı zamanda çağdaş cinsiyet teorisi ışığında tarihsel ve modern cinsiyet anlayışları arasında bir diyalog oluşturmakta kullanılmaktadır. Butler'ın toplumsal cinsiyetin, sosyal normlar aracılığıyla sürekli olarak performe edilen ve pekiştirilen bir sosyal yapı olduğu argümanı üzerine inşa edilen bu tez, bahsi geçen romanlardaki kadın karakterlerin toplumsal cinsiyet normlarına nasıl meydan okuduklarını veya bu normları nasıl güçlendirdiklerini değerlendirmektedir. Girişte *Middlemarch* ve *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* romanlarındaki kadınların ve toplumsal cinsiyet rollerinin temsilleri tartışılmakta ve bunlar Viktorya dönemi bağlamına yerleştirilmektedir. Aynı zamanda, cinsiyet ve toplumsal cinsiyet üzerine süregelen akademik tartışmalara ışık tutulmakta ve toplumsal cinsiyetin sosyal olarak inşa edilmiş doğasını vurgulayan çeşitli bakış açıları bir araya getirilmektedir. Tezin ilk bölümünde, George Eliot'ın *Middlemarch* eserindeki toplumsal cinsiyet rolleri ele alınmakta ve kadınların belirli bir kadınlık modeline uyma zorunluluğu tartışılmaktadır. Kadınların kimliklerinin, yaşamlarının ve kaderlerinin ne denli sınırlı fırsatlar ve eğitimle belirlendiği vurgulanmaktadır. Tezin ikinci bölümünde, Thomas Hardy'nin *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* eserinde erkekler ve toplumsal yapılar tarafından ezilen ve sömürülen kadınların mücadeleleri değerlendirilmekte; Tess'in hayatının ve karşılaştığı zorlukların detaylı bir incelemesi aracılığıyla toplumsal cinsiyet rollerinin sosyal normlar tarafından nasıl dayatılıp sürdürüldüğü ve norm dışı davranan kadınların sonuç olarak nasıl marjinalleştirildiği belgelenmektedir. Sonuç olarak, bu tez, farklı cinsiyetlerden yazarların, hafif değişikliklerle, Viktorya döneminin erkek egemen toplumundaki normatif cinsiyet rollerini nasıl yansıttığını Öz açığa çıkarırken cinsiyet kimliğinin tarihsel bağlamdan ayrılamayan, yapay olarak inşa edilmiş ve istikrarsız bir yapıya sahip olduğunu ortaya koymaktadır.

Anahtar Sözcükler

George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, Thoms Hardy, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, Judith Butler, Performativite, Ataerkillik

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INTRODUCTION

REVISITING VICTORIAN GENDER ROLES AND BUTLER'S THEORY OF GENDER PERFORMATIVITY

This thesis will examine gendered identities, female characters, and male-female relationships in George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871) and Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891). Analysing the normative understandings of genders and gendered roles within the Victorian male-dominated society, the study will also consider gendered identity as unstable, uncertain, and, most notably as artificially construed, to which contemporary feminist and gender theories also draw attention. In so doing, the thesis will explore Hardy's and Eliot's positions on gender and class matters, respectively. Even if Hardy's and Eliot's sensitiveness to gender and their realistic portrayal of these issues is of great importance, however, the primary focus of this study is to look at how Eliot and Hardy pave the way for an exploration of gendered identities with regard to Judith Butler's theory of "gender performativity" in which genders are considered as culturally, ideologically, and performatively constructed.

Both George Eliot's *Middlemarch* and Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, written by authors of different genders and published at other times during the nineteenth century, share common themes such as the Victorian domestic ideology, the restrictive societal norms and gender-based inequalities in a male-dominated society. These novels highlight how male dominance and societal restrictions of the time impacted the lives of men and women differently. The novels depict various female and male characters who perform their ascribed gender roles properly and also feature female heroines who challenge the constraints imposed by Victorian patriarchal society. However, it is important to note that the depictions of conventional and unconventional gender roles and identities in these novels are influenced by their respective eras' dominant discourse, ideology, and cultural tendencies. In light of these observations, this thesis aims to scrutinise how the prevailing cultural and social attitudes of the Victorian era influenced the portrayal of gender roles and identities in Victorian fiction as well as how authors of

different genders portray these themes.

The novels respectively problematise the cultural and societal norms, values, and beliefs that comprised the construct of Victorian gender ideology and primarily affected women's lives. In this gender ideology, women's roles and status were determined by their gender, based on the "doctrine of separate spheres" (Steinbach 133). This doctrine asserted that sexes were inherently distinct and should pursue separate occupations, resulting in a strict division of gender roles and expectations between women and men. Women were expected to manage the domestic sphere, while men were to handle the professional/public sphere. This gender ideology restricted women's access to resources like education, profession, and political participation, assuming that they were inferior to men. *Middlemarch* and *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* reject the conflicting principles of this ideology, not through overt resistance but by portraying the dangers of confining women to domestic roles, which is evident in their endings. Crucially, these novels illustrate the potentialities of female characters facing societal hindrances, as George Eliot comments on Dorothea, remarking that "there was always something better which she might have done" (*Middlemarch* 822). In a similar vein, Hardy's narrator notes that Tess "had hoped to be a teacher at the school, but the fates seemed to decide otherwise" (*Tess* 54), with which he associates Tess's failure to the lack of means that is based on lack of opportunity. Both writers show how women were confined to the domestic sphere due to gender and were limited in their options during the Victorian era. Consequently, these works highlight the complexity and ambiguity of Victorian gender ideology, making it essential to consider the historical context in which they were written.

The Victorian era was marked by rigid gender roles and expectations, which greatly influenced the portrayal of gender in literature, as seen in *Middlemarch* and *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. To truly grasp the intersection of gender representation and societal norms in these works, it is essential to examine the historical and cultural context of the period thoroughly. As Victor Seidler notes in *Recreating Sexual Politics* (1991), the understanding of gender and its power dynamics are intertwined with the specific historical and sociocultural conditions of a society (217). In other words, gender becomes a product of various societal forces and norms. Thus, it is crucial to examine the overall image of the era by analysing gender issues reflected in the selected novels. Before this aspect is explored in this chapter, it is noteworthy to present a brief overview of the

authors and the novels under investigation, starting with Eliot, while the novels are arranged chronologically according to their year of publication.

Regarded as one of the most unique woman writers of the Victorian era, George Eliot not only produced numerous novels, but also wrote philosophical pamphlets. Graham Handley describes Eliot as an author who “brought to her writing a wide and informed learning, a knowledge in the depth of science, philosophy, religion, languages, and their literatures, as well as a strong sense of moral and social responsibility,” and depicts her not merely as a novelist, but also as a philosopher and historian (5). In her writings, Eliot tackles “the problems of knowing the world and other minds” (Anger 82), and her novels explore social, cultural, and political issues, including class and gender issues that challenge Victorian patriarchal ideology. Harold Bloom also argues that Eliot’s works “vigorously portray the limitations experienced by women” (147); that is, she examines the culturally imposed norms on females and males with a primary focus on the limited opportunities given to women in their social milieux.

However, Eliot’s aim is not solely to improve women’s conditions in the first place; frankly, she seeks for the betterment of the whole race rather than for the welfare of an individual isolated from the community. Eliot sees, as Gillian Beer notes, “men and women as locked together by their needs and hopes” rather than as separate individuals (2). About this, Stopford Brooke asserts that Eliot “lowered the power of individualism,” and constituted her characters with the primary “purpose of showing that their individualism was to be sacrificed to the general welfare of the race,” which would lead them towards a state of “happiness or peace” (qtd. in Bloom 57). Brooke maintains that Eliot’s works challenge the notion of individualism by demonstrating that the individual interests of men and women must be subordinated to the well-being of the community, where men and women will find peace. Besides, Eliot’s utilisation of realism, along with other genres, leads to a “drive towards a true (in Lewes’ sense) representation of life” (Levine, *The Cambridge* 17). That is, her narratives generally portray themes that are true to life, reflecting her time concerning women’s social status, education, and their only vocation, marriage, thoroughly and realistically.

Such a realistic depiction of life might be found in Eliot’s *Middlemarch*, published in 1871. The novel is not only deemed as her “greatest work,” according to Edith Simcox,

but also “has scarcely a superior and very few equals in the whole wide range of English fiction” (1). Contemplated to possess a unique acuity, *Middlemarch* “marks an epoch in the history of fiction” because “incidents are taken from the inner life” and most notably, “the action is developed by the direct influence of mind on mind and character on character,” whereas “the material circumstances of the outer world are made subordinate and accessory to the artistic presentation;” that is, they give “background of perfect realistic truth to a profoundly imaginative psychological study” (Simcox 1). Eliot, in this respect, illustrates an intense insight into the human mind and society, blending this with her ethical vision in her work. Harold Bloom also positions Eliot within the group of great philosophers instead of seeing her merely as a great artistic writer and adds that *Middlemarch* amazes him artistically because it is the only novel that makes a “moral reflection to the level of high art” (6).

Although *Middlemarch* is widely admired, it has also been criticised for its imperfections. Henry James, for example, calls it “one of the strongest and one of the weakest of English novels,” explaining that it is “a treasure-house of detail, but it is an indifferent whole” (qtd. in Bloom and Atkinson 160). James believes that while *Middlemarch* contained many impressive characters and scenes, they did not come together as a satisfying whole and criticises Eliot for losing simplicity in her writing. Despite this, Jeannie Thomas argues that Eliot has been criticised for not putting the “‘woman question’,” as expected from her as a female writer “in the foreground of the contemporary scene of *Middlemarch*” (410). According to Thomas, the critique of Eliot and *Middlemarch* resulted from the novel’s intricate and multi-layered portrayal of a community of men and women struggling against life’s limitations, and Eliot has been misunderstood because she represented conventional gender roles and the complexity of the story. Nevertheless, *Middlemarch* has also been reread as a literary piece that questions gender conventions, mainly women’s submission and “the disabilities of a woman’s lot” within patriarchal discourse (Blake 288). Hence, this thesis explores the gender question in *Middlemarch* from a feminist perspective and demonstrates gender disparities and inequalities among the middle class in the early Victorian period.

On the other hand, Thomas Hardy is considered as one of the most prominent authors of the Victorian period, renowned for his vast oeuvre encompassing both novels and poetry. Dale Kramer’s assertion that Hardy is “the last great Victorian novelist, the

first modern novelist” (*Critical Approaches* 1) highlights Hardy’s significance as a literary figure of his time. Despite this, Simone Gatrell argues that “Hardy’s novels offer a series of individuals who try in some way to fight social convention” (88). In other words, Hardy focuses on individuals and their struggle against societal norms rather than on the community as a whole, as observed in George Eliot’s work. This makes Hardy’s approach to character development distinctive. In addition, gender issues, particularly the plight of women during the Victorian period, are a central theme in Hardy’s work. As is explained by Margaret Higonnet, Hardy’s portrayal of women is noteworthy because he creates “strong, complex, “realistic,” and challenging” female characters (2). Like Eliot, Hardy has taken a stand against these constraints women faced in their social environment, reflecting these gender-based issues through his heroines who often fall victim to the conventions of their community, traditions, and norms.

Thomas Hardy’s novel *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*, published in 1891, is seen as one of his most challenging works in terms of its portrayal of women’s struggles through his heroine Tess, who is portrayed as a victim. Tess becomes “virtually a victim of injustices” (Yu 74) and “a victim of her sexuality” (Rooney 478) according to Victorian standards. The novel demonstrates the significant themes of Hardy’s writings, especially the inequities of Victorian double standards regarding sexuality, morality, gender, and class hierarchies that mainly affect women. This novel perfectly illustrates Hardy’s disavowal of creating the ideal Victorian woman who embodies the “angel in the house” role. Instead, Hardy creates Tess as an unconventional and complicated woman who does not fit into the socio-culturally constructed gender norms and conventions. Following this, Morgan states that Hardy composes “female models who did not conform to the stereotypes” (*Women* xii). Additionally, Elizabeth Langland argues that Hardy’s “representations of women, by and large, exceed the simple stereotypes scholars initially identified as characteristic images of women” (Langland, “Nobody’s Angels” 32).

Moreover, Hardy’s formation of the “New Woman”,¹ who has been depicted as independent and objecting to being constituted by the male-dominated society, is evident

¹ The term “New Woman” was introduced by the writer and public speaker Sarah Grand in 1894, and quickly gained popularity in newspapers and literature. The New Woman, a prominent cultural icon of the fin de siècle, deviated from the typical Victorian woman in numerous ways. She was educated, intelligent, independent, emancipated, and self-sufficient. The New Woman was not limited to middle-class female radicals, but also included working-class women employed in factories and offices.

in his late works, especially in his novel *Jude the Obscure* and to some degree in his novel *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. Another critical issue Hardy touches upon within *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* is the notion of fate which plays a crucial role in moulding individual lives and their tragic ends, as Jeannie Brooks states that “Hardy’s characters with their tragic strength are types interacting ritually with fate” (qtd. in Harvey, *The Complete* 18-19). Brooke further explains that Hardy’s work emphasises the role of fate but also highlights the importance of human responsibility to alter the course of fate “before it is too late” (18-19). Similarly, Roy Morrell asserts that “Hardy’s characters, whatever they may feel, are not the slaves of blind chance, let alone Fate” (qtd. in Wright 13). Both scholars claim that fate is not the only determinant in creating the tragic ends of his female characters but that society plays an important role. This may be explained by Jeannette King’s words: “heredity and environment, character and society are each conceived as modern Fates” (26). Crucially, this modern fate hinders Tess from achieving her goal of becoming a teacher. Regarding this, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* primarily reflects the confines of the patriarchal ideology constraining individuals and the constructedness of genders and gendered identities, which the second chapter will explore. In order to understand genders and their constructed aspects, it is first necessary to examine gender roles and women’s portrayals in Victorian society and second to investigate Judith Butler’s arguments concerning gendered subjectivity and her theory of gender performativity.

i. GENDER ROLES AND WOMEN’S PORTRAYAL IN THE VICTORIAN ERA

This part aims to provide a concise overview of the Victorian era by examining the societal changes reflected in the novels *Middlemarch* and *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, with a particular focus on gender issues and women’s portrayal. From 1837 to 1901, the Victorian period was characterised by expansion, mobility, and progress, primarily driven by the Industrial Revolution². This revolution changed the class structure and deepened upper, middle, and working classes. The development of the middle class resulted in improved prosperity, while the working class faced increased misery. As Susie Steinbach

² The Industrial Revolution brought significant socio-economic changes, which increased class and gender inequalities. Men in the burgeoning middle class enjoyed new economic opportunities, while the working class, including many women, faced exhausting working conditions. Industry profited from women’s lower wage standards by employing them on a cheap and large scale. Despite their hard work, which often equalled or exceeded men’s, women’s efforts were undervalued, resulting in stark wage differentials and entrenching gender inequalities in the labour market.

points out in her book *Understanding the Victorians* (2017), in 1820, there were striking lifestyle differences among Britain's upper, middle, and lower classes; however, as society became "more industrialized and urbanized," these distinctions changed, and "the middle class was larger, richer, and more powerful than it had been in 1820," beginning to assert its cultural dominance (7). The rise of the middle class, rapidly improving politically and economically, weakened the position of aristocrats and became the backbone of society. As a result, the middle class influenced many domains, such as society, culture, and literature.

Despite these significant changes in economic, social, and class conditions, the main change of the Victorian era centred on women, women's nature and most importantly, women's place in society. This period was particularly complicated and challenging for women because industrialisation gave rise to "a new gender ideology," and "as ideas of rights and social justice spread more widely, ideas about women *narrowed*" (French 128). The newly created gender ideology not only defined the roles of men and women, but also positioned men and women differently within society. While Kathryn Hughes draws attention to this ideology in her article "Gender Roles in the 19th Century" by stating that "men and women's role became more sharply defined than at any time in history" (1), Nancy Armstrong claims that women were compelled into the domestic role and sphere, which ultimately resulted in "the formation of separate spheres" (9). These scholars argue that the development of the middle class and the ensuing social upheaval of the Victorian era determined men's and women's roles in society, namely, developed the "separate sphere" ideology. Regarded as one of the main issues of the Victorian era, the "separate sphere"³ ideology was created, based on the assumption that women and men are entirely antithetical by nature. This understanding has caused men's supremacy over women in history. The male gender has been regarded as vigorous, rational, and self-confident. The female gender, on the other hand, has been associated with the role of being weak, fragile, docile, submissive, and dependent.

3

The excerpt from Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* highlights a pervasive ideology during the 1960s that held domesticity as the ultimate and only acceptable expression of femininity. Friedan's description of the modern mystique reflects the historical concept of the "separate sphere" ideology in Victorian England, turning domestic aspects of feminine existence into a "religion" and an unquestionable norm, which sheds light on how the confinement of women to household roles persists, despite societal advancements.

This mentality has created the “separate spheres” ideology, as Susan Kent argues, stating that “men possessed the capacity for reason, action, aggression, independence, and self-interest (thus belonging to public sphere)” (30). In contrast, women belonged to the “private sphere,” for they were “suitable for the so-called qualities of femininity: emotion, passivity, submission, dependence, and selflessness” (Kent 30). Society confined women into the domestic sphere in the nineteenth century and assigned them socially constructed roles based on their biological characteristics, particularly their reproductive capacity (Kent 30). Ascribing specific values to women’s bodies, patriarchal society presents them as mothers, seductive, sexual, and, most importantly, procreative, compelling women to absorb these values and perform their gender roles within these bounds.

The gender division as such has caused power instability amidst women and men within the Victorian heterosexual culture and society, supporting men to become self, a subject, and creating a partial perception of women as other, an object. Donald Stone criticises this Victorian fallacy, pointing out that men’s treatment of women is regarded as “one of the sins of the Victorians” (65). In a similar vein, Simone de Beauvoir argues that man “isolated woman in the home” and reduced her to the role of the “angel in the house” (114), to an angel who was burdened with specific tasks. This again sheds light on how women were confined to the family boundaries within the domestic environment, excluded from the public sphere and subjected to the gender roles determined by men.

Eliot displays the situation of separate spheres in *Middlemarch* through Dorothea and her uncle Mr Brooke when Dorothea proffers to help her uncle with the paperwork, while Mr Brooke refuses “I cannot let young ladies meddle with my documents, Young ladies are too flighty” (Eliot, *Middlemarch* 24). With a conventional attitude, the uncle ignores Dorothea’s identity and underestimates her intelligence because of her gender. Later in the novel, he expects Dorothea to comment on a landscape painting, for it is, in his opinion, more suitable for girls: “this is just the thing for girls – sketching, fine art and so on” (Eliot, *Middlemarch* 73). Mr Brooke reflects the Victorian mindset by delimiting Dorothea in many ways, specifying her role and place within the domestic sphere because of her gender. Examining Victorian domestic ideology, Langland posits that “spaces were coded as masculine or feminine” and that “drawing rooms” in the Victorian age “were regarded as feminine” (“Nobody’s Angels” 295). This division of gender and sphere reflects women’s conditions and the double standards of patriarchal society, leaving

women no choice but to marry, dramatically positioning them as “angels in the house” and “domestic servants.”

The Victorian mentality that conditioned women to marry and to become the angel within their homes appeared iconographical in Coventry Patmore’s poem “The Angel in the House” (1854). A primary concern of Patmore while composing his poem seems to be his desire to idealise his beloved wife Emily by depicting her as perfect, angelic, and compatible with Victorian ideology. This poem portrays the woman as the symbol of self-sacrifice, with lines such as “she casts her best, she flings herself” (4), describing her absolute devotion to her husband. Often her efforts go unnoticed, as she “flings for nought, and yokes her heart to an icicle or a whim” (5-6). The poem also emphasises the woman’s docile nature, as she is “too gentle even to force his penitence by kind replies” (9-10), signifying a submissive nature idealised in the Victorian era. The expectancies of Patmore and therewith, of the Victorian male society, which is exposed in this poem, reduce women to submissive, fragile, docile, ethical, pure, and self-sacrificing creatures. Women devoted themselves to their husbands in the domestic sphere, who, according to Patmore, “must be pleased,” and “him to please is woman’s pleasure” (1-2). A decent wife was not merely expected to comply with her husband’s demands but also to fulfil his desires since women were deemed as objects of manly desire and were considered to occupy a secondary status in terms of gender.

On the other hand, as an egalitarian, John Stuart Mill opposed Victorian mentality and refuted the idea that women are legally inferior to men in his work, *The Subjection of Women* (1869). Mill argues that men and women should be treated equally, and neither gender should claim superiority or privilege over the other (25). However, as Mill states, “men do not solely want obedience of women,” but also their emotions, because men do not desire “a forced slave but a willing one” (17). Therefore, he rejects the idea of subordinating women and claims that marriage is “a mere affair of force between the master and the slave” (7). By so doing, Mill asserts that the marital institution can be considered coequal to legitimate slavery and “there remains no legal slaves, except the mistress of every house” (89). Mill compares women’s predicament – their subordination and suppression by patriarchy – to slavery and proposes to emancipate women, for this may culminate in prosperity not only for women as men estimate but for the whole.

In contrast to Mill's understanding of woman's status, John Ruskin confirms the view that women are angels in the private spheres even if he states otherwise as follows:

[W]e are foolish, and without foolish, in speaking of the "superiority" of one sex to the other, as if they could be compared in similar things. Each has what the other has not: each completes the other and is completed by the other: they are in nothing alike, and the happiness and perfection of both depends on each asking and receiving from the other what the other can only give. (44)

This passage, taken from *The Sesame and Lilies*, which includes one of Ruskin's Lectures, "Of the Queens Garden," might confuse the issue by implying equality in his sentences, such as "each completes the other" or "both depends on each" (44). Nevertheless, as the reading progresses, it becomes clear that his true attitude is the opposite, as he regards men as "the doer, the creator, the discoverer, the defender" (Ruskin 44) and women as subservient helpmates or guardians. As such, Ruskin's mentality aligns with the Victorian mindset that women belong to the private sphere, as moral creatures, or as guides to their husbands. Ruskin also idealises women as "incorruptibly good" and "infallibly wise" (45). However, he suggests that women should not use their wisdom for their advancement but for "self-renunciation" to preserve the stability and security of society from any potential changes in power dynamics (45). Consequently, Ruskin was aware that women's empowerment could challenge traditional gender roles and expectations, prompting rebellion against them.

The perspectives mentioned above by Patmore and Ruskin on feminine roles notably impacted Victorian society's marriage and women's position within it. The prevalent view of Victorian society was that women's foremost responsibilities were to become skilled homemakers. As M. H. Abrams and Stephen Greenblatt argue, this was the "ideal function of Victorian women" (x). In the Victorian patriarchal society, marriage and family were meant to take precedence over everything else in women's lives. In line with this, Phillipa Levine defines marriage for a woman in the nineteenth century as "perhaps the single most profound and far-reaching institution that would affect the course of her life" (150). In this era, marriage played a key role in women's lives, for it was a defining aspect of their identity and a means to elevate their social standing. However, Levine criticises this ideology that coerces a woman to marry and punishes "the woman who did not marry, whether by choice or by chance," not only by marking "her as one of society's unfortunates," but also by casting her "aside from the common lot of the sex" (150). Levine's criticism of the Victorian attitude can be supported by Judith

Butler's statement that "those who fail to do their gender right are regularly punished" (522). In other words, in the Victorian era, women were compelled to play the gender roles attributed to them, and if they did not perform their roles properly, they faced punishment; that is, women had no choice but to conform to societal norms and to marry. Likewise, Michel Foucault in *The History of Sexuality* (1976) discusses the nineteenth-century perspective on gender and marriage, pointing to "matrimonial relations: the marital obligation" and suggesting that "the marriage relation was the most intense focus of constraints" (37). Foucault acknowledges that marriage played a decisive role in the confinement of women in the nineteenth century.

Moreover, in the Victorian society, women were classified into categories as "the ideal" and "the fallen." The "ideal woman" performed her ascribed role correctly, conformed to the norms of patriarchy, and thus was regarded as "the angel" or "the madonna." However, the "fallen woman" was viewed as immoral, ruined, and sexually active, namely, as a prostitute. Morgan criticises this "Victorian conceptual bifurcation of woman (madonna and whore)," which, as she states, "may seem to the modern mind to be primarily iconographical but carried sufficient influence within society to generate its likeness in form: notably the concept of two types of women, one fit for sex and the other for wife" (*Women* xii). This categorisation and labelling of women as either angels or whores influenced society and women's behaviour towards social expectations and norms. However, it can be concluded that the common reason for women either accepting marriage and complying with norms to become "angels" or not marrying and not complying with norms to become "fallen" is women's economic dependency on men.

Regarding this, the primary reason for women's predicament, revealing their exclusion from social, cultural, political, and academic domains, and becoming economically dependent on men, arises, according to some critics, due to the lack of equal educational opportunities. For example, Mary Wollstonecraft, Harriet Taylor, and John Stuart Mill agree that women should have the right to equal education. Nevertheless, during the Victorian era, women and girls faced educational limitations, being allowed to take education, but not enough. It was believed that it was men's duty to deal with serious subject matters. Ruskin argues that "a man ought to know any language or science he learns, thoroughly," whereas "a woman ought to know the same language, or science, only so far as may enable her to sympathize in her husband's pleasures" (49) illustrates

this discrimination between genders profoundly. In contrast, Wollstonecraft argues in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) that “truth must be common to all, or it will be inefficacious with respect to its influence on general practice” (22). This quote highlights the importance of providing equal access to education and knowledge for both genders, as it may benefit not only women but also men and ultimately contribute to the betterment of society.

Along the same line, Harriet Taylor in *The Enfranchisement of Women* (1851) claims that gender inequalities restrict women, and “to say that women must be excluded from active life because maternity disqualifies them for it, is in fact to say that every other career should be forbidden them, in order that maternity may be their only resource” (qtd. in Rossi 104). Taylor’s statement underlines the fact that women are limited to specific roles and confront hindrances because of their gender, as their primary function is to bear and raise children. Mill likewise advocates for equal opportunities for both sexes, stating that “equal opportunities for women would cause an improvement in their education, and their power would develop at equal pace with that of men” (22). Namely, the oppression that subjugates women to ignorance and denies them access to knowledge is rooted in gender discrimination based on the perception of women’s maternal characteristics. As a result, these scholars agree that women’s emancipation is primarily achievable through the implementation of equal conditions, giving women the opportunity to get equal education.

Within this context, Victorian fiction pays attention to gender issues and the place of women in society, demonstrating women’s performances in their daily lives within patriarchy. In the novels under scrutiny in this thesis, one can find that women’s roles have been created by a male-dominated society, thereby restricting their opportunities in many fields. Significantly, these roles were not merely imposed upon women but were also portrayed as natural facts of life. Thus, it is crucial to examine the notion of gender and how sex, gender, and social identities take form in a cultural context. The next part will discuss the concepts of sex, gender, and gendered identity in line with Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity.

ii. SEX, GENDER, AND IDENTITY: THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

This part will examine the emergence of gender studies and the phenomenon of sex

and gender through the critical perspectives of some feminist theorists such as Judith Butler, Simone de Beauvoir, Ann Oakley, Gayle Rubin, and Kate Millet, to name only a few. The analysis will focus on their critiques of these concepts and how they influenced people's perception of gender as a social construct. It would be reasonable to start the research by examining the emergence of gender studies and the factors that contributed to its development. In *50 Key Concepts in Gender Studies* (2004), Imelda Whelehan and Jane Pilcher see the "development of gender studies as an academic discipline" as follows: "its emergence can be dated as recently as the late 1960s, and its development triggered by second wave feminism," since in this period "second wave feminism began to draw attention to the ways in which academic disciplines and sets of knowledge acted to exclude the experiences, interests and identities of women" (ix). In other words, during the second wave of feminism, scholars began to underline that academic disciplines were built from the male perspective and that women's presence in these fields was neglected. Second wave feminism criticised this exclusionary nature of academic practices and called for the integration of women's experiences into the present fields of study and the formation of new disciplines such as gender studies.

However, it is worth noting that second wave feminism was not only concerned with the exclusion of women from academic fields but also with the misrepresentation of women, namely, women's constructed representations. As Pilcher and Whelehan note, "for second wave feminists the key site of struggle was the female body itself – its representation and the meanings attached to the bald fact of biological difference" (144). As this quotation underlines, women's inherent sex differences account for their being mainly depicted in conventional roles like wives and mothers. Namely, the male-dominated society created stereotypical images of women, which "reinforced dominant ideologies of gender difference and the qualities of ideal-type femininity" (Pilcher and Whelehan 135-134). Feminists have criticised these idealised and stereotypical representations of women because they contribute to the internalisation of the image of women as inferior, thus enabling their subordination. As Gerda Lerner remarks in *The Creation of Patriarchy* (1986), women are involved "in the process of their own subordination because they have been psychologically shaped so as to internalize the idea of their own inferiority" (218). Following this, "during the 1970s, second wave feminist critiques," and several diverse theoretical movements focused on gender and gender

disparities, particularly women's issues. Hence, in order to explore women's plight, studies primarily "focused on 'filling in the gaps' in knowledge about women, gaps left by the prior male bias. Attention gradually moved to those aspects of experiences especially significant to women, including paid work, housework, motherhood, and male violence" (Pilcher and Whelehan ix-x). To assert that the gaps were "left by prior male bias" confirms the fact that knowledge of women, women's representation, and femininity are artificial concepts, socially and culturally constructed rather than being innate qualities. Therefore, the purpose of gender studies is to examine gendered subjects, gender inequality, women's representation, and the force of social and cultural aspects on gender roles.

Consequently, the existing body of research on women reveals that Western society's patriarchal and hegemonic ideology subordinated women to men in terms of culture, language, and literature. This is exemplified by Lerner's statement that the patriarchal system's continuation is ensured by various factors such as "gender indoctrination; educational deprivation; the denial to women of knowledge of their history; the dividing of women," and further "by restraints and outright coercion; by discrimination in access to economic resources and political power" (217). In other words, women have been oppressed and misrepresented in many ways, which has been the general concern of feminisms. In this context, while first wave feminism has been focused on women's equal rights, educational opportunities, employment, and the "doctrine of separate spheres," second wave feminism has been concerned with the exclusion of women from academic fields and knowledge, the female body as well as the misrepresentation of women. Nevertheless, gender studies as an interdisciplinary field incorporate "Judith Butler['s] view that gender assignation only takes meaning through performance and iteration" (Pilcher and Whelehan xii), which considers the notion of gender as social, constructed. Hence, gender studies aim to analyse representations of gendered bodies and gendered identities, that is, matters of sex, gender, and sexuality, with a particular focus on women's or men's positioning in literary texts as well as in socio-cultural studies, which is the theoretical framework of this thesis.

In her notable work *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1999), which has "the most influential impact upon feminist understandings of gender identity" (McNay 175), Judith Butler introduces her theories about gender and

subjectivity, questioning the very nature of gender and its relation to sex and sexuality. Referring to various theoretical movements, especially to French feminist theories, as well as engaging with psychoanalysis and poststructuralist views in *Gender Trouble*, Butler argues that she “was most concerned to criticise a pervasive heterosexual assumption in feminist literary theory,” objecting to the views that “restricted the meaning of gender to received notions of masculinity and femininity” (*Gender Trouble* vii). With her analysis and approach to the concept of gender in this work and other books, Butler has given a completely different meaning to feminist theory by rejecting the conventional assumption that reduces the meaning of gender to masculinity and femininity, since in Butler’s view gender is not a binaristic understanding of masculinity and femininity but a socio-culturally constructed concept: “Originally intended to dispute the biology-destiny formulation, the distinction between sex and gender serves the argument that whatever biological intractability sex appears to have, gender is culturally constructed: hence, gender is neither the causal result of sex nor as seemingly fixed as sex” (*Gender Trouble* 9–10). She argues that sex has been considered congenital, whereas gender is constituted, and importantly, gender is neither the effect of sex nor as stable as sex. So, Butler examines the binary and relation of sex and gender, aiming to challenge the conventional feminist understandings of the sex/gender distinction (Lloyd 79), for in her view feminist ideas that accept these standards and use them as a basis for their arguments and defences are limiting themselves.

However, the idea that gender is culturally constituted did not initiate with Butler and did not emerge until the 1960s. Nevertheless, it was one of the defining characteristics of feminism during the 1970s and 1980s. In connection with this, Stevi Jackson asserts that Ann Oakley (1972) was amongst the first theorists to separate sex from gender, stating that sex is congenital, whereas gender is social (Jackson and Jones 132). To be specific, as Oakley argues in *Sex, Gender, and Society*, “‘sex’ is a word that refers to the biological differences between male and female: the visible difference in genitalia and the related difference in procreative function. ‘Gender,’ however, is a matter of culture: it refers to the social classification into ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’” (16). In her argument, the male and female sexes may usually be identified by looking at their biological evidence. However, they cannot be identified as masculine or feminine using the same standards since it is a matter of culture, bearing the possibility to change with time and

place (Oakley 16). Mari Mikkola provides a similar explanation, arguing that “[p]rovisionally: ‘sex’ denotes human females and males depending on biological features,” while “‘gender’ denotes women and men depending on social factors,” that is, the “social role, position, behaviour or identity” of men and women within their social milieux (“Feminist Perspectives”). According to Mikkola’s explanation, sex refers to innate notions of male and female, and gender is the representation of women and men in the social sphere, produced socio-culturally. Thus, in both perspectives, sex is seen as a biological fact, while gender is viewed as a social construction.

In contrast to that, some feminists have opposed and criticised this gender division. One of them is Myra Hird, who attacks society’s view on this division by stating that in “contemporary society, the conceptual division between ‘sex’ as the biological difference, and ‘gender’ as the social, cultural, economic, and political differences, between women and men is largely taken for granted” (24). Hird asserts that this arises because many people may not be aware that this separation is referred to as the sex/gender dichotomy (24). Nevertheless, even though this sex/gender division has experienced a considerable shift, according to Hird, many debates about gender inequity are ultimately explained by pointing to biological differences between sexes as the underlying cause (24). Indeed, Hird challenges the view that biological sex is a fixed and unalterable matter, while gender is a fluid one, and that biological factors should not be employed to justify gender inequities.

Rejecting claims of biological determinism and essentialism, feminist theorists like Simone de Beauvoir contend that gender-specific behavioural differences between men and women are not the result of innate chromosomal, hormonal, or even other biological factors but instead are the outcome of culture and upbringing. Simone de Beauvoir affirms in her masterpiece, *The Second Sex* (1949), that “one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman,” and further remarks that “no biological, psychological, or economic destiny defines the figure that the human female acquires in society; it is civilisation as a whole that develops this product, intermediate between female and eunuch, which one calls feminine” (273). Simply put, de Beauvoir’s view suggests that women are not born but made through a process of classification, socialisation, and performance of gender roles within the constraints of Western ideology.

Arguably, for de Beauvoir, the concept of gender eventuates through a gradual acquisition of the imposed cultural norms on identity. That is to say, to become a woman, one acquires certain attitudes and identities through the stage of maturity. de Beauvoir, in this sense, emphasises the “becoming-of-woman” process as non-biological, as it seems to be achieved through the coercion of the patriarchal androcentric culture. As such, she makes the argument that women’s destinies are not solely determined by biology. Concerning this, Toril Moi also points out that de Beauvoir “insists that hers is a theory of the social construction of femininity and masculinity,” and crucially that she “categorically refuses the idea of a biological or anatomical ‘destiny’ of any kind” (162). Thus, de Beauvoir criticises what causes women to become women and be relegated to secondary positions, emphasising that it is not due to biological factors but rather the result of a patriarchal and oppressive society.

In addition, according to de Beauvoir’s argument, patriarchal mechanisms of oppression award men roles as universal human subjects. In contrast, women are subjected to a subordinate role, classed as the second sex, inessential, and most notably the inferior other. This notion of otherness and power distinctions between women and men has been deemed as an outcome of biological essence that inevitably leads to the stereotype of women as being “naturally” and “biologically” weaker than men. Although de Beauvoir accepts “biological facts” as “one of the keys to the understanding of woman,” she refuses to accept a “fixed and inevitable destiny” for women, while biological considerations “fail to explain why women is the Other” (61). So, in de Beauvoir’s view, the process of becoming a woman reveals that women are not “a completed reality” (61) because women become women and fulfil their feminine roles according to a predetermined model, a model that is the product of social and cultural structures, not biology.

Similarly, Gayle Rubin defines the “sex/gender system” as a “set of arrangements by which a society transforms biological sexuality into products of human activity” (159). Simply put, the patriarchal society takes biologically determined differences between the sexes and converts them into fixed gendered attributes that “serve to empower men and disempower women” (Tong 51). These gendered attributes are naturalised as if they were inherent qualities of females and males, mainly intending to normalise these differences among sexes. As stated by Rubin, “the biological raw material of human sex and

procreation is shaped by human, social intervention,” and “gender is a socially imposed division of the sexes” (165–179). Hence, in Rubin’s contention, biological differences are fixed, stable, and not changeable. In contrast, gender disparities are the products of oppressive social interventions that prescribe women and men the appropriate gender roles, coercing them to act within this heterosexual frame, yet mainly forcing women “by having to be women” (204). For Rubin, the goal of feminists should not only be to liberate women from suppression but also from their imposed feminine and sexist roles.

A further definition of the sex/gender distinction is elaborated by Kate Millet, who also considers sex as biological and natural, whereas seeing gender as a notion established by society and its periphery. Millet specifies how society is structured, stating that females and males constitute not one but two distinct civilisations. Their histories and their experiences in life differ entirely, and this distinction is quite important. Remarkably, according to Millet, “the gender identity development which takes place through childhood is the sum total of the parents’, the peers’, and the culture’s notions of what is appropriate to each gender by way of temperament, character, interests, status, worth, gesture and expression” (31). As it is apparent in this quote, the impregnation of codes and manners into genders begins with infancy, indoctrinating men to be strong, superior, and dominant and women to be submissive, docile, and obedient. This conditioning, as Millet states, paves the way for a division in terminology and perception regarding gender identities, one in which “aggression is male” and “passivity is female” (32). What needs to be underlined here is that Millet regards gender disparities as consequences of differential manners, asserting that they lean upon “essentially cultural, rather than biological bases” (28–29). In showing the mechanisms by which masculine superiority is justified as natural, Millet concedes that in traditional societies, patriarchal authorities and gendered expectations around sexual behaviour are both products of years-long processes of cultural indoctrination.

Each of the arguments mentioned above makes an essential contribution to understanding the sex/gender distinction; however, presumably, it is Butler’s troubling of the sex/gender distinction in *Gender Trouble* that has received the most attention recently. Butler contends that both sex and gender must be deemed as socio-culturally constituted entities, asserting “if the immutable character of sex is contested, perhaps this construct called “sex” is as culturally constructed as gender; indeed, perhaps it was always already

gender,” consequently, according to Butler “the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all” (*Gender Trouble* 10–11). Concerning this, some scholars suggest that “postmodernist feminists, such as Butler, scrutinised and dismantled and disrupted the very notion of gender/sex in the conceptualisations of gender,” and remarkably, “[c]rucial to Butler’s conceptualization of gender is her breaking down of the boundary between sex and gender to provide and display the patriarchal productions of gender and sexuality” (Yazgünoğlu 18-19). In this sense, Butler deconstructs the binary opposition of sex and gender by claiming that sex, like gender, is socially and discursively constructed throughout history.

For Butler, the very notions of sex and gender operate as oppressive means in a heterosexual culture where individuals are predominantly evaluated based on their sexual identities. Gender, as defined by Stella Sandford, pertains to “socio-cultural forms of identity, or to culturally and institutionally normative sets of rules” (18), through which femininity is expected from females and masculinity of males according to established norms. Butler rejects this dualistic structure of the heteronormative system, asserting that it is socially and culturally constructed through a heterosexual discourse to naturalise genders and gender differences (*Gender Trouble* 30). In other words, she claims that the assumption of an essential male-female divide and the concept of woman as a category both serve to perpetuate heterosexuality as the accepted norm, namely, to reproduce heterosexuality as the standard norm (30-31). In this sense, the classifications of sex and gender appear to be normative and serve to normalise gendered behaviour and expression. Regarding this, some scholars set forth that Butler “explains normativity as the process of normalization, during which certain norms, ideas and structures provide criteria for normal men and women and decide which expressions of gender are acceptable and which are not” and “normalization restricts the meaning of gender by imposing exclusionary gender norms” (Akçeşme 24). Consequently, the law of the patriarchal system, which adheres to the normative heterosexual standard, is not only restrictive but also controlling. This law imposes limitations on individuals, leading to the formation of culturally intelligible identities (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 172-173), namely, conforming and acceptable identities that fit into the heterosexual matrix.

It would then entail defining the heterosexual matrix, which in Butlerian terms, describes the social structure that regulates and normalises sex, gender, and gender

identities. This heterosexual cultural structure refers to the socio-cultural norms regarding gender and imposes rigid sex/gender norms. Butler shows the regulatory power of heterosexuality “to designate that grid of cultural intelligibility through which bodies, genders, and desires are naturalized” (*Gender Trouble* 151). Crucially, it presumes a binary gender structure where men and women have fixed heterosexual roles, expected to perform their roles properly. For Butler, the main reason for subjecting the human body to a dualistic distinction by categorising it as male and female is to naturalise the heteropatriarchal system, institutions, and norms through which the construction of gender eventuates. However, she further gets to the point that “gender might very well be the apparatus by which such terms are deconstructed and denaturalized” (Butler, *Undoing Gender* 42). So, in Butlerian understanding, this fixed and conventional concept of gender might be dismantled and deconstructed by subverting those accepted and normalised gender roles through the moulding of gendered acts because “what we take to be ‘real’, what we invoke as the naturalized knowledge of gender is, in fact, a changeable and revisable reality” (*Gender Trouble* xxiv). So, questioning the very nature of gender, Butler theorises it not as a fixed category but rather as a dynamic one.

Within this context, it is worth referring to Michel Foucault, who in *The History of Sexuality* (1976) characterises sex as a “fictitious unity” and further “as a basis for regulations” (146-154). Foucault argues that “the notion of ‘sex’ made it possible to group together in an artificial unity, anatomical elements, biological functions, conducts, sensations, and pleasures,” and most notably this “enabled one to make use of this fictitious unity as a causal principle” (154). For Foucault, sex is a socially and culturally constructed category that artificially unifies disparate elements. Foucault’s assertion is that “sex” is not solely a term to describe biological or physical characteristics, but operates as “a causal principle,” which regulates, controls, and shapes behaviours and identities. However, Foucault states that “we must not refer a history of sexuality to the agency of sex; but rather show how “sex” is historically subordinate to sexuality,” because “sexuality is a very real historical formation,” which “gave rise to the notion of sex” (157). Thus, in this view, societal perceptions of sex and sexuality are not inherent truths, but social constructs moulded and managed by power structures. Foucault considers the formation of sexuality intimately tied to historical practices that intertwine discourse, institutions, and practices that are influenced by power structures, as exemplified by his

statement that “sexuality resides within matrices of power” (152). Foucault highlights the intricate interplay between power, discourse, history and the construction of sex and sexuality. Drawing from Foucault, Butler notes that for Foucault, sexuality is “an historically specific organization of power, discourse, bodies, and affectivity,” and importantly, “the body gains meaning within discourse only in the context of power relations” (*Gender Trouble* 117). Identities, bodies, and subjects are, in Foucauldian conception, discursively constructed and significantly the effects of power and discourse. Simply put, subjects do not form discourses, practices, and power; rather, subjectivities are fabricated by discursive practices. However, in Butlerian terms, sexed bodies and gendered identities are constituted through rituals and repetitions of the norms under the constraints of social institutions and the heterosexual matrix, which will be analysed in the following part.

iii. GENDER PERFORMATIVITY AND GENDER AS PERFORMANCE

In her essay, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory” (1988), and thereafter in her book *Gender Trouble*, Butler places the concept of “gender performativity” at the core of her theory. She argues that gender is constituted through iterative acts in time and that gender is performative. This means that gender is brought into existence through continuous social performances that eventuate within the framework of the prevailing social and cultural norms and practices. As Butler explains, “gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in a space through a *stylized repetition of acts*” (“Performative Act” 519). Adopting de Beauvoir’s argument, Butler regards gender as not something one “is” but as something one “does,” as an ongoing activity, a process, in cultural and social context. By emphasising the idea that that gender is a “doing,” Butler puts forward that “the effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self” (“Performative Act” 519). So, gender is neither a fixed category nor a stable identity, but a social construct created through repeated acts. Thus, it is through the reiteration of the stylised and socio-culturally regulated acts that the body/subject becomes gendered or sexed within a society.

Butler emphasises the very significance of performativity which functions

essentially as the core of her gender theory. Chiefly, her central argument is that “gender identity is a performative accomplishment compelled by social sanction and taboo” (Butler, “Performative Acts” 520). Butler’s understanding of performativity is the practice of carrying out specific acts that she claims are necessary for the construction of gender through regular bodily practices. That is because, in Butler’s view, gender evolves over time in response to different social, cultural, and historical contexts, indicating that the body is not the cause of gender, and neither is “a natural fact” (“Performative Acts” 520). As mentioned before, Butler uses de Beauvoir’s noted phrase that “one is not born, but rather becomes a woman” (de Beauvoir 273) to demonstrate that the construction of gender depends on the enactment of bodily behaviours. Along with this claim that the body is a form of doing, in Beauvoirian understanding, the body also “*is* a historical situation,” which Butler epitomises as following:

When Beauvoir claims that ‘woman’ is a historical idea and not a natural fact, she clearly underscores the distinction between sex, as biological facticity, and gender, as the cultural interpretation or signification of that facticity. To be female is according to that distinction, a facticity which has no meaning, but to be a woman is to have become a woman, to compel the body to conform to an historical idea of ‘woman,’ to induce the body to become a cultural sign, to materialize oneself in obedience to an historically delimited possibility, and to this as a sustained and repeated corporeal project. (“Performative Acts” 522)

As the above lines indicate, gender is a construction that is performative, based on iterative acts, and notably occurs in a specific cultural and historical context. In that vein, Sarah Salih supports the idea that “both Butler and de Beauvoir assert that gender is a process which has neither origin nor end so that it is something that we ‘do’ rather than ‘are’” (46). To rephrase it, Butler and de Beauvoir agree with the idea that gender is a “doing” rather than a “being.” Likewise, a female is expected to perform “feminine” attitudes to become a woman, whilst a man is expected to perform masculine behaviour. To illustrate this notion of gendered acts with a well-known example, being fragile is often associated with women, while remaining strong is more often associated with men. This shows that men are protective, and women are creatures with a delicate and fragile nature that need protection. Although it seems normal, these stereotypically feminine and masculine behaviours/acts are the products of a gendered social structure, a polarisation of the sexes that is ingrained in culture, society, and institutions, proving that these acts are not natural but instead produced; hence, that gender is a “doing” rather than a “being.”

Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman also propose that gender is not something inherent, something “given,” but rather it is a “doing,” in particular, a “situated doing,”

an “achieved status,” enacted by individuals. As they state, the “‘doing’ of gender is undertaken by women and men whose competence as members of society is hostage to its production” (126), implicating that societal standing is tied to an individual’s gender performance. They further emphasise that “doing gender” is not an isolated or individual act but a “routine accomplishment embedded in everyday interaction,” noting that it is an essential and constant part of social interaction (125). This perspective underlines the widespread impact of cultural and social norms on gendered behaviours in daily interactions. Moreover, West and Zimmerman depict gender as “the activity of managing situated conduct in light of normative conceptions of attitudes and activities appropriate for one’s sex category” (127). This means that men and women constantly adjust their behaviours and actions based on gender norms and expectations specific to their social surroundings. Nevertheless, West and Zimmerman relate this constant adjustment to the fact that gender presentation is an inescapable aspect of daily life, by stating that “doing gender is unavoidable” (137). Every action and interaction provide an opportunity for individuals to display their gender.

West and Zimmerman further elaborate on the concept of gender performance being “accountable,” which means it is always subject to evaluation based on its adherence “to normative constructions of femininity or masculinity” (136). As they put it, each gender’s performance is at “the risk of gender assessment” (136), and, when people conform to conventional gender roles, they reinforce, endorse, and “reproduce,” those “institutional arrangements that are based on sex category” (146). So, West and Zimmerman contend that gender is not just a part of one’s identity, it is an ongoing process, an active “doing” that confronts recurrently in interactions with others (140). Conclusively, while both Butler and West and Zimmerman’s theories claim gender as a “doing,” they offer different perspectives on how this “doing” unveils. For instance, West and Zimmerman focus on the adjustments made in everyday interactions to align with the gender norms of distinctive social contexts, whereas Butler stresses repeated performances that individuals iteratively enact, influenced by social norms and expectations.

In a similar vein, Penelope Eckert and Sally McConnell Ginnet, in their exploration of gender, affirm that gender is not a static or inherent trait but a continual “doing,” a performative act that is both individual and social. As they argue, gender is not “something we have, but something we do,” for “gender does not simply unfold from

individual biology,” but rather “is a social arrangement, and every individual’s gender is built into the social order” (32). This statement expresses their view on gender as a social construct, a doing that people engage in social contexts. They elaborate on this concept, stating that gender is “something that is actively done both by the individual” as well as “by those who interact with it in the various communities to which it belongs,” namely that “gender is a collaborative affair” (17). So, gender becomes a dynamic performance, which is not merely limited to specific situations or environments but is a constant aspect of everyday interactions, varying according to the social norms and expectations of the given context. To exemplify this given context, it is crucial to consider the progression of a girl, who learns to act like a student, then as a lawyer, and thereafter learns to be a wife or mother, that is, with the change of the context also the expectations of a given society and the behaviours of the individual change (30). As a result, Eckert and Ginet’s argument presents gender as an active “doing” that is constantly changing in response to social interactions and contexts. Both Eckert and Ginet’s perspective and Butler’s theory of gender performativity underscore the performative and socially constructed nature of gender and emphasise how performances contribute to the doing of gender.

Butler points to the concept of performativity, suggesting that the idea of gender being an inherent characteristic is a fabrication of repeatedly performing and stylising acts:

The view that gender is performative sought to show that what we take to be an internal essence of gender is manufactured through a sustained set of acts, posited through the gendered stylization of the body. In this way, it showed that what we take to be an “internal” feature of ourselves is one that we anticipate and produce through certain bodily acts, at an extreme, an hallucinatory effect of naturalized gestures. (*Gender Trouble* xv)

In the quote above, Butler argues that gender is an effect, not a cause; gendered behaviour emerges not from gender but from acts repeatedly performed, thereby naturalising gender. In her view, a gendered subject is not the origin of these acts but rather the outcome. For Butler, identity categories are not inherent; they are “the *effects* of institutions, practices, discourses with multiple and diffuse point of origins” (*Gender Trouble* xxix). Butler strives to reveal that these seemingly essential categories are, in fact, socio-cultural and historical fabrications that are moulded by the “conditions of normative heterosexuality” (xii). This heterosexual matrix, she posits, exerts a compelling force on women as well as men, namely, directing them to act and desire in ways that correspond with the opposite sex. In showing gender as such, Butler notes that normalisation functions as a means to

keep the meaning of gender within defined bounds and that the normative heterosexual codes of the patriarchal system, which as regulating forces, construct culturally intelligible genders. As a matter of fact,

such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are performative in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means. That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality. (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 173)

As stated above, the gendered body/identity is a production formed and maintained through performative acts and discursive practices, constrained within the heterosexual matrix. Considering the gendered body/identity as performative implies that it is not possible to give any ontological position to it aside from the set of acts that form its actual existence. So conceived, “gender reality” becomes “performative which means, quite simply, that it is real only to the extent that it is performed” (Butler, “Performative Acts” 527). In other words, regarding gender acts and features as performative means that gendered subjectivity is constituted through those repeated acts, which bear socially established meanings within the frame of compulsory heterosexuality.

Acknowledging the performative nature of gender, Butler further lays stress upon the illusionary aspect of gender identity and its foundations in social norms. As she states, gender is seen as an illusion rather than a fact, and notably, the perception of gender is fabricated by a variety of acts, while “without those acts, there would be no gender at all” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 178). Those performed acts, gestures and expressed desires, as Butler articulates in *Gender Trouble*, “create the illusion of an interior and organizing gender core, an illusion discursively maintained for the purposes of the regulation of sexuality within the frame of reproductive heterosexuality” (73). Notably, this illusion serves to reinforce the impression that gender behaviours are natural and that their principal purpose is to sustain social order and enforced heterosexuality. Moving away from Butler’s perspective, it is important to consider the commentaries of other scholars on this topic, like Gill Jagger, who interprets the notion of gender and performativity by pointing out that gender

is a matter of the repetition of gender acts in which all aspects, including any sense of a psychological interiority, are fictional products of reproductive heterosexuality. And reproductive heterosexuality is also a fictional construct, which works as a regulatory ideal in Butler’s account of performativity. (28)

In this regard, gender is a construct, and significantly in Butlerian view, it is performative.

First, however, it is important to underscore that this performance is undoubtedly not something that people do on a daily basis out of their own free will; instead, it “is what is put on, invariably, under constraint, daily and incessantly, with anxiety and pleasure” (Butler, “Performative Acts” 531). Nevertheless, gendered subjects are not aware that they are acting out established and prescribed traditional behaviours, which are “the customs and practices of a culture” (Barker 137). Because gender roles are enacted by all members of a society based on identical cultural and historical standards, people belonging to the same culture follow the same script while acting out their gender roles, which eventually leads to a perception of gender as something innate and natural. As Butler suggests, “sex, gender, and heterosexuality are historical products which have become conjoined and reified as natural over time” (“Performative Acts” 525). In light of these observations, it becomes evident that gender is deeply ingrained and normalised within society, inextricably tied to daily performances, shaping the understanding of gender identity.

Moving on to Butler’s further arguments, it is essential to note that while Butler posits gender identities as the product of performative acts, thereby framing gender as an act of doing, she also asserts the absence of a “doer” or subject behind these actions. As she argues, “gender proves to be performative—that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be,” and notably, “gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed” (*Gender Trouble* 33). In essence, Butler proposes that the conventional understanding of a “doer” who initiates the “doing” of gender is misleading. Instead, the act of performing gender itself brings the “doer” into existence. Building on this, Butler denies the existence of a “doer” behind the acts, arguing that “there is no ‘being’ behind doing, effecting, becoming; ‘the doer’ is merely a fiction added to the deed – the deed is everything” (*Gender Trouble* 33). Therefore, the idea that a person performs gender roles as an independent entity is not accurate. This means that actions are not secondary to one’s identity; instead, actions themselves shape and construct the identity. Consequently, it is not the “doer” influencing the actions, but rather the actions define the doer.

Proceeding from the concept that deeds shape the “doer,” rather than the doer dictating the actions, the exploration turns to Salih’s interpretation of Butler’s ideas on gender identity, performance, and performativity. Salih underlines that for Butler “gender

identity is a sequence of acts,” nevertheless, there is no pre-existing performer of these acts, that is, there is no doer prior to the act (45). Butler’s primary intention, according to Salih, is to make “a distinction between *performance* (which presupposes the existence of a subject) and *performative* (which does not)” (45). As the terms “performance” and “performativity” are confusing and used interchangeably, Butler attempts to clarify this complex notion of performance and performativity in *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (2011) by defining “performance as bounded “act” and differentiates it “from performativity” which “consists in a reiteration of norms which precede, constrain, and exceed the performer and in that sense cannot be taken as the fabrication of the performer’s ‘will’ or ‘choice’” (178). As is explicit in Butler’s contention, one’s choice of gender is indeed limited within the confines of prescribed and mandatory sexed as well as gendered contexts. The performer is not free to choose but is forced to perform the iterative acts. These repeated acts, as Butler puts forth, are not “performed by a subject;” rather, reiterative acts create the subject and also make up the subject’s temporal status (*Bodies* 60). Consequently, women as subjects do not choose to be women of their own volition. Instead, they become women by performing the socio-culturally established norms which preexist them. Hence, these predetermined norms and rules in which the actions of gender identities are evaluated categorise them as women or men since those norms function by compelling people to embody the predetermined standards of femininity and masculinity and, most importantly, idealise heterosexuality.

Considering such norms and rules that idealise heterosexuality and constrain subjects, Butler draws attention to the consequences of deviating from these gender norms. Non-compliance, as Butler suggests, invites social “punishment,” compelling people to embody their culturally assigned gender roles. Because, if people “fail to perform the illusion of gender” in line with societal expectations, and do not fit into the prescribed norms, then “culture so readily punishes or marginalizes” them (Butler, “Performative Acts” 528). Such threats of marginalisation and punishment push both females and males to enact gender-conforming gender behaviours, adhering to the prescribed script of femininity and masculinity to avoid social sanction.

Within this context, with society’s forceful imposition of gender norms, subjects are pressured into performing gender roles they might not inherently identify with. This cultural coercion, as Butler puts it, eventuates because “sex is a regulatory ideal whose

materialization is compelled,” bringing forward that the construct of “sex” is materialised through the enforcement and continual iteration of societal norms (*Bodies* xii). These arguments display that the truth of sex is not a fixed entity but a concept moulded through these coercive, repetitive norms. However, Butler posits that gender categories are fluid and instable, arguing that binary sexes such as female and male no longer have a fixed meaning. In doing so, Butler redefines gender as “a free-floating artifice, with the consequence that man and masculine might just easily signify a female body as a male one, and woman and feminine a male body as easily as a female one” (*Gender Trouble* 10). Thereupon, the subject may be categorised as female though not displaying characteristics that are typically thought to be feminine. This introduces the possibility of inconsistency between an individual’s sex and their gender performance, as Salih suggests, leading to instances such as “one may be a ‘masculine’ female or a ‘feminine’ male” (46). In contesting the notions of stable sex and gender, Butler emphasises the influential role of regulatory forces and socio-culturally norms in shaping gendered subjects, which she describes as “the legacy of sedimented acts” (“Performative Acts” 523). Over time, subjects internalise these constructed gender norms, which then function as external indicators of their supposed biological attributes. Ultimately, Butler suggests that dismantling these gender norms could potentially foster an array of “gender configurations,” unsettle established identities, and deprive “the narratives of compulsory heterosexuality of their central protagonists: ‘man’ and ‘woman’” (*Gender Trouble* 187).

In light of this theoretical framework, the thesis analyses the gendered characters in George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* and Thomas Hardy’s *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* to delve into the authors’ portrayal of these characters as gendered subjects. The novels were specifically chosen because they provide a rich canvas for examining how historical, cultural, and ideological aspects influenced the characters’ gender performances and roles. Both Eliot and Hardy composed narratives that depict characters conforming to socially dictated gender roles while simultaneously presenting female protagonists who defy these expectations. These novels not only mirror Victorian societal attitudes towards women, but also highlight the notion that gender is sculpted by cultural norms within a heteronormative context, becoming solidified over time. Eliot and Hardy’s works offer a vivid representation of the prevailing mentality of their era concerning women, their subordination, and their position within society. The selection of these novels provides

an opportunity to profoundly investigate the complex dynamics of gender roles and societal expectations of the Victorian era. Moreover, the characters in these novels, particularly their struggles, offer a unique lens through which to apply and explore Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity. Therefore, this thesis employs Butler's gender theory to uncover the mechanisms through which gender is constructed and performed in *Middlemarch* and *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*.

The first chapter deals with the examination of gender disparities in George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, specifically through analysing the characters Dorothea, Rosamond, Casaubon, and Lydgate. These characters, subjected to the rigorous cultural expectations of the Victorian era, epitomise the societal constraints and inequities prevalent in that period. It argues that Dorothea and Rosamond's stories reflect the limiting gender norms, compelling them into societal moulds instead of forging their individual paths. This paints a vivid picture of Victorian womanhood, where societal constructs stifle ambitions and define roles within a heterosexual framework. In parallel, the masculine burden of embodying patriarchal ideals is demonstrated through the characters of Casaubon and Lydgate. Drawing on Butler's theory of gender performativity, the chapter endeavours to deepen our understanding of gender construction and enactment in *Middlemarch*. Eliot's realistic portrayal of these gender structures underlines the damaging effects of stereotypes, supporting the pursuit of a more gender-balanced society over the endorsement of female submission.

The second chapter scrutinises Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, demonstrating how the prevalent patriarchal societal structure of Hardy's era fostered a binary gender system. The double standards of Victorian society regarding gender, class, and sexuality are revealed through Tess's experiences. The narrative underscores how Tess's gender and socioeconomic status become key determinants of her victimisation by Alec and Angel. Hardy vividly depicts the plight of rural women, who are frequently subject to economic oppression, through Tess' relationship with Alec. Moreover, through Tess's experiences with Angel, he masterfully mirrors the rigid moral codes and stark realities that dominated his era. Rather than endorsing societal hegemony, Hardy utilises his narrative to underscore the issues stemming from the dominance of gender and class structures. In doing so, his narrative aligns with Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, asserting that gender is not an inherent trait but a socially conditioned

performance.

The conclusion brings together the key points discussed throughout the thesis, highlighting the disparities and similarities between the novels penned by two authors of distinct genders. This conclusion emphasises the significance of the examination of gender roles and identities in literature and the impact of historical, cultural, and ideological context on gender construction in the Victorian era. By employing Butler's theory, the thesis provides a framework for a thought-provoking exploration of the relationship between Victorian literature and contemporary gender theory. Ultimately, this allows for a comprehensive examination of these texts within the context of feminist and gender studies, promoting diverse interpretations and insights from various gendered perspectives.

CHAPTER 1

RETHINKING GENDER AND GENDERED SUBJECTS IN *MIDDLEMARCH*

“Many Theresas have been born who
found for themselves no epic life” (4).
George Eliot, *Middlemarch*

This chapter aims to explore how Eliot’s characters in *Middlemarch* are constituted as gendered subjects within their social milieu. Focusing on Victorian gender ideals, genders, and identities, the chapter attempts to show how these characters express their gender and gender roles, which are heavily influenced by the prevailing customs and norms. The chapter also examines mainly the portrayal and performances of the female characters, Dorothea and Rosamond, while the other major and minor characters such as Mr Brooke, Casaubon, Lydgate, Mary, Celia and Ladislav will be analysed in relation to them. In this regard, Judith Butler’s “gender performativity” theory proffers a diverse perspective to analyse the gender roles and gendered identities of female and male characters in *Middlemarch*. To understand how these societal norms and gender categories are construed within their historical context, it is essential to provide a brief overview of both the author and the novel and then to offer an analysis of the selected novel through the lens of Butler’s theory of gender performativity.

Deemed as “*the quintessential novelist*” (Davis 1), George Eliot, also known as Mary Ann Evans⁴, wrote numerous works of literature that are celebrated as “artistic, poetic, moral and human” (Bloom and Atkinson 54). In her fiction and philosophical writings, Eliot was mainly concerned with social conditions, political issues, moral conflicts, traditional roles of the individual, and oppressive ideologies. In doing so, Eliot created conventional characters as representatives of Victorian patriarchal culture in her fiction by examining the values and norms of that era. Specifically, Eliot’s depiction of

⁴ George Eliot’s decision to use a male pseudonym was not merely a personal choice, but a calculated response to the gendered expectations and constraints of the Victorian literary world. By presenting her work as that of a man, Eliot sought to escape the common prejudices against women writers, which often led to their work being dismissed or categorised as lightweight or overly sentimental. This move allowed her to be taken seriously in a literary culture that often marginalised women’s voices. It also highlights the gendered dynamics of the literary scene, where a woman’s association with a particular man or her personal reputation could overshadow her intellectual contributions. Eliot’s pseudonymous writing is thus both a critique and a manifestation of the gender inequalities of her time (*Cambridge* 178).

stereotypical gender roles in her novels shows the exclusion of women from the domains such as science, education, politics, and many others. In fact, before adopting the pen name George Eliot, it was Mary Ann Evans who questioned the social restrictions and conditions of her time. Thus, her essays related to these concerns, as George Levine illustrates, “are often polemical, severe, brilliant attacks on falsification, distortion, sentimentality, pomposity” (*Cambridge* 5). Levine further asserts that Eliot’s novels “almost bitterly portrayed the failures of community and family” (*Cambridge* 2). Commenting on such subject matters and themes in Eliot’s fiction, Amanda Anderson and Harry E. Shaw also provide a concise overview of the main issues Eliot addresses throughout her fiction:

Eliot’s writings engage a wealth of intellectual, historical, and broadly humanistic concerns. She is interested in science and religion, philosophy and art, ethics and politics, psychology and sociology, finance and law, and the broad cultural and economic developments that attend modernization...political economies of love and hate...domestic life, marriage, labor, and place. (10)

In light of these comments, it is possible to note that Eliot’s literary oeuvre encompasses a broad range of topics and conditions to be interpreted. However, George Levine points to the importance that Eliot “only began writing fiction that made her famous as George Eliot in 1856, when she was already thirty-seven years old” (*Cambridge* 3). After becoming George Eliot at the age of thirty-seven, she published her novels between the time span of 1856 to 1876, the first of which was *Scenes of Clerical Life* and the last, *Daniel Deronda*.

Within this twenty-year literary journey from 1856 to 1876, Eliot achieved significant attention through her distinctive writing and pioneering approach and has been considered as among “the first of the modern novelists” (Handley 6). Handley highlights her distinctiveness and depth by stating that she brought “wide and informed learning” into her writing, which included “science, philosophy, religion, languages and their literatures” (5). In addition to her intellectual competency, she also exhibited “a strong sense of moral and social responsibility,” further enhancing the richness of her narratives (5). This profound sense of responsibility, as Handley puts it, magnified her writing, contributing to the unique “intellectual expression of the form” she had chosen for her novels (5). Considering the form of Eliot’s novels, Handley remarks that “her novels show an awareness of artistic organization,” and the “belief that the completeness of real life could best be captured by a like completeness of form in the novel” (5). It was this

principle that guided her in constructing narratives as complex and multifaceted as life itself. Moreover, as Handley argues, Eliot's commitment to "structural coherence" in her work, which "Henry James was to call 'total relevance'," cemented her reputation for producing well-crafted and meaningful narratives (5). Eliot, as this argument indicates, dedicated herself to creating works that were not just engaging but also intellectually and emotionally resonant, solidifying her place among the most significant figures in the literary domain. Significantly, Eliot's writing style and her position as a writer stood out in their complexity and distinctiveness. Her writing style, imbued with philosophical undertones, lent a "subtly insinuating flavor," that provided "meaning and bias" to her literary pieces (Bloom and Atkinson 52). Eliot's distinctiveness, on the other hand, stemmed from her standing as a woman writer in a male-dominated society where women and women writers were often seen as secondary, inferior, and illiterate; Eliot surmounted the norm. Despite these societal perceptions, Eliot's use of various disciplines and her extensive knowledge showcased her profound understanding of a wide range of subjects.

Moreover, it is important to note that Eliot's literary technique is characterised by her adherence to the realism doctrine, which marks a key point in her writing. As Leslie Stephen highlights it, she was not content "to write amusing stories" but instead "ventured to speculate upon human life and its meaning" (qtd. in Bloom and Atkinson 34). In line with this, Levine remarks that "the energizing principle of George Eliot's art was realism," a style that aims at "representing the world adequately... representing its very ordinariness" (*Cambridge* 7). This point, namely Eliot's use of realism, warrants special attention since Eliot has been harshly criticised for depicting her female characters as traditional and ordinary, an approach that some have perceived as conservative. However, such characterisations reflect her dedication to realism, which seeks to depict life and characters in a genuine and ordinary form.

Given the context of Eliot's commitment to realism and the criticism she received for her portrayal of characters, George Levine offers an interpretation of Eliot's approach. He suggests that Eliot's writing emerged from "a cluster of rebellions, particularly against reigning social, moral, and aesthetic conventions" (*Cambridge* 2). Levine interprets Eliot's depiction of women and men in her novels, who are often seen adhering to societal norms and roles that were prevalent during their time. This is particularly evident in how Eliot's female characters are depicted, as they are pressured to conform to traditional

expectations and to perform their ascribed roles properly. Levine argues that Eliot's portrayal of societal norms in her works carries an underlying subversion as though she appears to support these norms; her depiction is, in fact, a subtle critique and act of resistance (7). Therefore, Levine labels Eliot's approach as a "rebellious act" (7).

However, not all scholars agree with Levine's perspective. Some feminist critics have expressed concerns about Eliot's realistic portrayals, considering them troublesome. These critics maintain that while Eliot accurately mirrors the real-life limitations and constraints her female characters encounter by demonstrating "a realistic awareness of the limitations in actual life" (Stone 70), such realism often leads to disheartening and unsatisfactory outcomes. This is clearly demonstrated in *Felix Holt*, where Eliot exposes women's social conditions. The narrative voice, referring to Esther Lyon, remarks, "she was a woman, and could not make her own lot" (Eliot, *Felix Holt* 436). This draws attention to the limited choices available to women, a sentiment further echoed by Esther's statement to Felix: "a woman must choose meaner things, because only meaner things are offered to her" (436-437). In a similar manner, in *Daniel Deronda*, it comes out through the Princess, who expresses the frustrations of being a woman, of having a "man's force of genius" but enduring "the slavery of being a girl" (528). These quotes underscore the oppressive social norms women endure, drawing attention to their suppressed feelings and renunciation. However, Kerry McSweeney criticises Eliot and asserts that Eliot's focus was primarily on "women's education" as a pathway to broader "societal amelioration" rather than the direct "improvement of women's" conditions (84). McSweeney bases her argument on Eliot's letters, claiming that Eliot mainly was concerned with equal educational opportunities for both genders because this would improve the whole society (84). In this sense, it seems that Eliot's approach to gender issues, especially to the woman question, has been highly criticised, and has been a subject of significant debate in feminist literary criticism. As Elaine Showalter notes, during "the 1970s, Eliot became the most difficult and controversial figure for feminist literary criticism" ("Greening" 299). This was primarily due to her intricate depiction of women in her novels, which stirred a significant debate. Showalter argues that the strong reactions to her work show both her lasting influence and the cyclical pattern of critical reception (299). In a similar vein, Nancy Henry remarks that Eliot's work has received great attention, and "recent critics have been interested in the way she speaks to issues of

class, gender, race and national identity” (qtd. in Levine, 37). Eliot’s novels, therefore, encapsulate various subject matters, including gender issues in connection with feminism. As a result, these novels remain a key source for exploring the multifaceted dynamics of the Victorian era, providing a nuanced look at the complexities of that time, one of which is *Middlemarch*.

Middlemarch: A Study of Provincial Life (1871-1872), “the novel that has most obsessed feminists” (Showalter, “Greening” 305), offers a wide range of readings, as Eliot draws attention to subjectivities, gender roles, the constructedness of gender, female and male characters’ attitudes within their social milieux. Nevertheless, Eliot has been criticised by feminist critics such as Zelda Austen. As Austen points out, feminist scholars are “angry with George Eliot because she did not permit Dorothea Brooke in *Middlemarch* to do what George Eliot did in real life: translate, publish articles, edit a periodical,” and most notably because of her decision to “refuse to marry until she was middle-aged, live an independent existence as a spinster, and finally live openly with a man whom she could not marry” (549). On this view, critics such as Barbara Hardy, Gillian Beer, Kathleen Blake, Joan Bennett, George Levine, Nancy Henry, Kristin Brady, and Jennifer Uglow have reread Eliot’s novel from feminist perspectives, paying attention to Eliot’s creation of gendered bodies. Hence, Kathleen Blake states that *Middlemarch* might be regarded as “a great feminist work” that rejects “the sentimental consolation of contemplating great souls trapped in an insignificant universe,” most remarkably, one that examines “the disabilities of a woman’s lot” (285–312). Indeed, women encounter societal oppression and “the meanness of opportunity” (Eliot, *Middlemarch* 4). This “meanness of opportunity” is one of Eliot’s main concerns in her novels as she highlights the centrality of hegemonic discourses which affect the process of gender formation. For Eliot, the dominant discourse has been the main system in moulding one’s gender and gendered identity.

The story in *Middlemarch* has been set around 1830s, presenting a panorama of England. Although one might initially associate the novel primarily with its main character Dorothea, the narrative is multi-plotted, encompassing a diverse array of female and male characters. Moreover, each character is meticulously crafted to represent different facets of society. As Jeanie G. Thomas posits, “although *Middlemarch* begins with the story of ‘Miss Brooke,’ that individual female focus quickly disperses,” and the

narrative expands into “the history of a community, evolving slowly” (394). This dispersion serves to highlight the varied experiences and perspectives within the society. As described by Henry James, “her novel is a picture – vast, swarming, deep colored, crowded with episodes” (qtd. in Bloom and Atkinson 160). *Middlemarch*, thus, consists of several stories such as Dorothea and her marriages to Casaubon and Ladislaw, Rosamond and her marriage to Lydgate, among others, ...and of various characters like Mr Brooke, Celia, Sir Chettam, Mary and Fred, ..., all of whom are of great importance to understand the Victorian society panoramically.

The novel starts and ends with Dorothea Brooke, a young, ambitious girl who displays a struggle and protest for knowledge. As Dorothea’s story progresses, other characters and plots are brought into play, specifically Rosamond Vincy, who represents the artificiality and falsity of the conventional angel in the house, Celia Brooke, who shows conformity to social norms, namely to patriarchal standards of femininity, and Mary Garth, who illustrates matureness, rationality, and the limits of vocational opportunities granted to women. Along with the female characters, male characters such as Mr. Arthur Brooke (her uncle), Mr. Edward Casaubon (an educated clergy), Will Ladislaw (a dilettante), Tertius Lydgate (an idealist doctor), and Fred Vincy come into prominence amidst other male characters. Each of these characters represent potential outcomes in a male-oriented society, whereas Thomas posits, both “women and men alike” are forced to “accept the limits life imposes” (394). More importantly, according to Flint, “what is undeniable is George Eliot’s continual interest in the formation of gender characteristics by community, by expectations, and by ideological pressures” (qtd. in Levine, 163). Thus, in *Middlemarch*, Eliot successfully portrays the profound influence of societal norms and expectations on gender formation.

Middlemarch is undeniably a narrative concerned with everyday gender problems, vividly showcasing how both male and female characters embody and perform gender roles dictated by a heteropatriarchal society with a significant emphasis on the restrictions imposed upon women. The novel illustrates the inequalities between men and women socially, politically, educationally, and vocationally, which became evident in the Victorian period. As Kathryn Hughes asserts, it was a time when “men and women’s roles became more sharply defined than any time in history” (1). As the “head of the family” and as the breadwinner, men took their place in the public sphere, dominating the so-

called masculine domain (1). On the other hand, women were confined to enact their minimised, normalised roles as helpmates, mothers, and daughters “to provide comfort, care, and offspring” in the domestic sphere (Shea and Whitla 8). This dichotomy underlined the significant division in gender roles and the reinforcement of such gender roles and stereotypes; the hierarchical pair where male was naturalised superior and female inferior profoundly shaped the lives of individuals, creating inequality between men and women during this period. Against this backdrop, Anne A. Patrick’s observation brings to light Eliot’s awareness and insightful depiction of these realities. As Patrick indicates, “although terms current today such as “sexism,” “pedestalism,” and “gender stereotyping” were not part of the author’s [Eliot’s] vocabulary,” there is “no doubt she was aware of the psychological and moral realities they denote” (224). This shows that, in her own way, Eliot was addressing these deeply ingrained societal stereotypes and gender imbalances through her characters and her narratives.

Nevertheless, the inconsistency between Eliot’s own life and the female characters she created has been criticised by feminist scholars. That is, the fact that Eliot’s traditionally portrayed female characters are subordinated to a secondary position, to “docile bodies” that perform their prescribed roles of womanhood properly might appear contradictory with her own resistance to socio-cultural practices. For instance, Ellin Ringler poses the question: “Why, when Eliot herself was able to defy social tradition and achieve her own epic life, did she relentlessly consign Dorothea to the unmitigated mediocrity of a conventional marriage to Will Ladislaw?” (57). Dorothea’s marriage to Will Ladislaw is conceived as her predicament, however. As Zelda Austen also notes, “feminist’s insistence that literature show women as more than bride, wife, and mother is admirable, but it can’t be applied to novels that were written when most women were either brides, wives, mothers, or dependent spinsters-unless George Eliot had written exclusively about herself” (552). This is in line with de Beauvoir’s view of women as being a “historical situation,” which Butler expounds as “a manner of doing, dramatizing, and reproducing a historical situation” (“Performative Acts” 520–521). Eliot reproduces that situation, which is a fact of her time.

However, an essential point to underline is Eliot’s refusal to shape Dorothea’s destiny and her journey in line with expected feminine norms of the Victorian literature. This is evident in her significant essay “Silly Novels by Lady Novelists,” where she

criticises novels by female authors, calling them “the mind-and-millinery species” (443). According to Eliot, these novels have no more intention than demonstrate an “ideal woman in feelings, faculties, and flounces,” a “gifted heroine,” who no matter what happens, appears in the finale “with a complexion more blooming and locks more redundant than ever” (443). This critique reveals that Eliot deplores the oversimplified, idealised portrayals of women in literature, which ultimately serve to reinforce stereotyped images. She further attacks lady novelists for producing unrealistic, perfect heroines, stating that “Greek and Hebrew are mere play to a heroine; Sanscrit is no more than a b c to her,” and notably, these heroines show perfection “in any language, except English” (445). As is explicit in her contention, Eliot objects to the portrayal of women as unrealistically accomplished, capable of mastering complex languages without effort. This may be exemplified with Dorothea’s longing for learning Greek and Hebrew; clearly, she is not the ideal heroine, and does not end up as one according to critics. Instead of portraying a perfect, idealised woman, Eliot chooses to depict Dorothea as an intelligent, complex character. Juliette Atkinson explains this situation by stating that Eliot “set out not to represent ideal, but rather representative females” (qtd. in Harris 83). In other words, Eliot intended to picture real, everyday women, with their strengths and weaknesses, as opposed to the unrealistic heroines often found in the “silly novels” she so strongly criticised. In doing so, Eliot rejects the superficial heroines of the novels she evaluates, providing instead a more accurate representation of women in Victorian society.

Building on this, throughout *Middlemarch*, Eliot pays significant attention to the constraints of opportunities available to women, particularly regarding education. Education is depicted as a crucial factor shaping her characters’ identities, lives, and destinies. This focus seems to be strongly influenced by Mary Wollstonecraft, who contended that the root of women’s troubles lies in “a false system of education,” declaring that “the neglected education of my fellow-creatures is the grand source of misery” (29). In the novel, Eliot examines the insufficient education provided to female characters. She emphasises the stark difference between the opportunities offered to men and women and the potential outcome of this inequality. For instance, Dorothea Brooke proves to be a striking example of this critique. Despite her upper middle class standing, her education is noticeably limited compared to her male counterparts. This deficiency

shapes her worldview and choices, including her ill-fated marriage to the much older pedantic Mr Casaubon, highlighting the detrimental impact of the educational disparity between genders. Moreover, Eliot suggests that the societal approval of women's marriages is entrenched in this flawed educational system. It is through the characters of Dorothea and Rosamond that Eliot illustrates the disparity between social classes. Despite coming from the upper middle and middle classes, both women struggle because of the constrictive educational system. As a result, Dorothea's misplaced intellectual aspirations lead her to a stifling marriage. At the same time, Rosamond's education encourages her to aspire to a higher social standing, leading her into a disappointing marriage with Dr Lydgate. Elaine Showalter supports this viewpoint, remarking that women "were deprived of education because of their sex, not because of their class" (*Literature* 41). This point, women's educational deprivation irrespective of class, underlines the gender bias endemic to Victorian society and illustrates the deep-seated systemic issues that Eliot grapples within *Middlemarch*. It is also worth noting that Eliot keeps from merely approving of a particular "feminine" image in *Middlemarch*; instead, she depicts different ideological perceptions of women's social place in society to demonstrate the disparities among materialised female sexes. In alignment with this view, Virginia Woolf in her essay "George Eliot" (1919) notes that Eliot's heroines "do not find what they seek, and we cannot wonder" since they might be longing for "something that is perhaps incompatible with the facts of human existence," and "Eliot had far too strong an intelligence to tamper with those facts" (qtd. in Bloom and Atkinson 88). This observation suggests that Eliot's portrayal of women was rooted in the era's harsh realities rather than an idealised vision.

The narrative structure of Eliot's *Middlemarch* is marked by a profound exploration of women's issues, specifically the limited opportunities offered to women within a patriarchal society. The narrative begins and ends by aligning Dorothea with Saint Theresa, thus effectively bookending the novel with this critical theme. The prologue introduces Dorothea, the heroine, as a re-embodiment of Saint Theresa. Possessing an intense yearning for knowledge and differing from the common lot, Dorothea is nevertheless subjected to limitations:

Many Theresas have been born who found for themselves no epic life wherein there was a constant unfolding of far-resonant action; perhaps only a life of mistakes, the offspring of a certain spiritual grandeur ill-matched with the meanness of opportunity...for these later-born

Theresas were helped by no coherent social faith and order which could perform the function of knowledge for the ardently willing soul...a Saint Theresa, 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, *Middlemarch* 4)

Evidently, by comparing St. Theresa with later-born Theresas, Eliot underlines the deficiencies women encounter in the Victorian era due to their gender. The basic social conditions of this time significantly influenced women's status, roles, and opportunities, which are vital to understanding the limitations of their experiences within the novel. In this respect, Elizabeth Langland contends that the inequality and inaccuracy of the dominant discourses are to blame for the societal struggles that women face (99). According to Langland, *Middlemarch* presents "the depiction of women's disability within patriarchy" (99). This view is consistent with the understanding of Dorothea's predicament, as she has an intense desire for knowledge but is constrained by social norms because of her gender.

The first chapter of *Middlemarch* further develops this theme by opening with the quotation, "since I can do no good because a woman, reach constantly at something that is near it" (5), taken from a tragedy play. The quote reflects the idea that being a woman can hinder one's ability to achieve great accomplishments. This idea can be explicated with Simone de Beauvoir's concept that women are not born as women but rather become women and are produced through societal practices. And in Butlerian terms, being a woman means "to compel the body to conform to an historical idea of 'woman'" and, most remarkably, "to materialize oneself in obedience to an historically delimited possibility" ("Performative Acts" 521–522). This notion is vividly reflected in Dorothea's experiences, as she is compelled to adhere to a preconceived notion of womanhood, thereby limiting her opportunities, as illustrated by the line, "do no good because a woman" (Eliot, *Middlemarch* 5). Blake expands on this point, noting that even in the novel's prelude, Eliot portrays the specific obstacles Dorothea encounters as a woman, and describes this situation as a "specifically feminine" fate (288). Therefore, viewed as a re-embodiment of Saint Theresa, Dorothea might represent women's struggle for intellectual and spiritual fulfilment within the restrictive confines of Victorian society.

The narrative reaches its conclusion by underscoring women's issues again, focusing on the scarcity of opportunities granted to women within patriarchal hegemony. Eliot associates Dorothea once again with Saint Theresa:

A new Theresa will hardly have the opportunity of reforming a conventual life, any more than a new Antigone will spend her heroic piety in daring all for the sake of a brother's burial: the medium in which their ardent deeds took shape is forever gone. But we insignificant people with our daily words and acts are preparing the lives of many Dorotheas, some of which may present a far sadder sacrifice than that of the Dorothea whose story we know. (*Middlemarch* 193)

This passage indicates that the choices of women like Dorothea, the new Theresas, are not the sole determinants of their destinies, but the historical context and the society limit their potential for doing great deeds. As demonstrated by Dorothea, society discursively shapes women's gendered performances. The Butlerian theory offers a theoretical framework that supports this situation. Butler posits that "gender is not always constituted coherently and consistently in different historical contexts," and "gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities" (*Gender Trouble* 6). Hence, it is not possible to isolate "gender" from the complex historical and cultural contexts that play a pivotal role in its formation and maintenance (6). Regarding Dorothea's inability to mirror the achievements of Saint Theresa, Sherry Mitchell offers a similar interpretation. Mitchell observes that while Saint Theresa was granted liberty to write and instigate reforms among the Carmelite, Dorothea is "hopelessly contained by a combination of Victorian social practices and discourses of normative femininity" (33). These scholarly perspectives, integrated throughout the analysis, provide an understanding of the societal constraints that shape and limit women's opportunities in the novel's historical context. They further illustrate the novel's central theme: the profound limitations and scant opportunities imposed on women by a patriarchal society. In this respect, the novel's beginning and end centred on Dorothea's character, highlight and critique these social constraints.

A deeper understanding of these constraints is offered through the portrayal of Dorothea in the initial chapter. She is illustrated as a young, beauteous lady in "poor dress" and "her hand and wrist were so finely formed that she could wear sleeves not less bare of style than those in which the Blessed Virgin appeared to Italian painters;" (Eliot, *Middlemarch* 5). Dorothea's virginal femininity is defined through her body parts, along with her apparel that feature her feminine semblance. However, more than that, Dorothea is familiar with "passages of Pascal's *Pensees* and of Jeremy Taylor" and views "the destinies of mankind" through a Christian lens (6-7). For her, "the solitudes of feminine fashion appear an occupation for Bedlam" (6-7). This reference to Bedlam indicates that

looking at women's ideally portrayed and lived conditions from a religious perspective, the acts that are normally considered meaningful become meaningless (M. Smith 27). As it is the case for Dorothea, her attire bears no meaning to her, while it does to other women. This divergence marks Dorothea's entrapped position within her female body, her disinterest in traditional feminine attitudes, and her dismissal of their value.

It also reveals that Dorothea deviates from the traditional feminine feature not only through her attire but also through her distinctive worldview. As the narrative voice remarks, "her mind was theoretic, and yearned by its nature after some lofty conception of the world which might frankly include the parish of Tipton and her own rule of conduct there; she was enamoured of intensity and greatness, and rash in embracing whatever seemed to her to have those aspects, likely to seek martyrdom" (Eliot, *Middlemarch* 7). These characteristics set her apart from her contemporaries, including her sister Celia, while Dorothea is praised for her intelligence, and her sister Celia is praised because of having "more common-sense" (5–6). The Brooke sisters, after losing their parents, "had both been educated...first in an English family and afterwards in a Swiss family" (7). Nevertheless, while Celia is maintaining her life, being satisfied with her education, and condition, Dorothea refuses to perform a predetermined, limited womanly role. Celia, with her female body and feminine behaviour, acts out her role appropriately and is embraced by society because of her conformity to the norms, whereas Dorothea is regarded as a threat because of her choice "not to do what is very agreeable" (22). For the middle-class, intelligence, knowledge, and literacy were believed to be unpleasant feminine attitudes, in that they were thought to interfere with women's ability to do their domestic duties effectively.

Nevertheless, Dorothea's quest for knowledge, embodied in her beautiful feminine body, causes ambiguity because intelligence and knowledge were regarded as masculine faculties in Victorian gender discourse. And describing her hands as "not thin hands, or small hands; but powerful feminine, maternal hands," and her propensity to raise them in "propitiation for her passionate desire to know and to think" (Eliot, *Middlemarch* 55), suggests that beneath her femininity lies a strong, intellectual personality, ordinarily linked with masculinity. Following Butler's theory, gender materialises through repeated performances over time. Therefore, society's perception of Dorothea's femininity is a product of pre-existing feminine norms, deeply entrenched through historical repetitions.

Nonetheless, these predetermined codes and norms naturalise femininity as a fixed trait, disregarding the fluidity of gender. Yet, gender is not stable, and “one may be a ‘masculine’ female or a ‘feminine’ male” (Salih 46). Dorothea’s intense desire for knowledge certainly challenges the established boundaries of Victorian femininity. That is, her desire for intellect, juxtaposed against the societal belief that “intelligence is not an admirable or even plausible female trait” (Judge 167), serves to underscore the incompatibility between Dorothea’s aspirations and societal expectations. Given these points, it becomes evident that Dorothea’s struggle lies in her limited opportunities for intellectual growth and her struggle against the prevailing societal norms.

From the outset of the story, Eliot highlights Dorothea’s unconventional goals, a situation that invites a disapproval from her family and social milieu. Clare Carlisle characterises Dorothea as a woman who is “passionately seeking a purposeful life” (202). Consequently, the narrative foregrounds Dorothea’s ideals and her endeavours to uplift the less privileged rather than focusing on traditionally feminine pursuits. As Carlisle further elaborates, Dorothea’s “heart and mind are “open, ardent,” shining through large eyes” and “she feels disturbed by her own privilege” (202). This unease propels her to contest societal expectations, a disposition that is reflected in her actions and choices throughout the narrative. This pattern of resistance to the existing feminine expectations is notably evident when Celia requests that Dorothea help divide their mother’s jewellery. Dorothea at first ignores Celia’s excitement over these jewels and responds in a way that emphasises her different priorities. She retorts, “Celia, that is too much to ask, that I should wear trinkets to keep you in countenance. If I were to put on such a necklace as that, I should feel as if I had been pirouetting. The world would go round with me, and I should not know how to walk” (Eliot, *Middlemarch* 14). Initially, it may seem that Dorothea’s denial to wear her inherited jewels is due to her spirituality; however, a closer examination reveals that she is rejecting the established normative feminine codes that have been in place for generations.

Furthermore, despite Dorothea’s privileged position in the wealthy middle-class and her good standing, Dorothea encounters challenges due to her intellect and religious fervour, which are perceived as obstacles to a suitable marriage. As Eliot describes, “and how should Dorothea not marry? —a girl so handsome and with such prospects? Nothing could hinder it but her love of extremes, and her insistence on regulating life according

to notions which might cause a wary man to hesitate before he made her an offer, or even might lead her at last to refuse all offers” (*Middlemarch* 8–9). The narrator defines her as a young woman of means who has eccentric habits such as praying like a puritan and staying up late reading dusty manuscripts. Moreover, the narrator notes, “a man would naturally think twice before he risked himself in such fellowship” (8–9). These observations point to the social uncertainty surrounding Dorothea’s character, revealing the hesitations her non-conformity evokes within the conventional feminine sphere.

It is evident that Dorothea’s behaviour and beliefs do not align with the conventional expectations of the *Middlemarch* community. Since in Butler’s words, “the gendered body acts its part in a culturally restricted corporeal space and enacts interpretations within the confines of already existing directives” (“Performative Acts” 526). However, Dorothea’s non-conformist attitudes such as her insistence on having strong opinions make her an unlikely candidate for marriage because “women were expected to have weak opinions” (Eliot, *Middlemarch* 9). Indeed, Dorothea’s behaviour put her at odds with the gender norms constructed by the Victorian hegemonic discursive practices, which positions her as unorthodox that disrupts the established gender dynamics within her social milieu. Eliot’s primary object in creating her heroine as an atypical female is to challenge the stereotypes of women, and to show how effective she was on other characters. Dorothea may end up complying with domestic ideology and normative femininity at the end of the novel; however, her continuous resistance to conventional ideas of femininity remains contentious.

Despite her privileged upbringing and her great intellect, Dorothea lacks the schooling to know how to transform her aspirations into concrete actions and believes that knowledge is “something that will enable her to act” (Blake 293). It is for this reason that she sees marriage as the only viable path forward. Eliot seeks to depict the pressures exerted by a patriarchal society that “force women into marriage by closing all other doors against them” (Mill 51). After Dorothea realises that she is confined within the bounds of womanhood and not able to reach her goals without help, she sees no other way than to marry since “the female body is ...both conditioned and circumscribed by historical convention” (Butler, “Performative Acts” 521). So, first, it is *Middlemarch* that forces her because marriage is “the destination appointed by society for women” (Mill and Mill 53). Then, her uncle Mr. Brooke, one of the main patriarchal representatives and an

advocate for distinct gender roles believes that women's place is in the domestic sphere. He thinks that feminine minds are not suitable for masculine knowledge, stating that "such deep studies, classics, mathematics, that kind of thing, are too taxing for a woman" (Eliot, *Middlemarch* 89). Furthermore, he continues with a description of the feminine mind as follows: "There is a lightness about the feminine mind—a touch and go—music, the fine arts, that kind of thing—they should study those up to a certain point, women should; but in a light way, you know. A woman should be able to sit down and play you or sing you a good old English tune" (89). Having a completely conventional mind, Mr Brooke is unable to support Dorothea "with the mental and emotional provisions she requires. Mired in a confusing present, he forces Dorothea to turn to Casaubon as her provider" (Knoepfmacher 56). But, above all, the misery is that in any case women are forced to live dependent on men, which Eliot portrays through Dorothea's seek for guidance. Eliot depicts the failures of the male-dominated culture that offers women little to do outside the domestic sphere and matrimony because of their gender.

Reflecting on the drawbacks of a patriarchal society, it is evident that such a system disproportionately restricts women within the parameters of domesticity and marriage. As Carlisle puts forth, in Victorian context, "most men of learning thought it entirely natural that wives belonged to a domestic sphere, separate from the domain of intellectual work," while women's duties were typically defined by "that daily battle with inconvenience which must be waged in order to make a comfortable home" (197). This point again illustrates the widespread societal belief of the Victorian era that intellectual pursuits were not within a woman's sphere, thereby confining her growth to the domestic realm. Taking the discourse further, Carlisle poses the question: "how could marriage be a site for philosophy, even a path towards knowledge?" (197). This question, according to Carlisle, represents the core of Eliot's investigation in *Middlemarch*, and notably this investigation "simmered unwritten through the most of 1870" (197). This discourse brings to the fore an unconventional perspective, exploring marriage not just as a social institution but a potential for intellectual growth and knowledge acquisition.

The perspective wherein marriage serves as a portal to knowledge and philosophy, aligns with Dorothea's distinctive stance on the matrimonial alliance, and her choice of spouse. Positioned within a social structure which the narrative voice describes as "nothing but a labyrinth of petty courses, a walled-in maze of small paths that led

nowhere,” Dorothea seeks an elevated intellectual platform (Eliot, *Middlemarch* 37). As per Carlisle’s interpretation, “Dorothea longs for higher ground,” and discerns a pathway “for her philosophical ambitions in Edward Casaubon,” a man of considerably advanced age, but “with a local reputation for ‘profound learning’” (202). Dorothea chooses Casaubon, a man in his fifties, whom she perceives as a reservoir of knowledge, asserting that “the really delightful marriage must be that where your husband was a sort of father and could teach you even Hebrew” (Eliot, *Middlemarch* 10). Dorothea’s interaction with Casaubon reflects her submissive approach as she asks if she could “be more useful?” by learning “to read Latin and Greek aloud” to him “as Milton’s daughters did to their father” (87). In this instance, Dorothea portrays Casaubon as a modern Milton, as “the most interesting man she had ever seen” (21). Casaubon is not merely a wise man, but also a good “listener who understood her at once...duly tempered with wise conformity and could mention historical examples before unknown to her” (32). He is a man with great knowledge, as Dorothea says, a man who “thinks a whole world of which my thought is but a poor twopenny mirror...what a lake compared with my little pool” (32). Besides, she believes that his great work, *Key to All Mythologies*, would be valuable and functional for humanity. She was so much concerned with fulfilling her ideals and desires so that she could not realise that Casaubon was just an ordinary man since Dorothea, “with all her eagerness to know the truth of life, retained very childlike ideas about marriage” (Eliot, *Middlemarch* 10). Her belief in the ideal marriage leads her to construct “her ideal Casaubon” so that she cannot notice the true motives behind Casaubon’s decision to marry a young lady (Carlisle 202). Evidently, Eliot employs Dorothea’s story to demonstrate the harmful effects of gender discrimination on women’s prospects for social advancement, showcasing the systematic subordination women encounter within a patriarchal society.

Dorothea is dedicated to expanding her knowledge and achieving self-fulfilment, which is reflected in her preference for marrying Casaubon over the young Sir James Chettam. Dorothea believes that a man of her age has nothing to offer her, but marrying Casaubon would enable her to lead “a fuller life,” and perform “large yet definite duties...in the light of a mind that she could reverence” (Eliot, *Middlemarch* 59–60). Nevertheless, Casaubon’s thought about marriage is conservative and traditional as the narrator indicates “that it was now time for him to adorn his life with the graces of female

companionship, to irradiate the gloom which fatigue was apt to hang over the intervals of studious labor with the play of female fancy, and to secure in this, his culminating age” (86). Casaubon’s expectations from a marriage obviously diverges from Dorothea’s in the sense that he wants a domestic and subservient partner who also functions as his secretary.

In Casaubon’s opinion, Dorothea is the most ideal match for him, embodying all the features he values in a woman. She is a beautiful, intelligent, and a young woman who hails from a wealthy family but most importantly, seems submissive. Casaubon, a man moulded by his era’s values, argues that a “man of good position should expect and carefully choose a blooming young lady—the younger the better, because more educable and submissive—of a rank equal to his own, of religious principles, virtuous disposition, and good understanding” (Eliot, *Middlemarch* 396–397). His notion of the ideal woman is not solely personal but is a product of Victorian patriarchal norms, because, as Butler points out, “doing one’s gender ... one does it in accord with certain sanctions and proscriptions” (“Performative Acts” 525). That is, as a representative of Victorian patriarchal culture, Casaubon’s “gendered body acts its part in a culturally restricted corporeal space and enacts interpretations within the confines of already existing directives” (526). He also claims that he would shower such a lady with lavish gifts and do everything in his power to ensure her happiness, but in return, he would enjoy the benefits of family life and be able to leave behind a replica of himself, which he sees as essential for a man (Eliot, *Middlemarch* 396–397). In Butler’s view, Casaubon conforms to his gender role within the limitations of prevailing societal norms.

Unlike Casaubon, Mr. Tertius Lydgate, a young ambitious doctor, does not view Dorothea as a convenient woman to marry because she does not fit his ideal image of femininity in the novel. He identifies her as “a good creature,” a “fine girl,” yet, not as his “style of woman” since she fails to perceive “things from the proper feminine angle” (Eliot, *Middlemarch* 130, 133). Dorothea’s intelligence, although she conforms to certain ideals of femininity, is considered as a threat to the conventional principles of a middle-class heterosexual marriage. This perception echoes Eliot’s remarks in her essay “Margaret Fuller and Mary Wollstonecraft” (1855), in which she observes that many men hold the notion that “an instructed woman, capable of having opinions, is likely to prove an impracticable yoke-fellow, always pulling one way when her husband wants to go the

other” (“Margaret Fuller” 989). Dorothea represents this category of learned women that Lydgate finds unsettling. Lydgate is instead captivated by a woman who embodies his ideals of femininity: “She is grace itself; she is perfectly lovely and accomplished. That is what a woman ought to be: she ought to produce the effect of exquisite music” (Eliot, *Middlemarch* 132). This highlights the differing attitudes and expectations of men towards women and marriage in the Victorian era, reflecting societal norms that often valued compliance and aesthetic appeal over intellect and individuality in women.

Lydgate’s ideal woman, the embodiment of his vision of femininity, turns out to be Rosamond Vincy, a character in stark contrast to Dorothea. The divergence in their educational backgrounds and ideals emphasises the inherent diversity among women and how societal standards often shape their lives in different ways. Rosamond exemplifies a woman whose private education has not disadvantaged her due to lack of formal education. The narrator’s description of Rosamond offers a potent insight into her character: “she was by nature an actress of parts that entered into her physique: she even acted her own character, and so well, that she did not know it to be precisely her own” (Eliot, *Middlemarch* 165). This effectively encapsulates Rosamond’s habitual demonstration of feminine attitudes, which have become her second nature to the point where she perceives them as her authentic identity. This reflection of Rosamond’s character strongly aligns with Butler’s view that “gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time – an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts” (*Gender Trouble* 140). Through Rosamond’s character, Eliot indeed demonstrates this “stylized repetition of acts,” illustrating how societal expectations of femininity can influence and shape an individual’s identity, and how the performance of gender can become viewed as an intrinsic quality.

Unmistakably different from Dorothea, Rosamond, the daughter of a middle-class tradesman, exhibits a noticeable adherence to Victorian era traditional and accepted feminine roles. This is more apparent in her priorities, which sharply diverges from Dorothea’s intellectual aspirations. Instead, Rosamond focuses on what may seem superficial and insignificant to Dorothea, such as her precise fashion sense and securing a high-status husband. The narrator explains Rosamond’s tendency for fashion: “she had an excellent taste in costume, with that nymph-like figure and pure blindness which give

the largest range to choice in the flow and color of drapery” (Eliot, *Middlemarch* 135). This vivid description stresses Rosamond’s continual performance of Victorian femininity, representing her thorough investment in social expectations around woman’s appearance.

However, Rosamond’s performative acts go beyond the mere surface level of clothing and physical presentation. Her approach to intellectual engagement also signals her alignment with the societal norms of her time, while she does not show Dorothea’s intense desire of knowledge; instead, she introduces herself as an ideal of refined femininity, “never show[ing] any unbecoming knowledge, and was always that combination of correct sentiments, music, dancing, drawing, elegant note-writing, private album for extracted verse, and perfect blond loveliness, which made the irresistible woman for the doomed man of that date” (Eliot, *Middlemarch* 381). These aspects feature her continuous performance as the ideal woman of her time, further reinforcing the performative nature of her gender identity. In fact, Rosamond’s ambitions are grounded in social aspirations. Her primary goal is to marry an affluent and respected man, improving her social standing. She invests “all her will and energy into achieving the daintiest wardrobe and the highest-ranking, best providing husband” (Blake 301). This relentless dream of social elevation reveals the constraints of the gendered social structure she exists, supported by Butler’s concept of performativity. Nevertheless, Eliot’s portrayal of Rosamond’s goal also critiques “the inadequacy of the options available to women who want to direct their own lives” (Thomas 398). So, Rosamond’s character lays bare the performative nature of gender and the constricting influence of societal structures, thereby shedding light on the complexities and challenges faced by women in the Victorian era who were seeking to craft their destinies.

Nevertheless, the charm of Rosamond extends well beyond her outer elegance. She was deemed as the top student of Mrs. Lemon’s school, considered the best academy in the province for shaping well-rounded ladies. She was the shining example of Mrs. Lemon, since none of her students surpassed her in terms of intellectual development and proper speech usage, not to mention her extraordinary musical performance (Eliot, *Middlemarch* 135). So, she was taught the particulars of femininity and blended it with her beauty, sexuality, and feminine intelligence. Eventually, she is illustrated as the ideal wife, as Patmore’s angel within the private sphere, and the whole blame may be put on

Mrs Lemon's schooling, which fabricates ideal wives, nothing more. Rosamond is compelled into a performative role, acting out her feminine role without true awareness, for these gender roles are ingrained and naturalised in her cultural discourse.

However, it is also important to note that the docile demeanour Rosamond displays throughout the narrative does not accurately represent her inherent self. As Butler explains, gender is not a substantial identity but "an illusion discursively maintained for the purposes of the regulation of sexuality within the frame of reproductive heterosexuality" (*Gender Trouble* 73). While Rosamond might appear inattentive in large part, she is smart enough to know that in a patriarchal society, women's sexuality and appeal can be powerful tools to persuade men, potentially facilitating socio-economic equality. Thus, she subtly deploys these tools to navigate her path in Middlemarch. Therefore, love is not Rosamond's initial objective in her marriage. Rather, she approaches marriage in a logical way, and Lydgate appears to be the most suitable man, as he is a stranger in Middlemarch, which is indeed essential "in Rosamond's romance" (Eliot, *Middlemarch* 234). Significantly, it "was his good birth, which distinguished him from all Middlemarch admirers, and presented marriage as a prospect of rising in rank and getting a little nearer to that celestial condition on earth in which she would have nothing to do with vulgar people" (234–235). It goes without saying that Rosamond succeeds in attracting Lydgate's interest since Rosamond performs a gender role which meshes well with Lydgate's stereotypical and basic view of female sexuality.

On the other hand, Lydgate's perception of the marital institution and his thought about women are similar to those of Casaubon. Although Casaubon and Lydgate hold disparate professional roles within Middlemarch, their perceptions of women and the institution of marriage strikingly converge. Engrossed in his scholarly work, Casaubon operates mainly in a world of intellectual abstraction. At the same time, Lydgate, a dedicated physician, is compelled to address the realities of human suffering in his day-to-day practice. However, despite their divergent professional engagements, both men hold traditional mindset, and discern women as intellectually inferior to men by trying to exert masculine power over Dorothea and Rosamond. Lydgate's thoughts about Rosamond, articulated by the narrator, underlines this viewpoint:

if falling in love had been at all in question, it would have been quite safe with a creature like this Miss Vincy, who had just the kind of intelligence one would desire in a woman—

polished, refined, docile, lending itself to finish in all the delicacies of life, and enshrined in a body which expressed this with a force of demonstration that excluded the need for other evidence. Lydgate felt sure that if ever he married, his wife would have that feminine radiance, that distinctive womanhood which must be classed with flowers and music, that sort of beauty which by its very nature was virtuous, being moulded only for pure and delicate joys. (Eliot, *Middlemarch* 231)

This quotation presents Lydgate's prejudices towards women, as he believes in a certain "kind of intelligence" that women possess and further values certain characteristics in female bodies such as being "polished, refined, docile" (231). This passage also highlights how Eliot portrays Rosamond and Lydgate as those who "conform to an expected gender identity" (Butler, "Performative Acts" 527). Namely, Lydgate performs his gender identity within the bounds of masculinity, and Rosamond within the bounds of femininity. Crucially, by performing their gender roles appropriately, these characters reinforce traditional gender norms.

Another point worth highlighting is that, like Dorothea, Lydgate also has an idealist outlook on life. Despite their differing genders, they share the same desire for a better world as Lydgate wants "to do good small work for Middlemarch, and great work for the world" (Eliot, *Middlemarch* 210). This reflects his lofty ambition to uplift local medical standards and make significant global contributions to the medical field. Despite his privileged background, he is a young, ambitious physician who opts for the role of a country doctor, motivated by a sincere will to help others. His dedication to discovering the "primitive tissue" (209), the fundamental origin of all tissues, stresses his profound commitment to medical innovation and progress. Nevertheless, his idealistic nature blinds him, obscuring the socially constructed identity of Rosamond, the woman he chooses as his spouse. He fails to recognise the performative aspect of Rosamond's identity – the repetitive gendered behaviours she exhibits conforming to societal expectations – and mistakes it for an innate "truth." This reinforces Butler's view of gender identity as a construction that can be misconstrued as natural. Similar to Dorothea, Lydgate fails to see beyond his idealistic vision and ultimately faces failure in his marriage. As such, it raises the question of whether this failed marriage was caused by his intense professional dedication and conventional views about women, which may restrict his understanding of Rosamond's individuality and identity. Or is it due to Rosamond's inability to maintain the constituted angelic image after their marriage?

The answer to the marital suffering experienced by Dorothea and Rosamond in

Middlemarch lies in the tension between personal aspirations and societal norms. This conflict is particularly evident in their unique, even paradoxical, adherence to and divergence from Victorian gender ideology. Both women deal with the complexities of being women during their time. These conflicts can be traced back to how they embody and challenge their prescribed gender roles. However, it is not solely these two whose identities are shaped by the gender roles of their time. Just like them, Casaubon and Lydgate harbour expectations of their wives and marriages based on their understanding of gender ideals. All four characters, Dorothea, Rosamond, Casaubon, and Lydgate are distinct in their circumstances and identities but are entangled in the societal web of gender norms. In an ideal scenario, these characters should embody and perform their gender roles in a way that complements one another, contributing to a harmonious social structure. Nevertheless, the reality of their experiences in *Middlemarch* reveals more dissonance than harmony since their desires and societal expectations eventually lead to their dissatisfaction in their marriages.

During her honeymoon in Rome, Dorothea's journey unravels profound personal realisation. As she navigates through the ancient city, she encounters disillusionment. The grandeur of Rome, drenched in history and culture, mirrors growing awareness of the dry and emotionally barren state of her relationship with Casaubon. Dorothea's experience leads to the reflection that, "the real future replacing the imaginary" is deeply rooted in her changing "perception of Mr. Casaubon and her marital role" (Eliot, *Middlemarch* 277). This growing disillusionment is intensified by her self-reproach, captured by the narrator as a "self-accusing cry that her feeling of desolation was the fault of her own spiritual poverty" (273), signalling Dorothea's struggle to reconcile her initial dreams with the stark marital reality. Her thoughtful journey deepens as she grapples with the contrast between her imagined marriage and the actual dynamics of her relationship with Casaubon, causing her to question, "but was not Mr Casaubon just as learned as before? Had his forms of expression changed, or his sentiments become less laudable?" (278). This questioning suggests that it may not be Casaubon's change but Dorothea's idealisation of him that is causing her distress. Dorothea confronts the harsh reality that Casaubon was not the mentor and guide she had envisioned. This becomes apparent when she observes, "what was fresh to her mind was worn out to his; and such capacity of thought and feelings as had ever been stimulated in him by general life of mankind had

long shrunk to a sort of dried preparation, a lifeless embalment of knowledge” (280). Ultimately, Dorothea feels disappointed, “sliding ...into forlorn weariness” as her choice to marry an elderly man because of her belief in his superior knowledge now “seem to have issued in a blank absence of interest or sympathy” (279, 280). Hence, Dorothea’s Rome experience, symbolic of her journey, leads to a critical revelation about the aridity of her idealised husband’s character and the emotional barrenness of her marriage.

As the narrator would call her, “poor Dorothea” experiences a period of discernment just in the early days of her marriage. Despite being surrounded by Rome’s rich historical and artistic heritage, she perceives the city as if it is “in a funeral procession,” (Eliot, *Middlemarch* 274). This perspective is less commentary on Rome and more indicative of Dorothea’s inner turmoil. The narrator’s remark that “Rome may still be the spiritual centre and interpreter of the world” juxtaposes the city’s grandeur and historical import against Dorothea’s distress. In fact, it is the disagreement between the external sensation of Rome and Dorothea’s internal disappointment that throws a gloom over the city, giving rise to a sense of funeral atmosphere. Nevertheless, the young Will Ladislaw, Casaubon’s cousin, introduces a different dynamic in Dorothea’s life. In a discussion of poetry and vocation, Ladislaw describes discernment as “a soul in which knowledge passes instantaneously into feeling and feeling back as a new organ of knowledge” (319), a sentiment Dorothea identifies with. She appreciates Ladislaw’s attentiveness and recognition of her knowledge, distinguishing him from the traditional male role typified by Casaubon. Ladislaw’s sensitivity, likely shaped outside the influence of a patriarchal system, appears to challenge the rigidity of gender norms. Ladislaw’s fluid and sensitive character, which deviates from the rigid constraints of traditional gender roles, suggests a more flexible and progressive interpretation of masculinity. He is just the opposite of Casaubon who perceives marriage as an obligation of “manhood” and aims to fulfil all requirements expectedly. As he sees it, “marriage, like religion and erudition, nay, like authorship itself, was fated to become an outward requirement,” and he “was bent on fulfilling unimpeachably all requirements” (400). Casaubon, as a man who displays adherence to traditional gender roles, expects his wife to act out her gender role according to the prescribed conventions. Ladislaw, on the other hand, represents a non-traditional outlook on gender roles, which may offer Dorothea an opportunity to escape from her restrictive marriage and pursue her intellectual and

emotional capabilities without limitations.

Like Dorothea, Casaubon struggles with the complexities of misunderstanding in their relationship. Before their marriage, he assumes her as submissive and ready to become his helpmate “without hidden calculations either for immediate effects or for remote ends” (Eliot, *Middlemarch* 69). Nevertheless, when Dorothea insists on helping him with his study in Rome, Casaubon becomes uncomfortable with her “darkly manner”; and the narrator reveals that Dorothea is blind to Casaubon’s “inward troubles as he to hers” and, most notably, “he had not yet listened patiently to his heartbeats, but only felt that her own was beating violently” (285). Rather than praising Casaubon and his knowledge, Dorothea becomes a critic of his work, leading Casaubon to allude to her unbefitting manner as “as a spy watching everything” (285). According to David L. Smith, Eliot portrays Casaubon as a poor author who is not able to complete his study, *Key to All Mythologies*, in order to challenge the belief that men are “superior intellectually to women” (38). Obviously, Dorothea’s intellectual curiosity and critical attitude pose a threat to Casaubon’s sense of masculinity and his search for intellectual prominence in a society that values traditional gender roles.

Casaubon’s fear of losing his masculine authority leads him to enforce social norms to ensure Dorothea’s submissive position as a woman and uphold his masculine role. This is evident when Dorothea suggests that Ladislaw should receive a share of his mother’s inheritance. Casaubon responds with extreme disdain, stating: “Dorothea, my love, this is not the first occasion, but it were well that it should be the last, on which you have assumed a judgement on subjects beyond your scope...especially in the matter of alliances, constitutes a forfeiture of family claims...it is not for you to interfere between me and Mr. Ladislaw” (Eliot, *Middlemarch* 534). Indeed, Casaubon embodies hegemonic norms and subjugates Dorothea through othering, dictating that she should not overstep her feminine domain. As a matter of fact, at first, Casaubon believes that he has found more than he asked for in Dorothea, as the narrator notes he “believed that he had found even more than he demanded” (397). However, he later admits that she has “turned out to be something more troublesome that he had conceived” (596). Casaubon wants Dorothea to act as his helpmate and secretary, devoting herself entirely to her wifely role, which aligns with his preconceived notion of what a wife should be.

However, Dorothea's life in Lowick Manor after returning from Rome may be described as a combination of her suffering, displeasure, regret, and maturity. Her view of marriage has changed as she realises that it has not freed her from the constraints of being a lady; nor has it provided her with the unbridled sensitivity she had hoped for. As the narrator notes, "marriage which was to bring guidance into worthy and imperative occupation, had not yet freed her from the gentlewoman's oppressive liberty: it had not even filled her leisure with the ruminant joy of unchecked tenderness" (Eliot, *Middlemarch* 390). In this context, the harsh reality that Dorothea must face is summed up by the following quote: "we are all of us born in moral stupidity, taking the world as an udder to feed our supreme selves" (300-301). It was her choice to marry Casaubon and now her responsibility to face the consequences of her decision. Therefore, Dorothea could not blame anyone but herself for such a marriage. She married the old Casaubon because she desired masculine qualities such as vocation and knowledge, and as a result, she now takes responsibility for her choice. Dorothea's situation and feelings are expressed by the narrator who describes her youth as standing "in a moral imprisonment which made itself one with the chill, colorless, narrowed landscape, with the shrunken furniture, the never-read books, and the ghostly stag in a pale fantastic world that seemed to be vanishing from the daylight" (390). According to Butler's theory of gender, Dorothea's actions do not conform to socially accepted feminine acts and are subject to repression. In this light, Dorothea's discernment stems from her realisation that she has been captivated by the performative masculine qualities Casaubon projects. But unfortunately, these qualities do not align with the figure of a spouse, teacher, and father she has idealised, leading to her discernment.

Additionally, Dorothea's loss of faith in her ideals leads her to question what is truly meaningful in her life. Although she had hoped marriage would allow her to do some good, it turned into a form of imprisonment. Eliot gives Dorothea a glimmer of hope through her friendship with Will in Rome, which highly disturbs Casaubon, but Will's existence becomes "the source of greater freedom to her" (Eliot, *Middlemarch* 298). Nevertheless, Will criticises Dorothea's devotion to her husband and recognises that "such weakness in a woman is pleasant to no man but the husband in question" (295). This friendship underlines Dorothea's predicament, trapped in her marriage to the old Casaubon, as Will warns her of her bleak future "in that stone prison at Lowick," where

she “will be buried alive” (315). Will is aware of Dorothea’s ideals and foresees her future, yet this friendship leads to a major quarrel between Dorothea and Casaubon and notably incites Casaubon to write a codicil.

Given Eliot’s insightful grasp of the societal standards of her time, she recognises that Dorothea can only escape her marital imprisonment through the death of Casaubon. Consequently, she “manipulates the plot’s circumstances to rescue Dorothea from a married life...by means of that sudden death” (Lundberg 275). Eliot represents the prevalent notion of her time since “[d]eath often has to provide a substitute for divorce in Victorian fiction” (Hardy 33). However, even posthumously, Casaubon attempts to exert dominance over Dorothea, insisting that “in case of my death, you will carry out my wishes: whether you will avoid doing what I should deprecate, and apply yourself to do what I should desire” (Eliot, *Middlemarch* 681). This again points out Eliot’s nonconforming stance since she touches upon the death scene in Victorian fiction in her essay “Silly Novels by Lady Novelists.” Here she critiques the common image in Victorian fiction where “the tedious husband dies in his bed requesting his wife, as a particular favor to him, to marry the man she loves best” (443). Contrastingly, the death scene in *Middlemarch* diverges from this convention. Rather than passing peacefully in his bed or seeking Dorothea’s happiness, Casaubon persists in exerting his repressive and domineering masculine power. The end of Dorothea’s marriage and Casaubon’s death are articulated through the novel’s finale: “every limit is a beginning as well as an ending” (Eliot, *Middlemarch* 1184). Dorothea’s subsequent marriage to Will Ladislaw exemplifies this sentiment, indicating that there “is still a beginning” (1184). Susan Morgan observes that “Dorothea’s release from that oppressive marriage is a gift...Freedom does give Dorothea a second chance to make at last the right choice, the choice of open eyes and admitted passion” (154). Significantly, the death of Casaubon and his posthumous directives drive Dorothea to question things, mainly “her husband’s conduct, her own duteous feeling towards him, every struggle between them,” but more importantly, “her whole relation to Will Ladislaw” (Eliot, *Middlemarch* 700). Eliot wants Dorothea to discover her fault in marrying the old Casaubon, the selfish man who tries to constrain her even after his death. And more than that, she wants Dorothea to become aware of her feelings, to realise the “strange yearning of heart towards Will Ladislaw” (700). Hence, the insulting codicil stands for Casaubon’s masculine authority that intends

to regulate and control Dorothea; threatening her with disinheritance, however, becomes the trigger of Dorothea's awakening to a second chance.

The crux of Dorothea's first marital failure lies in her misguided ambitions. Driven by an intense yearning for knowledge, she blinds herself to the genuine character of Casaubon and instead idealises him. This leads her to envisage an ideal marriage with Casaubon, focusing solely on his intellectual persona rather than his actual personality. In this sense, it would not be wrong to say that Eliot constitutes Dorothea as an embodiment of women's desire "for independence of mind and personal achievement" and Casaubon as an embodiment of "the myth of male superiority to be impeached" (Smith 34). However, as the veil of idealisation lifts, Dorothea experiences a powerful realisation: her yearning extends beyond intellectual companionship to encompass emotional connection and genuine love. This understanding becomes pivotal in her life, preparing her for the deep, heartfelt connection she will eventually experience with Will Ladislaw.

Following this transformative experience, Dorothea's narrative takes a favourable turn with her marriage to Will, a union which is based on mutual affection and understanding. She made her choice with open eyes, which discouraged "many who knew her" (Eliot, *Middlemarch* 1190). Dorothea's choice to marry Will may not have been the most ideal, but still aligns with societal gender roles. This is emphasised by Mrs. Cadwallader, the wife of the local rector, a stereotypical voice in *Middlemarch* known for her gossipy nature and forthright opinions. She, perhaps unconsciously, serves as a representative for societal norms, suggesting that for a woman like Dorothea, "it will be well [for her] to marry again as soon as it is proper" and that having a husband is necessary "to keep her in order" (765). Her comments reflect the expectation that women should remarry since women require husbands for guidance and control. Given her gender and the patriarchal society, Dorothea appears to have no other choice than to marry. Crucially, the deeply ingrained societal norms are such that men and women view them as normal and are unable to think beyond them, as exemplified by Mrs. Cadwallader. Dorothea conforms to her gender role within the social script, which generates positive outcomes when complied with, according to Butler's perspective. However, straying from these boundaries, such as remaining a widow, can result in undesirable punishments. Therefore, Dorothea's realisation of her love for Ladislaw leads her to play her traditional feminine

roles of wife and mother, and to give up Casaubon's legacy and the deeds she might have accomplished with it.

In contrast to Dorothea, Rosamond is depicted as materialistic, self-centred, and obsessed with the rituals and ornaments of domestic life because for her, marriage represents a source of power and high position in society. As the narrator explains, "she was quite determined, when she was married, to rid herself adroitly of all the visitors who were not agreeable to her at her father's; and she imagined the drawing-room in her favorite house with various styles of furniture" (Eliot, *Middlemarch* 379–380). Her preoccupation with decorating this imagined room highlights her focus on superficial appearances and the status which they bring.

Nevertheless, her obsession with decoration causes problems in their relationship since Lydgate sees it as a frivolous feminine preoccupation. To be specific, when Rosamond expresses the need for a renewal of their furniture, Lydgate becomes frustrated: "this is idle Rosamond. You must learn to take my judgement on questions you don't understand" (Eliot, *Middlemarch* 850). Lydgate's blow here stems from Rosamond's refusal to adhere to his expectations as his perfect angel, not performing her domestic role properly. Certainly, Lydgate's disappointment with Rosamond extends beyond her lack of emotional support. He also figures out that she does not care about their financial problems and even worse, she does not offer any assistance to alleviate their situation. This is brought to the fore in the scene where Lydgate, who has tried to hide their financial struggles from Rosamond due to her illness, finally breaks down and asks for her help. However, Rosamond's response is far from helpful. Her utterance of "What can I do, Tertius?" shows her recklessness towards their financial problems, causing Lydgate to feel "a sinking of the heart," as described by the narrator (847). Lydgate ultimately acknowledges that he chose to take on the burden of Rosamond's life and must bear it, which is shown in the narrator's depiction of Lydgate's thoughts: "He had chosen this fragile creature, and had taken the burthen of her life upon his arms. He must walk as he could, carrying that burthen pitifully" (1141). So, Lydgate wonders how this "mild creature," this ideal wife as he thought of before, becomes entirely self-serving, deeming Lydgate's work only as a financial support.

It is worth noting that Eliot's expression that Lydgate "had taken her burthen of her

life upon his arms” shows the dependency of a wife on her husband regarding financial matters because a woman’s status and financial security were largely tied to her husband’s occupation and income. Nevertheless, women do not choose to be dependent on men of their own free will, they are rather forced to be. In light of Butler’s gender theory, women are not naturally predisposed to be dependent on men; instead, their dependency is constructed and reinforced by social and cultural norms and institutions that shape their understanding of gender identity. Thus, women’s subjectivity is not a matter of choice but is rather an outcome of cultural and social norms that pre-exist them.

Regarding woman’s status, the difficulties Lydgate and Rosamond face in their marriage derive partially from Lydgate’s belittling view of women. The narrator indicates that he has the inability to value women as individuals and views them as the secondary sex: “this rather abrupt man had much tenderness in his manners towards women, seeming to have always present in his imagination the weakness of their frames and the delicate poise of their health both in body and mind” (Eliot, *Middlemarch* 924). Based on this view, Lydgate claims that Rosamond is responsible for managing household expenses and demands and tries to convince Rosamond to be more careful with household spending, telling her that it is her wifely duty to manage the domestic sphere rightly. However, Rosamond’s feminine educational upbringing which prioritised marriage and conventional feminine roles failed to provide her with the necessary skills for efficient financial management.

Following this, Lydgate deems that his devotion to Rosamond does not yield him the presumed returns, as she does not provide him the comfort and support that a wife is supposed to offer. This realisation leads Lydgate to question his idealised image of Rosamond as the perfect angel and “the true womanly limit” that clash with Rosamond’s egocentric characteristic (Eliot, *Middlemarch* 502). Despite being depicted as self-centred and artificial, Rosamond persistently strives to uphold her image as an ideal of sensible discernment throughout the narrative. However, she fails to perform her angelic role, thus exposing the artificiality of the role imposed by culture. Her reaction to other people’s fury is always the same: she would withdraw in cool disdain and grow even more confident in her own justness; certainly, she is not the type of person to misbehave no matter what others do (938). While Lydgate, like Mr. Brooke and Mr. Casaubon, is a man of tradition, and considers decision-making as a male responsibility, Rosamond disagrees

and asserts her “right to speak on a subject” that interests her “at least as much as” him (938). Rosamond’s intelligence and obstinacy lead her to act according to her own convictions, and it becomes a habit to do things without sharing them with Lydgate because he loses his temper and accuses her of treating him as a fool (939). In fact, George Eliot’s portrayal of Rosamond’s actions illustrates a woman’s potential for autonomy, despite the restrictive societal norms of her time.

Eliot further depicts Lydgate as a decisive man who does not deviate from societal norms and contradicts the idea of equality. Thus, there is an unfair power dynamic regarding gender roles in their marriage in the sense that Rosamond is forced to follow his lead on all matters and seek his consent before taking any action, while Lydgate is empowered to make any decision on his own. He subscribes to the traditional notion of gender roles, where manly and wifely roles are performed according to the preordained discourse, which grants men priority and supremacy, and women a subsidiary position. Nevertheless, Eliot portrays Rosamond as a woman guided by her convictions and enjoyment in her actions. She embodies a strong sense of purpose, focusing her intelligence on achieving what she deems is right (Eliot, *Middlemarch* 833). Hence, Eliot’s portrayal of Lydgate and Rosamond’s marriage highlights the tension between traditional gender roles and individual agency.

In the heat of their conflict, Rosamond’s reactions to Lydgate provide a glimpse into this tension. During their conversation with Lydgate, Rosamond takes offense and responds by making negative comments about his character and his profession. Her intention is to undermine him and to show that he has faults, too. For instance, she asserts that “you should be more careful not to offend people, and you should send out medicines as the others do” (Eliot, *Middlemarch* 925). Lydgate responds to this by reminding her that such matters are within the masculine domain and beyond her comprehension (925). However, as his temper flares, Lydgate displays a patronising attitude that seemingly ignores “feminine weakness” but refuses to tolerate “feminine dictation” (925). In these disagreements, Lydgate tries to maintain his authority, while Rosamond tries to make her voice heard. His retort that “the shallowness of a waternixie’s soul may have a charm until she becomes didactic” signals his unwillingness to accept Rosamond’s input in his professional matters (925). He further emphasises that decisions about his medical practice are his to make: “what I am to do in my practice, Rosy, it is for me to judge”

(925). So, this tension between Rosamond and Lydgate reveals a disruption regarding the expected power dynamics of their marriage.

Drawing from Butler's theory, Rosamond's actions and defiance against Lydgate could be seen as performances that transgress the traditional feminine role she is expected to perform. In her assertion of agency and resistance to Lydgate's authority, Rosamond subverts the normative gender roles ascribed by society. Conversely, Lydgate's inability to assert masculine authority over Rosamond reveals the fragility and constructedness of gender roles. Eliot highlights Lydgate's helplessness in the face of Rosamond's stubbornness and self-centeredness, which have an impact on his life and manipulate him. Obviously, Eliot portrays the ideal image of woman produced by Mrs. Lemon's school as false and reflective of the constructedness of gender identity.

In this respect, Eliot depicts Rosamond's disillusionment in her marriage with Lydgate by underscoring how socio-cultural hegemony can lead to dissatisfaction and suppression of the self. When Rosamond first meets Lydgate in the novel, she envisions a future with him, and feels deeply in love as she "thought that no one could be more in love than she was" (Eliot, *Middlemarch* 501). However, after she realises his true nature, she loses herself in thought, and her inner voice appears to say "that if she had known how Lydgate would behave, she would have never married him" (850). Having felt disillusioned in her marriage, she has been down on her husband for a while since her "marriage had lost its charm of encouraging delightful dreams" (941). Significantly, her discontent originates from cultural forces and "the conditions of marriage itself" which requires "self-suppression and tolerance" from women (1072). This statement reflects the premise of Butler's theory, which argues that gender roles are constructed and performed through repetitive societal behaviours and actions within a specific cultural context. So, Rosamond and Lydgate are compelled to perform their respective gender roles that align with societal norms.

Despite all the difficulties Lydgate faces, he eventually is able to achieve his financial goals over time, much to Rosamond's contentment. Consequently, he establishes a profitable practice, writes "a treatise on Gout," and can satisfactorily provide for Dorothea and the children after his death. However, despite these successes, Lydgate still feels like a failure. He believes that he has not yet fulfilled his original ambitions to

make significant scientific and medical advancements. The narrator details that he once meant to do more, saying “he had not done what he once meant to do” (Eliot, *Middlemarch* 1188). This sense of unfulfillment is reflected in his comparison of Rosamond to a “basil plant,” which flourishes “on a murdered man’s brain” (1189). Eliot uses this metaphor to emphasise Rosamond’s negative impact upon him, hindering Lydgate from materialising his ideals, mainly to do good for medicine and science.

Apart from Dorothea, Rosamond, Casaubon, and Lydgate, there are also other characters such as the non-conforming Will Ladislaw, the traditional-minded uncle Mr. Brooke, the sensible, realistic working-class woman Mary Garth and her educated yet jobless husband Fred Vincy, the conforming Celia and her husband Sir James Chettam, the gentleman of Middlemarch, all of which are of great importance to the analysis of gender roles in the novel. Initially, Will Ladislaw, Dorothea’s second husband, is not defined as a perfect masculine male; rather, he appears as a “slim young fellow with his girl’s complexion” (Eliot, *Middlemarch* 871). He differs from the other males in the novel by displaying an empathetic and understanding nature, skilfully sensing the emotions of others and alleviating “the pressure of their thought instead of urging his own with iron resistance” (709). Considering this, Karen Chase propounds that Eliot, who disrupts the stability of traditional gender categories in her fiction, “proceeds to rearrange the attributes of sexual identity and to assign them to characters in such a way that the lines between masculinity and femininity begin to blur” (67). It is Will’s sensibility, his non-masculine, non-coercive characteristics that blur the gender boundaries of his time and, above all, attract Dorothea. He symbolises the slow evolution of traditional gendered identities.

Mr. Brooke, on the other hand, is a representative of the Victorian heterosexual culture, one who discriminates between the sexes and regards women as fragile, weak, light-minded and inferior to men. He confines women to the domestic sphere, excluding them from masculine domains, claiming that female “sex are not thinkers” (Eliot, *Middlemarch* 74), that “there is a lightness about the feminine mind,” and that the female gender should learn “music, the fine arts...and should be able to sit down and play you or sing you a good old English tune” (89). He stands for an authority figure who regulates and suppresses the female sex.

Compared to Dorothea and Rosamond, Mary is the opposite of an idealistic and typical portrayal of female beauty: “she was brown; her curly dark hair was rough and stubborn” (Eliot, *Middlemarch* 159), she does not conform to the societal expectations of feminine allure, nor does she belong to the wealthy class. She is a working-class woman, strong in mind, decisive, and dominant in nature, which is clear in her talk to her father when she states that “husbands are an inferior class of men, who require keeping in order” (1182). Though Mary is in love with Fred, she is dominant in their marriage, and transgresses the bounds of female gender roles. Mary’s assertion of authority over her husband exemplifies the fluidity of gender roles, as she appropriates a traditionally masculine position of control and decision-making in their marriage. As Butler puts it, gender is not stable, so Mary might be a masculine female. This transgression of conventional female role shifts Fred into a traditionally feminine space, where he becomes “passive, sentimental and submissive” (Chase 67). His love for and dependency on Mary is not a new condition; it has its roots in their childhood. Unlike Dorothea and Rosamond, whose marriages take place earlier in the narrative and are marked by idealistic aspirations, Mary’s relationship with Fred culminates in marriage towards the novel’s end, primarily grounded in mutual love. Their love is described as “an ancient love, an old, old passion dating from their earliest consciousness” (Chase 80), free from the societal or materialistic ambitions. Mary and Fred’s relationship, thus, presents an alternate exploration of gender roles within Victorian society, one that is not strictly bound by rigid societal norms. Their shared life, which yields three sons, is a testament to a relationship where gender performance is less stringently dictated by societal constructs, echoing Butler’s assertion that gender roles are performative and subject to individual agency (*Gender Trouble* 11). Their relationship enriches Eliot’s depiction of gender dynamics in *Middlemarch* by introducing a scenario where traditional gender expectations are challenged and subverted.

As for Celia, a conforming young lady, compared to her sister Dorothea, she has a “more common-sense,” and is “so amiable and innocent-looking...knowing and worldly-wise” (Eliot, *Middlemarch* 6–9). She stands for the ideal compatible and obedient wife, longing to perform her female gender roles such as a devoted wife and mother. For this reason, she accepts Mrs. Cadwallader’s (a conventional voice of *Middlemarch* society) matchmaking and marries Mr. Chettam. Sir James Chettam, the excellent baronet, is a

landowner, a gentleman who in fact wants to marry Dorothea, but is rejected, which is revealed through a conversation between them. He is a traditional man, having the thought that “every lady ought to be a perfect horsewoman,” and “may accompany her husband” (27). Nevertheless, Celia and James are well-matched, and display a happy marriage. In her book, *Sisters in Time*, Susan Morgan represents the happiness of Mary and Celia, stating that “reality in the time and place of Middlemarch is represented as cultural and unfulfilling, then the conventional happy endings for Celia and her baby or Mary Garth and Fred Vincy on their farm are revealed not only as old-fashioned solutions but as outmoded fiction,” and this displays “conventions from a fiction that had not yet tied the earthly paradise to a patriarchy (156). Morgan defines this as lovely images, delightfully grounded in reality “rather than idealized” (156). Morgan reveals the happiness of Mary and Celia and claims that their joy is neither unexpected nor exceptional. This is the effect of their realistic approach to life, for, they do not long for some ideals like Dorothea and Rosamond but are content with their conditions and maintain their lives accordingly. The disparity of these two couples, Mary/Fred and Celia/James, lies in the fact that they knew the importance of mutual agreement, knew how to respect each other, and to perform their roles properly.

So conceived, in *Middlemarch*, George Eliot underlines the constraining social structures that discriminate based on gender, marginalise women from traditionally masculine spheres, and offer them limited opportunities, thereby perpetuating gender inequality. The characters she crafts, including Dorothea, Rosamond, Casaubon, and Lydgate, are moulded by their era’s prevailing cultural norms and expectations, as the narrator states “there is no creature whose inward being is so strong that it is not greatly determined by what lies outside it” (Eliot, *Middlemarch* 1193). A dominant social expectation is the institution of marriage, which is deemed as the only viable accepted pathway for women. Her portrayal of Dorothea and Rosamond’s characters underscores the meanness of opportunities available to women, as well as the societal pressures that force them to conform to gender roles that are not their own choosing. Despite their differences in personality, Dorothea and Rosamond are both shaped by the gender roles imposed upon them, and their stories illustrate difficulties faced by women in challenging or deviating from these roles. Dorothea, with her boundless enthusiasm and drive for knowledge and social good, and Rosamond, marked by her domestic aspirations and

desire for societal status, are both manipulated and constrained by society. Their narratives highlight the realities of Victorian womanhood: their choices are dictated by societal norms, their aspirations are curtailed, and their roles are predefined as wives and mothers by the heterosexual matrix. On the other hand, Eliot captures the essence of Victorian masculinity through the characters of Casaubon and Lydgate. Casaubon, the stern scholar, and Lydgate, the ambitious doctor, are drawn into a patriarchal narrative that enforces their masculinity and expects them to perform their many roles properly. Hence, her main intention in using realistic depictions of society and her characters in the novel has been to make readers more conscious of the perilous effects of gender roles and stereotypes in human relations, not to reinforce women's submissiveness. Furthermore, *Middlemarch* manifests Butler's concept of gender performativity through the struggles and experiences of its characters. Dorothea and Rosamond's repeated performances in accordance with societal expectations highlight their gendered experiences. At the same time, Casaubon and Lydgate are shaped by the same social forces, demonstrating the pervasiveness of performative gender norms. As a result, *Middlemarch* not only offers a critique of the gender inequalities prevalent in the Victorian era, but also encourages a Butlerian reassessment of gender norms and identities. Eliot uses the novel to initiate a critical analysis of deeply ingrained gender constructs, and invites readers to reconsider these norms, recognising their limitations and the consequences of their unquestioned acceptance on individuals and societal well-being.

CHAPTER 2

BREAKING THE MOULD: WOMEN AND GENDER ROLES IN *TESS OF THE D'URBERVILLES*

This chapter aims to scrutinise Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* with an emphasis on Hardy's understanding of gender, showing how socio-cultural structures of the late nineteenth-century society mirrored and influenced major discussions on gender, sexuality, and the status of women. The central figure of this study is the heroine, Tess, and her portrayal and expression of her gender, which will be closely examined alongside the male characters Alec and Angel. In this framework, Judith Butler's gender performativity theory provides a distinct perspective to analyse gender identities and roles of female and male characters in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* within their context. To comprehend the development of gender categories and societal norms in their historical context, to introduce both the author and the novel is crucial. After giving such information about Hardy and the novel, this chapter assesses the insights gained from the analysis of the chosen novel by applying Butler's gender performativity theory to the novel.

Considered both "a late Victorian novelist" and "an early twentieth-century poet" (Cox xii), Thomas Hardy's work stands out for its questioning of actual topics like sexuality, gender, class, and social complications. Hardy deals with the struggles of individuals concerning their social milieu, illustrating the complexities and injustices of life. In fact, his portrayals of gender and social strata are intertwined to reveal the broader matter of women's conformity to normalised gender roles. Hardy rejects the notion that males are inherently more suited to taking the lead in the community because of biological distinctions between the sexes and, notably, that women have to be mute, subservient, passive objects of men's desires. He was indeed conscious of the treatment of women in his period, which constitutes one of the key themes of his writings. He uncovers the brutality women endure from abusive male figures and the inequalities they grapple with daily. His depiction of women's roles and sexuality – particularly their harsh reality in his time – is demonstrative in his fiction. As Judith Mitchell states, "female characters

and issues surrounding sexuality and gender form such an important almost all of Hardy's novels" (180). This quote shows the significance of female characters and gender-related issues in Hardy's works. Hardy explores the complexities of gender, presenting it as a crucial aspect of his novels' narratives and themes. Thus, his female characters are not just simple additions; they play a vital role in providing insights into the exploration of sexuality and gender roles, particularly in the context of their social and cultural surroundings.

Commenting on such subject matters in Hardy's fiction, Richard Carpenter also provides a concise overview of the main issues Hardy addresses throughout his novel. In his work *Thomas Hardy* (1964), Carpenter sheds light on Hardy's mastery of realistically portraying rural life and his keen "concern with the social scene" (36). Carpenter remarks that Hardy's narratives tackle "the conflict between classes, the shifting economic and social patterns brought about by the replacement of 'stationary cottagers' with migratory labour and the introduction of machinery" (37). This insight highlights Hardy's adept handling of multifaceted social issues in his novels, which include class struggles and swift societal transformations. Carpenter further elaborates on Hardy's exploration of "the problems resulting from a restrictive code of social ethics and propriety" (37), pointing to the impacts of stringent societal norms. These insights clarify that Hardy's oeuvre spans a wide array of themes that can be interpreted and analysed from various viewpoints. As for his literary journey, Hardy authored fourteen novels, starting with *Desperate Remedies* in 1871 and concluding with *Jude the Obscure* in 1895, marking his transition from "prose fiction" (Widdowson, *On Thomas Hardy* 14).

With the thematic scope of Hardy's novels mentioned above, it is noteworthy to analyse his literary standing and the multifaceted nature of his writing. Hardy, considered "an enormously productive writer" (Howe 16), exhibits remarkable versatility and complexity, personally and artistically. Irving Howe elucidates Hardy's profound scholarly prowess, emphasising his work's wide variety of themes and stating that "the more one reflects upon his work, the more it seems to grow into multiplicity" (17). This description underlines Hardy's unique ability to weave numerous themes within his narratives, allowing for a continually unfolding myriad interpretations. Moreover, Howe describes Hardy as a "philosopher spinning fables of determinism, an elegist of rural simplicities, a poet of tenderness" (17). These varied depictions of Hardy confirm his

literary sophistication, emphasising his skill in navigating philosophical discourses, encapsulating profound human sentiments in his works. In addition, Howe identifies Hardy as an “autodidact who keeps stumbling into sublimities of intuition, a troubled modernist trying to come to terms with the malaise of our life” (17). This characterisation of Hardy as a “troubled modernist” illuminates his struggle with societal changes and offers an analysis of Hardy’s keen focus on societal anxieties within his novels.

Building on Hardy’s portrayal as a “modernist,” his work also bridges the Victorian and Modernist literary eras. As articulated by Peter Widdowson in his book *On Thomas Hardy*, Hardy is cast as “ineluctably “transitional” between “Victorian” and “Modern,” which evokes “the affinity between his work and late-twentieth-century critical approaches” (74). This transitional status, however, does not merely denote a chronological position; it signifies Hardy’s involvement “in the late-19th-century literary debate on Naturalism and Realism” (25). Nevertheless, he was not just a conformist to these literary movements but an innovator within them. Rather than passively occupying a “‘transitional’ category,” he actively challenged and even subverted “the limits of realism as a fictional mode” (25). This reveals Hardy’s stand on “realism” in art, challenging the conventions of realism and imbuing his narratives with complexity.

Hardy’s writings demonstrate a realistic approach in depicting the struggles and triumphs of ordinary working-class and rural people, including the unfairness that permeates their lives. On the other hand, a counterpoint to this realism can be observed in the naturalistic overtones in his work; his characters often are helpless in the face of nature and socio-cultural norms. Hardy predominantly sets his stories in the rural region, in “a fictional world” that he calls as Wessex, where “the natural world” serves as “the source,” significantly controlling “human existence” (Howe 23). By doing so, Hardy weaves the fate of humankind with nature, thereby shaping the natural landscape into an accomplice in human destiny (23). This fictional world is of great importance, for Hardy has been criticised for limiting himself by creating his novels and characters in the same periphery in a tragic manner. However, Rosemarie Morgan points out that Hardy’s novels are “universal,” and “despite their regional settings, their *centre of interest* mirrors the human condition everywhere” (*Student* 16). So, Hardy knew how to portray ordinary people and common problems, being concerned with the connection of the Wessex community with the world and the impact the world had on local traditions and beliefs.

For Hardy, “the natural world” is one of the leading forces, along with the social laws determining his characters’ destinies. That is, nature is not passive or lifeless; instead, nature takes on a function and performs its role through and through, punishing and destroying those who transgress the codes while following their desires. Thus, Hardy’s work embodies a harmonious blend of realism and naturalism, where the natural world is personified and intricately woven into the human narrative, thereby offering a profound reflection of the human condition.

Mirroring this subversion of norms in his depiction of nature, Hardy also disrupts traditional gender roles in his works. As Margaret R. Higonnet suggests in *The Sense of Sex: Feminist Perspectives on Hardy* (2015), “in an age when political, social, and literary challenges were being mounted to traditional gender roles, Hardy tested and subverted constraining gender definitions to an unusual extent. He certainly would not have wanted to privilege women or men over women in the analysis of systems of social representation” (3). This observation emphasises Hardy’s dedication to portraying a balanced view of gender roles, highlighting his commitment to questioning and challenging established norms. Hardy, as Higonnet puts it, did not aim to elevate one gender over the other; instead, he sought to portray a realistic and complex human experience where both genders are subject to the pressures of societal expectations (3). Thus, Hardy’s reinterpretation of gender roles and his focus on the pervasive impact of traditional customs has made his work a rich ground for gender and feminist criticism.

In her work “Becoming a Man in *Jude the Obscure*,” Elizabeth Langland indicates that feminist scholars began to focus on Hardy’s works since his portrayals of women go beyond the conventional generalisations that have been defined as archetypal depictions of women (32). Langland further lays stress on the fact that these early studies were essential in revealing the potential “of a rewarding feminist approach to Hardy,” but that current studies explore a broader spectrum of gender, investigating not only the issue of “femininity” but also the issue of “masculinity” in Hardy’s novels (23). Obviously, Hardy has dealt with profound social upheavals in ways that have destabilised gender categorisations. Langland in this sense points out that “poised between centuries (nineteenth and twentieth), between cultures (rural and urban), and between classes (peasantry and middling),” Hardy challenged traditional gender roles and “disturbed the stability of gender classifications” (32). This suggests that Hardy’s writing is intricately

woven with the fabrics of social, cultural, and class transitions, all of which have played a role in challenging and redefining gender roles.

Joanna Devereux, like Langland, offers a valuable perspective on Hardy's unconventional approach to the gender narratives of his time. Hardy does not conform to the prevailing literary norms of his time, for he has woven the complicated aspect of female-male sexuality into his writing (Devereux xiii). Indeed, Hardy's novels show the difficulties "inherent in the social class and gender hegemony of his time" by not perpetuating "that hegemony" (Devereux xiii). Devereux also discusses the intriguing dichotomy of the female characters in Hardy's novels. These women, she asserts, can either threaten men or become symbolic representations of men's ambitions, both in terms of their profession or social standing (xii). It is the rebellious female characters who defy societal expectations of their gender roles, and it is their recurring appearances in Hardy's work that serve to challenge hegemonic masculinity. Hence, it is essential to note that Hardy's work becomes a crucial reflection of his culture since he exposes and attacks dominant ideologies. His novels contest traditional gender roles by presenting strong female characters who resist the confines of a patriarchal society. These characters refuse to accept male-defined standards passively. However, as Devereux observes, the complexity of these novels also lies in how female characters tend to internalise the very discourse that both defines and restricts them, thereby denying them the same individuality or subjectivity granted to male characters (xv).

In line with Devereux's analysis, Penny Boumelha further explores the connection between Hardy's novels and modern ideas of gender and sexuality, especially drawing attention to the inconsistencies in his writings, showing how he subverts and reasserts sexual discourse through repetition and alteration of ideological aspects (*Thomas Hardy* 4–5). Hardy's work can only be adequately understood by placing his novels in their proper historical context rather than reading them in isolation from the existing beliefs and "contemporary ideologies" that literature generates and evolves (8). Thus, Hardy's recurrent themes such as women's issues, aspects of sexuality, matrimonial and antimatrimonial issues are all embedded "in an ideology of sexual difference" based on biological theories of his period (8). This insight stresses the complex layers of gender portrayal and sexual difference within Hardy's work, underscoring his treatment of such themes.

Patricia Stubbs also identifies a fundamental conflict in Hardy's writings, suggesting that Hardy's central attitude and content in the art are critical, disruptive, and divergent, and notably that his radicalism has constantly been muted because of the established preconceptions and norms (80). This tension is manifest in Hardy's construction of female characters. His tendency towards "moral iconoclasm" often conflicts with his portrayal of women that fit into traditional moulds (80). The duality in Hardy's depiction of women is striking. He depicts confident and favourable women such as Bathsheba Everdene from *Far from the Madding Crowd* and Eustacia Vye from *The Return of the Native*, who diverge from the traditional expectations of their time, yet find themselves subjected to the mental and sensual prejudices inherent in the sexism of their society. While those female characters in Hardy's novels who conform to social expectations receive appreciation, those who forge unique paths face challenges and punishments. A prime example is Tess Durbeyfield, who faces immense hardship despite her resilience and strength due to societal judgement and gender biases. Hence, according to Boumelha and Stubbs, it is not realism as a literary form in the first place that constrains Hardy, but rather the Victorian period and its ideologies, norms, and codes that determine the bounds of his narratives. So, Hardy is aware of the various manipulative structures that exist, and he seeks to disclose or disrupt these conventions to lay bare how society blindly accepts these restrictive norms and structures. Considering the ends of his novels and heroines, resistance sometimes occurs through silence and death, most evident in Tess's story in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*.

Tess of the D'Urbervilles, which "brought Hardy into the centre of contemporary controversy" (Cunningham 94), is a novel that can be read and interpreted in multiple ways. It addresses gender issues, women's positioning in their social milieu, and particularly societal double standards concerning sexuality, gender, and class. Nevertheless, Stubbs argues that early critics failed to notice these themes in the novel, for they focused "on an angry and literal-minded discussion of the book's subtitle, 'A Pure Woman'" (17) and criticised Hardy for manifesting Tess as pure. Tess, the fallen woman, might have been pure in Hardy's view, but she certainly was not for others, which brought about those criticisms. Fundamentally, for most critics, Tess represents Hardy's opposition to Victorian sexual ideals, conventions, and double standards. In this light, recent critics such as Penny Boumelha, Rosemarie Morgan, Margaret R. Higonnett,

Patricia Ingham, Kristin Brady, Joanna Devereux, and others reread Hardy's work through a feminist lens, focusing on gender issues. For example, Brady in her essay "Thomas Hardy and Matters of Gender" asserts that "Hardy's texts, as well as the readings of those texts," are "gendered performances" (93). This notion of "gendered performances" shows how gender dynamics and biases fundamentally influenced Hardy's narratives and their interpretations. In Brady's view, not only are Hardy's narratives "gendered performances," but so are the interpretations and readings of those narratives. This draws attention to the fluidity and subjectivity in literary analysis, particularly in feminist criticism, where contemporary discourses on gender dynamics influence readers. In turn, the reader's perspective simultaneously shapes the interpretations. This ties into Stubbs' assertion that earlier interpretations overlooked critical themes in Hardy's novel. Consequently, the constant re-examining of Hardy's works in the light of evolving perspectives on gender reveals new interpretations. Hence, this study analyses Hardy's narrative from a gendered stance by reinterpreting gendered performances of the characters in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*.

Tess of the D'Urbervilles may essentially be the story of Tess, a peasant girl struggling with the harsh realities of the Victorian patriarchal culture – including its existing societal norms, sexual double standards, and male dominance. However, it is also a powerful depiction of nineteenth-century peasant women's experiences under the brutality of a male-dominated rural society. The novel is divided into seven distinct phases, each revolving around Tess's struggles and evolution within the setting of traditional rural England, Wessex. Notably, Tess and the two leading male characters, Alec and Angel, appear in these phases, which lead to her destruction. In brief, the first phase, "The Maiden," initiates with Tess's devastating encounter with Alec D'Urberville, marked by a violation of her innocence. Subsequently, the "Maiden No More" phase narrates her refusal of Alec's marriage proposal, coupled with the birth and death of her son, poignantly named "Sorrow." Following a two-year gap, the third phase, "The Rally," presents Tess's encounter with Angel and the blossoming of their affection. In "The Consequence," the fourth phase, Tess and Angel's marriage is framed alongside their confessions of past transgressions, starkly displaying Victorian sexual double standards. The fifth phase, "The Woman Pays," as the title suggests, encapsulates the social consequences Tess faces for her past; despite being a victim, she is burdened with blame

and abandoned by Angel. The sixth phase, “The Convert,” demonstrates Tess’s predicament, being aware of her family’s complicated situation and accepting Alec’s offer to live as his mistress. Finally, the novel ends with the seventh phase, “Fulfillment,” culminating in Tess’ execution after murdering Alec.

The narrative intriguingly begins not with Tess but with her father, John Durbeyfield, who dreams of social elevation after an unexpected encounter with Parson Tringham, representing the rural working people’s futile aspiration for upward mobility. The narrative swiftly transitions to Tess, a diligent country girl who grapples with numerous societal and personal challenges. As her story progresses, other characters emerge, each embodying distinctive facets of Victorian society. Tess’s mother, Joan Durbeyfield, exemplifies the resigned adherence to societal norms and gendered expectations, while her younger brother, Abraham, presents the innocence and possible resilience of youth. Alec D’Urbervilles, the debauched son of a wealthy family, is a personification of the affluent class’s exploitation and misuse of power. Angel Clare, Tess’s well-meaning but critically flawed love interest, portrays the contradictions of Victorian ideals and their destructive implications for women. Alec’s parents, Mrs and Mr Stoke-D’Urbervilles, and Angel’s parents, Reverend and Mrs Clare, further highlight the constraints imposed by rigid class structure and societal norms. Throughout these characters, Hardy underscores the intricate relationship between gender, class, and social norms and their gendered influence on their lives. As Higonnet notes, Hardy’s *Tess* “identifies gender codes,” seeking “to dismantle clichés about masculinity and femininity” (14). Likewise, Brady points out that *Tess* is “obsessively associated with matters of gender” and revolves around “representations of sexual difference,” revealing the cultural production of gender (93). Both critics argue that Hardy deals with gender and sex-related matters in his fiction. Thus, in *Tess*, Hardy portrays the profound influence of societal norms and expectations on gender formation.

Tess is a narrative that includes gender inequalities, manifesting female and male characters’ gender performances in conventional rural England when women are constrained and maltreated socially, educationally, and occupationally. Hardy shows how the patriarchal social structure of his time contributed to the formation of a binary gender system through the actions of his characters. He illustrates how women were expected to fit societal norms and how power was distributed. There is evidently a connection

between this idea and Judith Butler's concept of "heterosexual matrix," which postulates the societal moulding of individuals into specific gender roles based on pervasive norms and expectations. By examining Tess's experiences of class, education, and marriage in relation to Alec and Angel, it becomes clear that societal pressures and expectations of femininity, purity, and passivity are imposed on her. The novel is a powerful critique of discursive constructions of gender and how they lead to the marginalisation and oppression of women. As Butler notes, "the mundane reproduction of gendered identity takes place through the various ways in which bodies are acted in relation to the deeply entrenched or sedimented expectations of gendered existence" ("Performative Acts" 524). Applying this to Hardy's characters in *Tess*, it becomes clear that females and males are profoundly impacted by gender norms which are paramount in guiding their behaviour and actions.

Exploring Tess's behaviour, actions, and character in the context of Butler's theory reveals her dynamic roles throughout the narrative. Initially depicted as "a fine and handsome girl," Tess engages in the local "club-walking" in her village, Marlott. Here, she embodies the typical allure of her peers, neither standing out nor receding in attractiveness (Hardy 20). However, despite the initial depiction of Tess as an ordinary rural girl, Hardy unveils the intricate layers of her character through her fascinating physical features, such as her "mobile peony mouth and large innocent eyes" that "add eloquence to colour and shape" (20). Furthermore, against the backdrop of her peers adorned in white flowers, Tess's red ribbon in her hair emerges as a symbol of distinctiveness. This accessory evolves throughout the narrative, standing as evidence of her unique identity within the community and foreshadowing the sexual nuances her story would later unravel. This association with the colour red, often symbolising passion and violation, may hint at the challenges she will pose to the conventional norms of femininity in her future actions. In this sense, Tess's red ribbon indicates her quiet defiance against societal norms. This concept of symbolic defiance aligns with Butler's understanding of gender as a performative and changeable construct, suggesting Tess's potential to subvert societal expectations, particularly those regarding femininity and sexual propriety.

In his essay "Colour and Movement in Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*," Tony Tanner deepens this interpretation by extending the symbolism of the colour red. Tanner associates this colour with "blood and the spilling of the blood," which elicits a range of

emotions and events from “sexual passion and the creation of life” to “murderous passion and death,” elements that all form the essence of Tess’s story (237). This dual representation of red aligns closely with Tess’s character and fate. Furthermore, it illustrates her life experiences, marked by passion, creation, and death. Tanner’s observations on the “red ribbon marking out the little girl in the white dress” and the “red blood stain on the white ceiling” reinforce the tragic inevitability of Tess’s story (237). With his phrase “in her beginning is her end,” Tanner also posits that Tess’s fate is predetermined and inevitable. So, the striking symbolism of red and white, which appears throughout Tess’s narrative, illustrates the complex interplay of innocence and passion, revealing the constant struggle and dilemma she faces. This symbolism also encapsulates the tensions Tess experiences as she deals with gender norms and subtly reflects her ongoing battle between conformity and resistance to these norms.

One pivotal illustration of Tess’s conformity is evident considering her education, which displays her societal and gender compliance, despite her aspirations. Earlier in the novel, Hardy describes Tess as “a mere vessel of emotion untinged by experience” (21), suggesting that she is a character profoundly driven by her emotions and lacks worldly experience. This statement reflects the societal view of women during the Victorian era, who were considered as emotionally driven beings with little exposure to and understanding of the wider world. However, Tess’s education contradicts this stereotype. She graduated from “the sixth standard” at “the National school under a London-trained mistress,” and she was able to speak both the local dialect as well as standard English (27). More importantly, Tess aspired to become a teacher. However, her circumstances and the decisions of others ultimately led her down a different path, which serves as a commentary on the lack of opportunities for women in her class during this period. Hardy provides information about Tess’s education to show that she is not just a typical country girl but a character with some level of understanding and consciousness. However, despite her education providing her with an understanding that extends beyond her rural life, she remains confined to traditional gender roles due to societal circumstances. Tess bears the burden of her irresponsible parents, which is apparent in her decision to take on the responsibility of the beehives, taking them to the market because her father is too tired and drunk to do it (35). In this case, Tess performs the role of a dutiful daughter and caretaker, not necessarily because it is an inherent part of her

identity, but because societal norms and her family's expectations compel her to do so. This encapsulates Butler's argument of gender being constituted and performed in specific historical and societal contexts, where Tess's education allows her a certain level of consciousness but does not liberate her from performing the gender role assigned to her.

Tess's devotion to her role as a dutiful daughter and sister, which she demonstrates through her task of transporting the beehives, inadvertently leads to a tragic accident that further confines Tess within the boundaries of her gender and class. In the aftermath of the accident, Tess is consumed with guilt and takes full responsibility for the death of Prince, exclaiming that it was all her fault. She expresses this by saying, "all my doing – all mine!" (39). In fact, Tess's primary concern is the economic struggle her family will face. Feeling guilty, Tess agrees to her parents' plan of visiting the D'Urberville mansion despite her reluctance, saying, "well, as I killed the horse, mother," she said mournfully, "I suppose I ought to do something. I don't mind going and seeing her. But you must leave it to me about asking for help" (42). The underlying tension in this decision arises from the contrast between Tess's progressive thoughts and her mother's traditional beliefs about a woman's role in society. Tess's mother perceives this visit as an opportunity to secure a financially stable future for Tess through marriage, a common societal expectation at the time. Tess expresses dissatisfaction with her mother's intentions of using their relationship for financial gain. Moreover, despite her reservations, Tess decides to pay the visit but makes clear that she will handle the matter in her own way and not entertain any thoughts of a marriage arrangement, as she puts forth, "don't go thinking about her making a match for me – it is silly" (42). Hardy displays how the weight of her family's economic struggles takes away her freedom of choice in this decision. It is both, her class and her gender that constrain Tess. So, she is forced to confront the harsh realities of her societal position as a rural woman and her limited agency in the face of sociocultural and familial pressure.

It is worth noting that, guided by the traditional norms of the Victorian era, Tess's mother prioritises marriage as the essential route to upward mobility for her daughter, thus setting the stage for Tess's tragic story. Obviously, Tess's mother is "both conditioned and circumscribed by historical convention" (Butler, "Performative Acts" 521) and is not able to think otherwise. In Hardy's depiction, the restriction on women's

freedom emerges not just from men and patriarchal systems but also from women who have internalised societal norms. This aspect of Tess's victimisation is strengthened by Terence Wright, who contends that Tess is also a victim "of her own sex" (7), suggesting that Tess is oppressed by societal norms women in her community uphold and enforce. For instance, on the night of Tess's seduction, first the women of Trantridge reject Tess. Wright's claim that women are "subjected to the ill-treatment and prejudices of a society whose values and assumptions are those of the opposite sex" (7) further expands this. The "values and assumptions" to which Wright refers are the pressures and standards related to marriage, purity, and femininity imposed on Tess by her mother and other women in Wessex, where Tess lives. This is consistent with Butler's idea that oppressive systems have perpetuated and reinforced gender roles for all society members, and gender norms normalise over time. As Butler claims, "sex, gender, and heterosexuality are historical products which have become conjoined and reified over time" ("Performative Acts" 525). Hence, Tess herself becomes an embodiment of the historically reified gender norms based on the dualisms Mary/Eve, virginial ideal/sex object, spiritual/material, good/evil. Despite her awareness and internal struggles, Tess is situated within these pervasive gender norms, and her actions, even her resistance, are confined by these boundaries, culminating in her encounter with Alec D'Urberville, the son of the wealthy woman.

Before examining the encounter of Tess with Alec, it is crucial to understand Tess's character through her acts of resistance, such as her daring baptism of her illegitimate child, challenging the moral codes of her time. Following her traumatic experience with Alec, Tess faces the consequences of premarital pregnancy, ultimately leading to her child's birth. This context of Tess's pregnancy provides insight into the complexity of her situation and the immense emotional burden she carries. As she grapples with losing her child, Tess fears that her baby's soul may be in peril due to the prevailing moral norms that regard unbaptised souls unsaved. Her desperation is evident as she pleads, "o merciful God, have pity, have pity on my poor baby" (Hardy 106). However, seen as illegitimate by the parson, Tess's baby is denied an official baptism. Therefore, in defiance and determination, Tess takes matters into her own hands and baptises her child "in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost" (107). Tess performs the act of baptism, typically performed by a male religious figure, to show her defiance of societal norms and moral codes. This transgression, as analysed by Rosemarie Morgan, showcases

Tess's strong character and willingness to break societal boundaries to do what she believes is morally right (*Women* 73). Moreover, Tess's actions, seen as disregarding traditional gender roles, reflect Hardy's critique of the prevailing sociocultural and moral practices. Morgan further illuminates Hardy's "scorn for a cultural ideology" that "under the mantle of Christianity" reinforces "both the myth of the fallen woman's guilt and the guilt of unbaptised innocents" (73). The "myth of the fallen woman's guilt" alludes to the societal view that condemns women who lose their purity before marriage by labelling them "fallen" and attributing innate guilt to them. This is evident in Tess's experience, for Tess's premarital pregnancy marks her as a "fallen woman" in the eyes of her community. Despite the harsh societal judgement and the guilt placed upon her as a "fallen woman," Tess continues to assert her autonomy, challenging the prescribed moral codes and norms of her society. Tess's story ends with her final act of defiance – killing Alec – and shows the tragic consequences of becoming a woman in such a society. So, through Tess, the novel illustrates how such values and norms pressure individuals to comply and how these can harm individuals, particularly women.

Tess's life, beginning as a naive, innocent girl in the rural confines of Marlott, undergoes significant transformations, notably shaped by her encounters with Alec D'Urbervilles and Angel Clare. Tess navigates through various roles—from a devoted daughter to a mother, a wife, and a mistress—eventually culminating in the societal perception of her as a "fallen woman" and a murderer. Her journey, in many ways, reflects a symbolic transition from the pristine innocence linked to biblical Mary to the moral transgression epitomised by Eve. This comparison to Mary and Eve embodies the moral spectrum of womanhood in a patriarchal religious context, with Mary representing revered impeccability and Eve signifying sinful temptation. However, in line with Judith Butler's gender theory, Tess's journey could also be seen as a 'performative' process, where her gender is not a fixed biological trait but something that evolves through these roles she is compelled to enact within societal norms. To fully understand the dynamics of this transformation, it is crucial to analyse her relationships with Alec and Angel, both rife with critical concerns of gender, class, sexuality, and morality. Hence, an in-depth exploration of her relationships, initiating with Alec, becomes indispensable for a nuanced understanding of Tess's character and the societal expectations that shape her life.

Alec D'Urberville, an embodiment of reckless upper-class masculinity, is introduced in the narrative as a character possessing distinct physical attributes and a pronounced sense of entitlement. Alec is portrayed as a carefree young man in his mid-twenties, enjoying the privileges that come with his inherited fortune and the respected name his father purchased. This background significantly frames his interactions with Tess, who, compared to Alec, is of lower social standing. In addition, Hardy paints Alec as a man who "had an almost swarthy complexion, with full lips, badly moulded, through red and smooth, above which was a well-groomed black moustache" and implies that "despite the touches of barbarism in his contours there was a singular force" in his face (45). His physical characteristics complement Alec's privileged class status, further underlining his masculinity and dominance. These features, paired with his unchecked desires, pave the way for the predatory behaviour evident from the beginning of his relationship with Tess. In contrast, Tess is depicted as a rural maiden, an innocent yet stunning figure at the mercy of her family's impoverished circumstances. Her striking femininity and vulnerability draw Alec's attention. However, his fascination with Tess is not marked by admiration or respect but by objectification. Seeing Tess as easy prey due to her family's financial struggles, he exhibits his entitlement by laughing dismissively at her: "what a funny thing! Ha-ha-ha! And what a crumby girl!" (49). Moreover, a critical moment arrives during their carriage ride, where Alec, ignoring Tess's discomfort, forces a "kiss of mastery" upon her. This event occurs in an isolated place, allowing Alec to exert power over Tess. Nevertheless, Alec is confused and belittles Tess for being "mighty sensitive for a cottage girl" (61). This stresses his exploitative nature and overt misuse of his social privilege and gender power. In the face of Tess's reluctance and discomfort, Alec's lack of comprehension further highlights the glaring disparities of class, gender, and power between them. Consequently, Alec's interactions with Tess serve as a stark illumination of the imbalances and injustices that define Tess's tragic narrative, setting the stage for the profound changes that her life is to undergo.

So conceived, Hardy creates Alec as the embodiment of Victorian heterosexual culture regarding class and sexuality, positioning Alec as a figure of power and dominance in contrast to Tess's lower social status and moral integrity. Significantly, Tess's innocence and naivety pave the way for Alec's abuse and her fall. The major incident of her story takes place in the Chase, where "darkness and silence ruled

everywhere,” and “Tess’s guardian angel,” in the unknown, was unable to save or protect her from Alec’s seduction. While the narrator questions this act by asking why it happened to “this beautiful feminine tissue,” the real “pity of it” emerges with the phrase “it was to be” (Hardy 82–83). The pity lies in the fact that this plight is a performative act that has its roots in history because the narrator remarks that her ancestors “had dealt the same measure even more ruthlessly towards peasant girls of their time” (82). Referring to such masculinist acts, Higdonnet considers this as “a historical repetition of the sins of powerful men against simple peasant girls” (19). Indeed, the quote illuminates the historical repetition of men’s misconduct towards women, emphasising that Tess’s experience is not an isolated incident but part of a broader societal pattern. Thus, Tess’s rape represents the plight of rural women, for they had no opportunity other than to work because of financial reasons and were forced to endure the abuse of a wealthy man like Alec.

Whether this sexual act is rape or seduction is open to debate, however. William A. Davis delves into this discussion, providing essential details from the novel. First, he points out that Tess is depicted as being asleep and unresponsive to Alec’s actions, stating that she “does not respond to Alec’s address” (223). This quote suggests that Tess’s lack of response raises concerns about her consent and agency. Additionally, Hardy’s description of Tess “sleeping soundly” with tears on her eyelashes further emphasises her vulnerable state (82). Davis further points to Hardy’s portrayal of the scene, especially to the lack of Tess’s “guardian angel” and to that “coarse pattern,” drawing attention to Tess’s lack of protection and the aggressive nature of Alec’s actions. These details, as Davis argues, “all suggest the violent nature of Alec’s assault” (223). This act shows the power imbalance between Alec and Tess, where she is defenceless and unable to participate or provide consent actively. Even the narrator questions this act: “why it was that upon this beautiful feminine tissue...why so often the course appropriates the finer thus, the wrong man the woman” (Hardy 82). This quote from the novel raises concerns about the power dynamics and the unjust appropriation of agency between genders. So, Davis concludes by underscoring Tess’s state of unconsciousness, which is crucial because it implies that she is not giving her consent, and this act might be classified as rape (223).

On the other hand, Morgan analyses the sexual encounter between Alec and Tess

in the Chase scene through the lens of property and power dynamics. She argues this is “an act of theft, a dishonest appropriation of another’s property” (*Women* 67). This quote stresses the notion of tyranny within the act, which actualises rape. Furthermore, she argues that Tess’s Chase scene transcends the mere physical act of sexual assault and acknowledges the violation of a woman’s autonomy and control over her own body and her own life (67). This reflects that in patriarchal hegemony, women do not have agency over their own lives and bodies. In line with this, de Beauvoir and Wittig argue that society often reduces women to their perceived sexual characteristics, viewing them primarily through a sexual lens (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 26). Both critics contend that by associating women solely with their sexual features, society denies them the same level of freedom and autonomy which is “purportedly enjoyed by men” (26). In other words, these critics oppose the dominant heterosexual structure that attributes fixed roles and characteristics to women and men restricts women’s agency and perpetuates oppressive power structures. In addition, the quote from Morgan, along with the insights of de Beauvoir and Wittig, illuminates the broader context of gender inequality and the denial of women’s autonomy within patriarchal systems. Whether seduction or rape, Hardy expresses his dismay at the plight of women who, like Tess, fall victim to sexual abuse and exploitation. By exploring the impact of such experiences on their lives, Hardy brings to light the injustices women face and the societal pressure they endure.

The cruel event, Alec’s violation of Tess, has a profound and lasting impact on Tess’s life. Hardy’s focal point becomes the aftermath of this brutal act, particularly the physical and social consequences. This is evident from the weighty title “maiden no more,” which signifies Tess’s status and identity transformation. As she grapples with emotional consequences and the challenges her pregnancy brings, Tess experiences a shift in her sense of self internally and externally. The narrator defines this change, noting the evolution of Tess from a “girl to complex woman,” which is reflected in her facial expressions and the tragic undertones in her voice (Hardy 112). John Goode’s perspective sheds further light on the significance of this event and the change of Tess, as it illustrates the intertwined nature of class and gender issues, specifically how men use power and control over women (33). Concerning this, in his essay “Hardy and Marxism,” Goode argues that “Tess is finally made into a woman by violation and into a field woman by economic oppression” (33). The quote shows the immense impact of the event on Tess,

who must confront the difficulties of womanhood and shoulder the burden of societal power imbalances. Furthermore, it stresses her unjust treatment as she is coerced into a predefined societal role and faces financial problems.

In this sense, Alec's character in the novel represents traditional patriarchal power structures. Alec desires to dominate and control Tess while Tess strives to break free from his power and assert her independence. This power struggle is evident when Alec attempts to initiate a physical interaction with Tess, and she responds by turning her head away "in the same passive way, as one might turn at the request of a sketcher or hairdresser" (Hardy 90). However, as Alec expresses his frustration over Tess's lack of response and bemoans the act of Tess, he acknowledges that she "never willingly" kisses him (90). This moment signifies a shift in Tess's perception of Alec's power over her. This is because what has happened has already happened, and Alec can no longer hurt her. Tess has realised that she has already been through the worst, and Alec's power over her is limited, and "she had no fear of him now" (88). According to Morgan, this act is a "passive resistance," and Tess displays "deliberate, conscious rebellion and considerable self-control" (68). Morgan's quote emphasises Tess's strengths and determination in the face of Alec's manipulative acts. While Alec may have violated Tess physically, in Morgan's words, "her spirit remains self-governing and unyielding" (69). This signifies that although he may have taken control of her body, he cannot dominate her spirit and internal autonomy. Tess's decision to leave her work at Trantridge and return to Marlott marks a turning point in her encounters with Alec, as it is during this confrontation that she boldly resists his desires. When Alec attempts to apologise for his wrongdoings, his words irritate Tess:

very well," he said laughing. "I am sorry to wound you. I did wrong— I admit it." He dropped into some little bitterness as he continued: "Only you needn't be so everlastingly flinging it in my face. I am ready to pay to the uttermost farthing. You know you need not work in the fields or dairies again. You know you may clothe yourself with the best, instead of in the bald plain way you have lately affected, as if you couldn't get a ribbon more than you earn." Her lip lifted slightly, though there was little scorn as a rule in her large and impulsive nature. "I have said I will not take anything more from you, and I will not— I cannot! I should be your creature to go on doing that; and I won't!" (Hardy 89)

The quoted passage displays the power dynamics between Alec and Tess, precisely the economic control he wields over her. He tries to assert control over Tess by offering her material benefits and positioning himself as her provider. This aligns with traditional patriarchal norms that assign men the role of the provider and women the role of dependent beings as also asserted by John Ruskin. In other words, Alec's attempt to

provide Tess with improved material conditions, better clothing, and a life free from labour reflect the societal expectation that women rely on men for financial support. By doing so, Alec exhibits a learned pattern of gendered behaviour, which is imposed on him based on his perceived gender and perpetuates a binary understanding of femininity and masculinity. So, Alec's masculine behaviour is the product of the gendered social structure, which evinces that his acts are not natural but instead produced. He does his gender in a historical and cultural context, acting out his stereotypical role of a robust and protective man. However, Tess resists Alec's attempt to place her in a position of dependency. This showcases Tess's determination to assert her autonomy and refuse the confines of being someone's "creature," challenging the prescribed gender roles and the power dynamics they entail. Tess asserts her independence by defying male dominance and chooses to move independently; she "did not look after him, but slowly wound along the crooked lane" (90). This resistance aligns with Butler's theory, which suggests that individuals express their gender by adhering to societal norms. Therefore, Tess's rejection of Alec's demands for reliance and her seek for autonomy might be seen as challenging traditional gender roles as she refuses to be confined by them. That is, by not accepting Alec's offer, Tess rejects performing her ascribed gender role as expected within the bounds of the heteronormative context.

Despite Tess's belief that she has escaped Alec and moved on from her past, it becomes evident that Alec continues haunting her. This realisation dawns on her when she re-encounters Alec, the man who troubled her life and still asserts presence, attempting to control her:

I did not come to reproach you for my deeds. I came, Tess, to say that I don't like you to be working like this, and I have come on purpose for you. You say you have a husband who is not I. Well, perhaps you have; but I've never seen him, and you've not told me his name; and altogether he seems rather a mythological personage. However, even if you have one, I think I am nearer to you than he is. I, at any rate, try to help you out of trouble, but he does not, bless his invisible face! The words of the stern prophet Hosea* that I used to read come back to me. Don't you know them, Tess?—'And she shall follow after her lover, but she shall not overtake him, and she shall seek him, but shall not find him: then shall she say, I will go and return to my first husband; for then was it better with me than now.' . . . Tess, my trap is waiting just under the hill, and—darling mine, not his!—you know the rest. (Hardy 352)

In this encounter, Alec questions the existence and significance of Tess's legal husband, Angel, implying that Angel is a mere illusion. Alec is dissatisfied with Tess's current circumstances and employment, presenting himself as the one who can help and support, unlike her "mythological" husband, who remains unseen and unhelpful. Alec's obsession

with Tess is evident as he pursues her relentlessly, intending to exert control over her. It is essential to acknowledge that Alec's obsession is deeply problematic, driven by his abusive and manipulative nature. His relentless pursuit is not motivated by genuine love or concern but rather by his desire to dominate and manipulate her. This portrayal of Alec's obsession can be understood within social class dynamics, as he belongs to the privileged class accustomed to power and influence. Therefore, Tess's reluctance leads him to experience a sense of powerlessness and interrupt the accustomed power structure. In this sense, considering Alec through Butler's perspective entails that Alec's gendered identity is the effect of Victorian socio-cultural practices, which are shaped by the "conditions of normative heterosexuality" (*Gender Trouble* xii). This normative heterosexuality, as Butler puts forth, coerces men and women to act and desire corresponding to the opposite sex, as is the case with Alec, who desires Tess. Alec adheres to the norms and expectations placed upon him as a man, displaying masculine attitudes and behaviours that are considered socially acceptable.

Additionally, the reference to the words of the prophet Hosea introduces religious and biblical allusions, highlighting the intersection of social and religious discourses that reinforce gendered roles. Alec's use of these words implies that Tess's rejection of him deviates from prescribed gender roles and moral codes, resulting in adverse reactions and punishment, as she is not currently in a favourable state. Furthermore, Alec performs the role expected of him based on his assigned gender, asserting his superiority and dominance by reminding Tess of their previous relationship and claiming ownership over her body. His words, "remember, my lady, I was your master once; I will be your master again. If you are a man's wife, you are mine!" (Hardy 352), exemplify his belief in the entitlement he possesses as a man and the control he assumes over Tess's life. Alec's obsession with Tess depicts toxic masculinity and the abusive nature of patriarchal power structures.

Despite her initial reluctance, Tess succumbs to societal pressures and economic necessities, becoming Alec's mistress. In a moment of profound self-awareness, Tess expresses a sense of helplessness, "once victim, always victim: that's the law" (Hardy 352). This poignant phrase encapsulates Tess's perception of her existence and the pervasive influence of societal forces in shaping her life. Through these words, Tess acknowledges the deeply ingrained belief that those who have experienced victimisation

are condemned to carry the consequences of their past indefinitely. She sees this “law” as an oppressive force that denies her the possibility of liberation and perpetuates a cycle of victimhood. Tess’s decision to accept Alec’s offer is driven by overwhelming circumstances and a limited range of choices. In a letter to Angel, she expresses her internal struggle, stating, “I am, as I say, worried, pressed to do what I will not... I am so defenseless on account of my first error” and fears that her future will be even bleaker than her past (357). While Tess fully knows that yielding to Alec is a mistake, she feels trapped and devoid of alternatives. By examining Tess’s behaviour through Butler’s theory, her actions can be considered a response to the gendered expectations imposed on her. Her inability to deal with societal pressures, her sense of helplessness, and her internal conflicts are all examples of how cultural interpretations of a person’s biological sex shape and limit them.

The death of her father and the judgment of the Marlott community, perceiving her as an impure woman, further compound this sense of helplessness. She carries a burden of guilt, expressing remorse by stating, “I ought never have to come home!” (Hardy 374). It is her status as an “impure” woman that disgraces her family and compels them to face societal repercussions. However, as Butler interprets and expands de Beauvoir’s idea, the idea of being a woman is not a fixed or universal concept, “but to be woman is to have become a woman, to compel the body to conform to an historical idea of ‘woman,’ to induce the body to become a cultural sign, to materialise oneself in obedience to an historically delimited possibility,” and importantly, “to do this as a sustained and repeated corporeal project” (“Performative Acts” 522). Tess’s story exemplifies that being female, in terms of biological sex, does not inherently determine one’s identity or behaviour as a woman. Instead, it is the cultural interpretation and signification of her biological sex that shape the understanding of womanhood and influence women’s actions. Tess is constricted in a patriarchal society that adheres to rigid gender norms and expectations. She is constantly judged and evaluated based on social standards of femininity, which are historically and culturally constructed. Tess feels pressured to uphold the idealised view of womanhood society has imposed on her as she makes her way through her experiences. She is expected to embody specific behaviours (self-sacrifice, submissiveness, obedience), roles (daughter, wife, mother), and expressions (feminine) associated with being a woman. This is reflected in her last words to Alec, before she murders him as

follows:

you had used your cruel persuasion upon me . . . you did not stop using . . . my little sisters and brother, and my mother's needs . . . they were the things you moved me by....and you said my husband would never come back.... And then he came back! Now he is gone, gone! A second time....O you have torn my life all in pieces . . . made me be what I prayed you in pity not to make me be again! My own true husband will never never – O God – I can't bear this! I cannot! (Hardy 403)

In this emotional outburst, Tess confronts Alec, laments the irreversible damage caused by his cruel persuasion, and expresses her despair over losing her faithful husband forever. Filled with anguish and resentment, Tess's hurtful words serve as a prelude to her ultimate act of resistance, as she takes a drastic and fateful step to free herself from Alec's control by committing the irreversible act of murder.

Building upon the analysis of Tess's relationship with Alec, it is essential to shift our focus to her subsequent connection with Angel, unravelling the intricate interplay of gender, class, sexuality, and morality that underpins their interactions and contributes to Tess's journey of self-discovery and resistance. While Alec represents the oppressive forces of patriarchal dominance in Tess's life, her relationship with Angel introduces a different dynamic rooted in ideals of love, morality, and personal transformation. The narrator vividly describes Angel's physical appearance, portraying him as having "an appreciative voice, a long regard of fixed, abstracted eyes, and a mobility of mouth, somewhat too small and delicately lined for a man's, though with an unexpectedly firm close of the lower lip now and then" (Hardy 130). After this detailed depiction, the focus shifts to Angel's education and career, essential in shaping his aspirations and values. Angel is introduced as the son of Reverend James Clare, a man of strong moral and religious convictions who disagrees with Angel's chosen career path. Angel confesses to his father, "I love the church as one loves a parent," but he cannot find honesty in becoming ordained like his brothers (131). Instead, Angel desires to pursue farming, "either in the Colonies, America, or at home – farming at any rate," expressing his intention to become "well-qualified for the business by a careful apprenticeship" (133). He sees farming as a means to attain independence without compromising his cherished "intellectual liberty" (133). With this ambition, Angel arrives "at Talbothays Dairy as a six-months' pupil," seeking to acquire practical farming skills, and it is within this setting that he crosses paths with Tess, who works as a milkmaid. This shared environment and their divergent backgrounds set the stage for exploring their relationship and the conflicts

that arise from their differing perspectives and societal expectations.

Through his unique portrayal of Angel, Hardy creates a character that stands out among the workers on the farm, not just by his status and education but also due to his insatiable thirst for knowledge and his distinctive perception of humanity. On the other hand, Tess is merely a milkmaid who works at the Talbothays Dairy to support her family financially. However, when Angel discovers Tess among the crowd of milkmaids, he sees a clear difference in her, a quality that sets her apart. Her pure and captivating voice resonates with him, as he remarks, “what a fluty voice one of those milkmaids has,” prompting him to observe her more closely (Hardy 135). Angel’s observations lead him to conclude that Tess is a “fresh and virginal daughter of nature,” and he finds himself deeply attracted to her (136). His fascination with Tess, however, goes beyond her physical attractiveness. He is equally drawn to her intellectual depth, her unique perspective on life and her ability to convey profound thoughts, as the narrator indicates:

he was surprised to find this young woman— who though but a milkmaid had just that touch of rarity about her which might make her the envied of her housemates— shaping such sad imaginings. She was expressing in her own native phrases— assisted a little by her sixth-standard training— feelings which might almost have been called those of the age— the ache of modernism. (140)

Angel observes Tess and is struck by the depth of her thoughts and emotions. Tess possesses a unique quality that sets her apart from her peers. This uniqueness likely lies in her ability to articulate complex emotions and thoughts beyond what might typically be expected from someone of her social standing and education. “Shaping such sad imaginings” refers to Tess expressing negative thoughts, revealing her capacity for profound emotional depth and introspection. This expression of her inner feelings surprises Angel, further emphasising the rare and unique qualities he finds in her. Tess, despite her rural upbringing and limited formal education (denoted by “sixth-standard training”), is capable of understanding and expressing complex ideas. Thus, this quotation encapsulates Tess’s paradox: while she is a milkmaid and thus expected to fit specific social and intellectual parameters, she exceeds these through her depth of thought, sensitivity, and awareness of broader societal changes. It is a testament to Tess’s individuality and the complexity of her character, and it plays a crucial role in deepening Angel’s interest and attraction towards her.

Despite Angel’s attraction to Tess and his view of her as an exceptional woman, Tess struggles with deep-seated feelings of inadequacy and uncertainty. During her

profound dialogue with Angel, Tess candidly reveals her perceived inferiority, a sentiment deeply rooted in the limitations imposed by her societal circumstances. She laments, “my life looks as if it had been wasted for want of chances! When I see what you know, what you have read, and seen, and thought, I feel what a nothing I am!” (Hardy 141). These words underscore her acute awareness of the disparities between her and Angel, particularly regarding education and social position, and convey her deep-rooted sense of wasted potential. Jules Law supports this, stating that “Tess clearly defines her tragedy in terms of education and social position” (260). Indeed, Tess’s tragedy arises from many factors, including her limited opportunities, lower social status, and familial background. This perspective aligns with Judith Butler’s assertion that “to be a woman is, by definition, to be in an oppressed situation” (Butler, “Performative” 523). Tess comprehends her marginalisation as an individual and part of the collective female experience. She does not feel any hope that this situation for women will change. This becomes clear when Angel tells her that he will teach everything she wants to know. For Tess reluctantly expresses that she does not want to know more than she already does. In Hardy’s portrayal, Tess’s resignation speaks volumes about the enduring predicament of women during that period. Tess’s declaration, “the best is not to remember that your nature and your past doings have been just like thousands’ and thousands’, and that your coming life and doings’ll be like thousands’ and thousands’” (Hardy 142), illuminates a sombre recognition of the cyclical, historical oppression of women. Hence, this takes us to de Beauvoir’s argument that “‘woman’ is a historical idea and not a natural fact” (qtd. in Butler, “Performative Acts” 522) and thus manifests Hardy’s concern about womanhood and its artificiality. Therefore, through Tess’s resignation and poignant self-awareness, Hardy critically engages with the construct of womanhood, illustrating the societal dynamics that continue to shape and confine women’s experiences during the Victorian era.

Angel’s perception of Tess appears to cross the boundaries between objectification and idealisation, as he ascribes to her labels and titles that may not align with her self-concept. By referring to Tess as “Artemis” or “Demeter,” Greek deities symbolising virginity, purity, and divine femininity, Angel reveals his tendency to place Tess on a pedestal. However, Tess, uncomfortable with this idolisation, resists these lofty names, pleading, “Call me Tess” (Hardy 146). She desires to be seen and acknowledged as an

individual rather than an idealised figure. As Morgan notes, Tess “quietly asserts her own identity” (*Women* 73). Through this act of naming, Angel unwittingly attempts to control Tess and classify her based on traditional and societal views of femininity and womanhood. This small yet significant proclamation of her identity reveals her assertion of selfhood amidst Angel’s objectifying tendencies. Angel’s application of these divine titles can also be seen as an attempt to categorise Tess within his societal understanding of femininity and womanhood. This not only exposes Angel’s compliance with the prevailing norms about women and gender roles but also demonstrates his unintentional perpetuation of these norms. This is where Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity becomes applicable. As Butler puts it, gender is not an inherent quality but a performance that individuals repeatedly enact, influenced by societal expectations and norms. In this context, Angel displays his masculinity and does so based on social “sanctions and prohibitions” (“Performative Acts” 525). His behaviour towards Tess, including his naming and idealisation of her, is part of this gender performance and is not merely an individual or personal act. This demonstrates the influence of social gender norms on Angel’s actions and beliefs.

The societal prejudices and biases of Angel’s family and the entrenched norms of the time emerge as significant influences that shape Angel’s beliefs and actions, leading to an evident double standard in his relationship with Tess. Angel is not devoid of imperfections; he lives within ingrained social practices and firmly upholds the societal concept of morality. To him, Tess is not just a trivial being to be played with and disregarded; she is a woman leading a meaningful life in her own right (Hardy 172). Angel is deeply in love with Tess and wants to marry her. Thus, he thinks he must first seek his family’s approval before committing formally. He is mainly concerned with gaining his father’s acceptance, Mr Clare, a clergyman with certain expectations of what a wife should be like. Angel’s question to his father about the ideal wife for a “thrifty hard-working farmer?” receives a predictable response: “a truly Christian woman” (180), emphasising the idea that a wife must be a “Mary” rather than “Eve.” This conversation shows that Angel as a traditional man values societal norms and customs, and his father puts Christian morality above everything.

Angel attempts to present Tess to his family in a manner that fits their societal expectations and traditional views of femininity. He emphasises her “ladylike” character,

poetic soul, and religious piety, all traits traditionally valued in women of middle-class society. Angel is aware of the existing “latent prejudices” in the minds of his parents “as middle-class people” (Hardy 182). Being sure that Tess is the most suitable partner for him as a farmer, he proposes marriage to her: “I shall require for my wife a woman who knows all about the management of farms. Will you be that woman, Tess?” (188). However, Tess remains resistant to his proposal. While she loves Angel, she does not envision herself as his wife. Her reluctance stems from her past with Alec, which frustrates her “because she is not a virgin” and “is ‘impure’ according to society’s definition of the term” (Stubbs 67). This illustrates the internalisation of societal norms that aligns with Butler’s theory. As Butler posits, gender norms are not natural or inherent but socially constructed and ingrained in men and women from a young age. These norms, including the expectations around purity, virginity, and suitability for marriage, are repeated and reinforced to seem natural and unchangeable. In this context, Tess and Angel are bound by these societal norms, unconsciously acting in ways that reinforce these norms. Angel’s attempt to present Tess as a “suitable” wife and Tess’s self-perception as “impure” and thus unworthy of marriage are all manifestations of these normative gender norms.

Embarking on their marital journey, Tess and Angel confront a pivotal moment on their wedding night, filled with uncertainty, fear, and the shadow of untold pasts. Tess carries a heart laden full of forethought. Crucially, the wedding night, traditionally a time of joy and celebration, becomes the scene of heartbreaking confessions. Driven by his belief in “frankness and honour”, Angel confesses his past and hopes for Tess’s forgiveness. This encourages Tess to make hers, as she says, “now *you* can forgive *me*!” for she thinks, “’tis just the same!” (Hardy 243). Nevertheless, after Angel’s unforgiving response, Tess:

slid down upon her knees beside his foot, and from this position she crouched in a heap. “In the name of our love, forgive me,” she whispered with a dry mouth. “I have forgiven you for the same.” And as he did not answer she said again, “forgive me, as you are forgiven. I forgive you, Angel.”

“You,— yes, you do.”

“But you do not forgive me?”

“O Tess, forgiveness does not apply to the case. You were one person: now you are another. My God— how can forgiveness meet such a grotesque— prestidigitation as that!” (248)

This quote reveals the brutal outcome of Tess’s confession and underlines the oppressive gender norms and the double standards of Victorian society. Tess forgives Angel’s past

without hesitation, but Angel, trapped by social norms and moral values, refuses to forgive Tess, replying that “forgiveness does not apply to the case” (248). Angel’s assertion that it is not the same and forgiveness is not possible in her case displays the injustices of a societal moral code and the double standards of his society, which “enabled Angel to palliate his sins while condemning Tess” (Carpenter 126). Instead of offering to understand Tess, Angel dismisses her as a different person: “You were one person: now you are another,” and highlights that “the woman I have been loving is not you” (Hardy 248). Notably, Angel imposes societal and moral norms on Tess, transforming her into “a guilty woman in the guise of an innocent one” (249), by which he points to her lost virginity and purity. Angel “is too blinded by his prejudices to see the reality before him – her fundamental purity and innocence”; he, instead, is “controlled by his barren notions” (Carpenter 130). This is because Angel is “both trapped and empowered by the ideal” (Devereux xvi) and creates an ideal woman in his mind. He sees Tess as a specific archetype, an “ideal” woman, and his affection falters when she does not fit this mould. Thus, the phase of Tess’s confession and Angel’s reaction offers a damning critique of the gendered double standards in Victorian society by underlining how such norms can corrupt personal relationships and lead to the unjust treatment of individuals based on gender.

In grappling with the harsh reality of their strained relationship, Tess confronts Angel and questions the realness of his love and the idealisation that seems to define it. Seeing the situation’s inanity, Tess expresses her doubts to Angel, pleading: “I thought, Angel, that you loved me – me, my very self! If it is I you do love” (Hardy 248). She questions whether it was indeed her that Angel loved or just his idealised version of her. Besides, she pleads for forgiveness, recognising that she may have contributed to the breakdown of their marriage. This shows the internalised societal pressure placed upon women to conform to strict moral standards, particularly regarding sexuality. However, Tess rejects performing the traditional role of a woman, to which the narrator gives voice: “If Tess had been artful; had she made a scene, fainted, wept hysterically...he would probably not have withstood her” (272). The narrator’s portrayal of societal expectations for Victorian women and the resulting tension with Tess’s unconventional approach aligns closely with Butler’s theory of gender performativity. Victorian women were anticipated to be emotional, submissive, and embody specific roles, often using emotions

to manipulate men. The text suggests that had Tess conformed to these norms—creating a scene, fainting, or crying hysterically—Angel might have been swayed to stay with her. However, Tess’s preference for sincerity over self-benefit, particularly in a social climate where women were expected and even encouraged to act contrary, results in a broader protest. As Cunningham articulates, Tess is “unwittingly making a more general protest for women against the social conventions that foster deceit as an essential part of their nature” (97). From Butler’s viewpoint, Tess’s refusal to adopt stereotypical female emotional tactics to influence Angel signifies a deviation from deeply embedded societal performances of femininity. Her refusal to adhere to these norms and to perform the conventional gender role can be viewed as a form of resistance against the patriarchal norms of Victorian society.

Furthermore, Tess, who once viewed Angel as a wise companion guiding her in every decision, is confronted with Angel’s deeply ingrained societal norms as he questions, “how can we live together while that man lives?” (Hardy 262). Angel blames Tess because, in his view, she is still tied to Alec as her “husband in Nature,” expressing apprehension about the potential repercussions of her past relationship. This encounter shatters Tess’s ideal image in Angel’s eyes - she is no longer the pure, innocent “virgin daughter of Nature” or the goddess “Artemis” that Angel initially perceived her to be. She has lost her virginity and is now seen as a woman who does not conform to societal and moral norms. Tess accepts Angel’s “judgment of her,” even though she feels he is “unjust and hypocritical” since “she herself has absorbed the false code” (Stubbs 68). It is obvious that both Tess and Angel are constrained by the societal and cultural expectations of gender, which are constructed by the “conditions of normative heterosexuality” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* xii). As a result, Tess and Angel’s relationship is hindered by their idealisation of each other and their inability to accept each other’s true identities. Tess again suffers in the hands of a man and decides to return to Marlott, whereas Angel decides to leave for Brazil, which Tess accepts, stating: “you know best what my punishment ought to be” (Hardy 272). She believes that she deserves punishment because this is the consequence of her failure, and “culture so readily punishes or marginalises those who fail to perform” their gender appropriately (Butler, “Performative Acts” 528). Through the character of Tess, Hardy exposes the cruelty and injustice of moral codes and encourages the readers to question such ideas and consider the human

cost of adhering to a strict and rigid code of behaviour.

As the narrative unfolds, the distinct journeys of Tess and Angel portray their struggles and subsequent growth. Returning to Marlott, Tess encounters the quintessential traditional woman in her mother, who berates her as a “little fool” for her unconventional conduct. This confrontation underscores the persistent tension between tradition and deviation, a recurrent theme in Tess’s life. On the other hand, Angel’s journey to Brazil, initially spurred by his disillusionment and desire to escape, presents unexpected opportunities for self-reflection. Angel crosses paths with an Englishman whose cosmopolitan mindset influences Angel’s rigid perspective and he starts to see Tess’s situation in a new light, which is less narrow-minded and more worldly. The stranger had travelled to many different countries and had experienced various cultures and people, and he,

sojourned in many more lands and among many more peoples than Angel; to his cosmopolitan mind such deviations from the social norm, so immense to domesticity, were no more than are the irregularities of vale mountain-chain to the whole terrestrial curve. He viewed the matter in quite a different light from Angel; thought that what Tess had been was of no importance beside what she would be, and plainly told Clare that he was wrong in coming away from her. (Hardy 360–361)

Angel understands that his perception of Tess as a pure and innocent woman as a misjudgement and he has judged her based on this unrealistic, idealistic standard of his society. As the stranger implies, Angel has internalised the norms of his society so much that he can no longer think outside of that mould, causing him to judge Tess within a specific framework. This goes in line with Butler’s argument that gender is “determined and fixed” by the culture in which an individual is raised, which can be seen as a similar concept to the idea that biology is destiny (*Gender Trouble* 12). In this way, the cultural norms and laws that shape gender can be seen as determining an individual’s fate, just as their biology would under the previous formulation.

In the final stages of the narrative, the revelation of Angel’s misjudgement of Tess and his subsequent apology, Alec’s tragic death at Tess’s hands, and Tess’s impending execution paint a poignant picture of doomed love, guilt, and fatalistic submission to social norms. After realising his fault, Angel seeks forgiveness from Tess, whose bitter response is a sharp rebuke: “too late, too late” (Hardy 400). Eventually, Tess holds Alec responsible for her predicament and kills him. Following this tragic incident, Tess and Angel find themselves fugitives and decide to rest at Stonehenge, a heathen temple, where

she feels at home. She is happy to be with her love, Angel. Nevertheless, Tess is not accustomed to happiness and knows it is temporary, for she is guilty. She expresses this in the arrest scene, saying, “Angel – I am glad – yes, glad! This happiness could not have lasted – it was too much – I have had enough,” and most remarkably, is her saying, “I am ready” (418). Taking her words into consideration, Tess’s decision to rest indicates her submission to her fate, to get arrested and executed. This acceptance of her imminent execution brings into sharp focus the phrase, “once victim, always victim: that’s the law” (352). This articulates the ceaseless cycle of suffering she is subjected to as a woman in a patriarchal society.

Indeed, the final phase of the narrative points to the repression of women in a patriarchal society, a theme perpetually illuminated through Tess’s experiences and actions. At this stage, Tess is depicted once again as a victim, this time as a victim of legal punishment:

the figure came straight towards the circle of pillars in which they were...Turning, he saw over the prostrate columns another figure; then, before he was aware, another was at hand on the right, under a trilithon, and another on the left...they all closed in, with evident purpose...the nearest man was upon him...“There are sixteen of us on the Plain; and the whole country is reared.” (417–418)

This quote shows with certainty that it is not merely Tess’s fate that shapes her life, yet the societal and legal codes/laws controlled by men that restrict her autonomy. This is evident in the scene at Stonehenge, where the guards’ encircling formation symbolises the pervasive restrictions women face in a patriarchal society. Tess realises that as a woman in a male-dominated society, she has no right to make mistakes. Her act of murdering Alec has deemed her assertion of autonomy and agency over her body and life by subverting societal and legal laws, a rebellion that prompts severe punishment. Notably, her final act of defiance is ultimately met with her execution, highlighting the harsh consequences women face when they dare defy the patriarchal norms of the then-existing society. Tess gets punished for performing her role out of turn, not acting as a submissive, docile woman, and killing her so-called “nature” husband. This draws attention to the strict moral and social conventions of the society in which the story takes place and stresses the subordinate position of women within the prevailing male-dominated culture.

In the light of this analysis above, the dynamic narrative of *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* presents Tess as a tragic heroine, victimised differently by the two central

male characters, Alec and Angel. Howe offers a powerful insight:

Alec assaults Tess physically, Angel violates her spiritually. Alec is a stage villain, Angel is an intellectual wretch. Alec has a certain charm, in his amiable slothful way; Angel bears an aura of tensed moralism. What they share is an incapacity to value the splendor, of feeling-which radiates from Tess. Each represents a deformation of masculinity, one high and the other low; they cannot appreciate, they cannot even see the richness of life that Tess embodies. (122-123)

In this profound exploration, Howe characterises Alec and Angel as two distinct representations of masculine perversion, each detrimental to Tess in their unique ways. Alec, described as a “stage villain,” abuses Tess physically, demonstrating a crude and immediate form of patriarchal power. On the other hand, Angel, regarded as an “intellectual wretch,” spiritually undermines Tess through his stringent moralistic views and intellectual rigidity. Interestingly, despite the contrasting ways they inflict harm on Tess, both characters share a common inability to recognise and appreciate the emotional depth and richness Tess embodies. Both men fail to value Tess’s inherent worth, whether it is Alec’s more obvious, low-level form of masculine deformation or Angel’s more subtle, high-level form. Consequently, their destructive impacts on Tess illuminate the broader themes of patriarchal subjugation and gender inequity, central to Hardy’s critical examination of societal norms and values.

Throughout the chapter, the analysis underscores Hardy’s profound critique of the patriarchal norms that sustain gender imbalances. The discourse within this chapter revolves around Hardy’s critique of gender inequality, societal gender bias, and the double standards women encountered in his era. Hardy’s exposition of women’s marginalisation as the “other” in society is integral to the narrative. He weaves a realistic setting and integrates naturalistic elements in his storytelling. This strategic use of narrative tools allows Hardy to demonstrate the pervasive societal and natural forces that shape women’s experiences, thereby reaffirming that gender is not merely a personal construct but rather a societal one. Hardy’s portrayal of Tess, a woman of rural class, accentuates the prevalent sexual double standards of Victorian England. His narrative invites readers to revisit and question their own beliefs and attitudes towards gender and sexuality, reflecting a resistance against the dominant societal norms and an endeavour to dismantle traditional conceptions of gender roles. The novel demonstrates the difficulties women face, effectively demonstrating the influence of gender, class, and economic status on women’s lives within Hardy’s patriarchal society. Through Tess’s difficulties

and performances, Hardy portrays her as a victim of gender inequality and discrimination, painting a striking portrait of the societal confines of gender and the resulting struggles during his time.

CONCLUSION

“But we insignificant people with our daily words and acts are preparing the lives of many Dorotheas, some of which may present a far sadder sacrifice than that of the Dorothea whose story we know.” (1193)

George Eliot, *Middlemarch*

“The best is not to remember that your nature and your past doings have been just like thousands’ and thousands’, and that your coming life and doings ’ll be like thousands’ and thousands’.” (142)

Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*

“Here then was I (call me Mary Beton, Mary Seton, Mary Carmichael or by any name you please—it is not a matter of any importance).” (3)

Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*

This thesis has analysed George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* and Thomas Hardy’s *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* within the framework of Judith Butler’s gender performativity theory. The novels were penned in the Victorian era; both Eliot and Hardy manifest the prevailing image and dominant mentality of their era. These novelists touch upon a range of subjects, including societal, cultural, and political matters, with a significant focus on gender and class issues, questioning the patriarchal ideology. It is worth mentioning that these writers sought to shed light on the impact that such a society and its norms have on the lives of women and to call attention to the ways in which they restrict their freedom and opportunities. This is well-illustrated in *Middlemarch* by the case of Dorothea, whose life was significantly impacted by the actions and discourse of the Middlemarch community, who, however, was only a representative “of many Dorotheas,” affected by “daily words and acts,” of “insignificant people” (Eliot, *Middlemarch* 1193). Dorothea’s life experiences are not unique to her but are common to many women, who “are exhorted to be women,” to “become women,” and to “remain women” in their cultural contexts (de Beauvoir 13). Eliot’s emphasis is on the societal and cultural effects that have a profound impact on females, shaping their identity and behaviour.

Similarly, in *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*, Hardy portrays Tess as a representative of many women with similar experiences related to her “past doings,” and her “coming life and doings” are expected to align with those of countless other women (Hardy 142).

Hardy aims to highlight the persistent nature of women's issues and suggests that, despite the passage of time, these issues will continue to persist in the future. Furthermore, Tess's observation that the best thing to do is "not to remember" one's own "nature," as it will always be like this, reflects Tess's realisation of the limitations and restrictions placed on her due to her gender in Victorian society. Hardy draws attention to the gender discrimination of his time, how deeply ingrained conventional notions of gender were, and how it affected women. In this sense, one of the epigraphs above, which is taken from Virginia Woolf's work, *A Room of One's Own* (1929), indeed encapsulates the core theme of these novels and the thesis. By putting an emphasis on the unimportance of a specific name as a form of address and disregarding the significance of a name, typically used as a personal identifier, Woolf creates a universal, subjective identity for readers to identify with. That is, the story of Mary Beton, Seton, or Carmichael, or the stories of Dorothea, Rosamond, and Tess, no matter what their names are or no matter in what time span they were written, these narratives become literary pieces that apply to all women, for these characters face challenges merely because they are women.

It is important to note that the novels respectively showcase the strength and resilience of female characters who face societal hindrances and the lack of opportunities because of being women. These women are representative of their period, facing constraints in terms of gender, which illustrates Eliot and Hardy's objective: to expose gender-based inequalities that positioned womanhood as subordinate to manhood and thus ascribed distinct, prescriptive roles to the genders. For instance, in *Middlemarch*, Dorothea is expected to embody the ideal of feminine domesticity, despite her intellectual aspirations and desires for a more meaningful life. Rosamond Vincy is expected to perform the role of the "angel in the house," and is trained in the feminine arts in Mrs. Lemon's school. Similarly, in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, Tess is forced to adhere to rigid codes of femininity and "purity," which are tied to her social class and gender. These examples show that gender is not simply a matter of individual choice or biology. Instead, it is a deeply ingrained set of social expectations and practices that limit and constrain women's agency and potential.

The male characters in these works have also conformed to their roles within the confines of hetero-patriarchal culture, as their actions are deemed necessary by the regulatory power to maintain existing societal norms and gender identity categories. For

example, to maintain his power, Casaubon restricted Dorothea to her own outdated and lifeless work, thereby inhibiting her intellectual exploration, effectively stifling her personal development, and imposing the expectation of a submissive wife devoid of personal ambition. At the same time, Lydgate's decision to marry Rosamond Vincy represents his conformity to the social norms of his time, choosing her for the graceful, elegant, and docile qualities he perceived as ideal in a wife. Alec uses his status and wealth to manipulate the vulnerable Tess into conforming to his own insidious desires. Moreover, Angel, who initially appears to be progressive, is seen as conforming to social norms, as evidenced by his stubborn expectations of his wife's purity and his initial judgement of Tess's past, suggesting that he struggles to accept her reality fully. In this sense, these characters share the commonality of identifying as heterosexual because they are conditioned by heterosexual norms and perform their gendered identity as fixed, stable, and fundamentally committed.

Both Eliot and Hardy's texts critically approach the gender norms of their time, highlighting their advanced comprehension of gender-related issues. The oppressive nature of gender norms and the impact of societal expectations on individuals' lives have been foregrounded in their works, underlining the fluid and constructed nature of gender. This concept of gender as a socio-culturally construct is demonstrated through detailed portrayals of the characters by providing insight into the Victorian gender ideology, which enforces a binary gender system. In this regard, by highlighting the flaws in binary gender norms and revealing the constructed nature of gender roles, Eliot and Hardy offer narratives that mirror the principles of Butler's subsequently formulated gender performativity theory. Therefore, this thesis has posited that in their realistic portrayal of societal norms, Eliot and Hardy laid the groundwork for future discussions on gendered subjectivities and the performative nature of gender. Eliot and Hardy expose that male and female gender roles are not inherent but moulded by societal discursive practices and expectations.

Indeed, even as Eliot and Hardy share similarities in their critique of Victorian gender norms, the differences in their approach and narrative choices are equally noteworthy. A primary discrepancy lies in the characterisation of female characters in both novels. Unlike Hardy, Eliot creates multiple female characters to explore different aspects of womanhood and the challenges they face in society. Eliot's characters are both

assertive and submissive, with some attempting to transgress the bounds of gender norms by seeking masculine knowledge, while others willingly conform to the norms of their time. This adherence to societal norms calls into question Butler's theory of gender, which suggests that behaviours and norms are so normalised that individuals may not even be aware of them and act willingly within their assigned roles. Hardy's female protagonist, Tess serves to portray a multitude of female characteristics and societal issues. Tess is depicted as both strong and weak. She is responsible for her family's welfare, yet she cannot resist Alec's advances and subsequently accepts his proposition. She is decisive and subversive when she chooses not to marry her seducer, going against the norm for a seduced woman. Tess exemplifies the notion that characters should not be understood as having fixed, stable identities but rather as beings in progress, changing and evolving.

Another discrepancy is found in Eliot's and Hardy's perspectives, manifested in their literary pieces. Both novelists were acutely aware of women's social condition, their secondary status, and the "meanness of opportunities" given to them during the Victorian era. They reflected these issues from their own perspectives, and Eliot's stance has been considered as optimistic for her portrayal, suggesting a belief in the possibility of societal progress, while Hardy's worldview has been deemed as pessimistic, for his view led him to subject his characters, particularly his female ones, to harsh fates beyond their control, which can be seen as a form of victimisation. This notion is obvious in the endings of the novels. In *Middlemarch*, Dorothea is given a second chance with her marriage to Will Ladislaw by her creator, whereas in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, Tess meets a tragic end, doomed to death, metaphorically getting punished by her creator. However, the conventional endings of both novels were not necessarily the results of Eliot and Hardy's personal beliefs or their gender. Rather, it was the Victorian ideology that played a significant role in shaping the portrayal and fate of these characters. Eliot and Hardy's intention was not to conform to Victorian gender norms with their conventional endings but to highlight the consequences of the subversive behaviour of women who rejected the social constructions of femininity and strived for a more masculine identity. Both authors sought to criticise the oppressive Victorian ideology and its harmful effects on women by portraying the tragic outcomes of going against social expectancies.

Overall, this thesis argues that the Victorian era, distinguished by its stringent patriarchal system, was inherently discriminatory towards women. Women's roles were

defined within this male dominated social structure which restricted their agency. It is undeniable that this era was characterised by rigid gender norms, relegating women solely to the domestic sphere, as is prominently exhibited in *Middlemarch* and *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. These novels serve as powerful testaments to this societal structure, with their narratives underscoring the pervasive impact of this oppressive ideology on their female characters. Moreover, the thesis concludes that the Victorian patriarchy essentially gave women no alternatives outside the institution of marriage, thus further curtailing their independence and potential for personal growth. This oppressive Victorian ideology imposed strict societal norms and perpetuated pervasive gender inequalities that severely limited women's opportunities educationally, politically, and economically. Additionally, this study dwells on how the authors' gender and the prevailing societal attitudes of their time influenced the depiction of characters, their gender identities, and their story outcomes. It underlines the fact that it was the historical context, more than the authors' gender, that moulded the creation of their works. Since "writers, like everyone else, live in history, and like everyone else, the structure of their thought is shaped by the character of the age in which they live" (Stubbs 58-59). It is concluded that these writers, as being the characters of their own age, were "also conditioned" and "limited" by the power dynamics of their age. The gendered power dynamics that Victorian society employs to subordinate women, the patriarchal system, and the socio-culturally constructed norms of the Victorian period are questioned altogether within these selected novels. Scrutinising these Victorian novels through the lens of Butler's contemporary theory broadens the scope of interpretation beyond the Victorian ideals. This expanded perspective paves the way for a more profound, diversified analysis, thereby uncovering subtle nuances and facilitating a deeper understanding of gender performativity within the restrictive norms of Victorian society. Thus, these narratives and characters, examined through the lens of Butler's theory, provide a more comprehensive and multi-dimensional analysis that interweaves Victorian literature (the past) with contemporary gender theory (the present).

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