



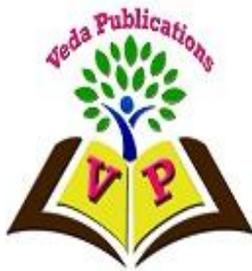
A STUDY OF MORAL AWAKENING OF GWENDOLEN HARLETH AND DANIEL DERONDA IN GEORGE ELIOT'S *DANIEL DERONDA*

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ABSTRACT



Daniel Deronda (1876) is the last novel by George Eliot. The crux of this novel lies in the moral growth and regeneration of two major characters— Daniel Deronda and Gwendolen Harleth. The novel mainly revolves round the interaction and relationship between these characters. As the novel develops, Gwendolen slowly frees herself from egoism and self-pride and Daniel Deronda is the agent in this process, for she begins to regard him as her own better self. She discovers a moral authority in his eyes. Her responsiveness to Deronda is something unique in her life. In fact, Deronda impresses Gwendolen with his personal charm, moral integrity and depth of vision. He literally teaches Gwendolen to shed off her base and narrow outlook of life to embrace whatever is good and noble. Deronda instinctively longs to be sympathetic and useful to the suffering and the needy in the world but it is equally obvious that in the early stages he is rootless. In the absence of any specific clues as to his parentage, he takes himself to be an illegitimate child and feels cut off from specific communities. Eventually with his varied experience pertinent to the discovery of his ancestral religion, contact and abetment to Gwendolen Harleth and pursuing of the altruistic mission of universal brotherhood through Zionism, Deronda comes to recognize the fact of spatial vastness of the world and is led to the transmutation of self-interest into social impulse.

Keywords: *Altruistic, Egoism, Emancipation, Fellow-feeling, Moral Awakening.*



Daniel Deronda (1876) is the last novel by George Eliot. The crux of this novel lies in the moral growth and regeneration of two major characters — Daniel Deronda and Gwendolen Harleth. The novel mainly revolves round the interaction and relationship between these characters. Quite interestingly both of them share some close similarities in spite of their biological, social and economic differences. F. R., Leavis in the Article 'Gwendolen Harleth' comments that it is Gwendolen Harleth who represents the great creative George Eliot and it is possible to produce a sufficiently self-contained Gwendolen Harleth by excising the virtual half of the total work. (Leavis F.R., Gwendolen Harleth, *London Review of Books*, 21st January 1982).. However it is strongly refuted by Ibn Warraq in his article *George Eliot, Daniel Deronda & Zionism: Some observations* (Warrant Ibn, *George Eliot, Daniel Deronda & Zionism: Some Observations*, New English Review Press, December, 2019).

The personal differences between Gwendolen and Deronda are obvious enough. She is a woman, he is a man; she has no money, he has as much as he wants; her education is indifferent, his is the best available; her ambition is concentrated in personal supremacy, his is deflected among infinite possibilities. He has everything materially, and yet he cannot assert himself; she feels the pressure of material wants, and habitually asserts herself to satisfy them. But there are deep similarities between them which are often hinted at in so many ways in this novel. For very different reasons they both have difficulty in taking their place in society, that is, a difficulty with vocation. Both make the inefficient use of their energies that encourages a kind of passivity and threatened will.

Initially, Gwendolen has fantastic notions about herself, about love and about the world. But gradually she matures from her egoistic and narcissistic nature and eventually attains wisdom and insight. The basis of her growth lies in her acquiring a thorough knowledge about her own limitations.

Probably the basic loophole in her character is her inability to appreciate and respond to the emotional feelings of others. Thus she appears to be

heartless and rude while dealing with fellow men and women. In spite of being tender to her mother, Gwendolen cares little for her mother's emotions : 'Now, Mamma, don't interfere with me. If you have ever had any trouble in your own life, remember it, and don't interfere with me. If I am to be miserable, let it be by my own choice'. (*Daniel Deronda*, George Eliot, Wordsworth Publication, 1996.p.113).

Moreover, her generalised remark, 'I believe all men are bad, and I hate them' (*Daniel Deronda*, George Eliot, Wordsworth Publication, 1996.p.297.) shows her lack of depth and experience. Even her response to the advice and sympathy of Herr Klesmer is not at all cordial:

When he had taken up his hat and was going to make his bow, Gwendolen's better self, conscious of ingratitude which the clear seeing Klesmer must have penetrated, made a desperate effort to find its way above the stifling layers of egoistic disappointment and irritation. Looking at him with a glance of the old gaiety, she put out her hand, and said with a smile, 'If I take the wrong road, it will not be because of your flattery.' (*Daniel Deronda*, George Eliot, Wordsworth Publication, 1996.p.348)

Actually Klesmer understands that Gwendolen is untrained for any serious occupation and means to go well so as to avoid the need to do, or know, or understand anything exactly. Gwendolen expects to marry someone who can give her high position and status to which, she thinks, she is entitled, and at the same time she appreciates her superiority enough to let her lead him in everything. In this respect Gwendolen may be compared with a girl who cannot perceive herself as anything else than a lady, or as in any position which would lack the tribute of respect. Apart from this she is equally apprehensive of the dire economic condition of her family and she knows that the immediate solution of it lies in her marriage with Mr. Grandcourt.

So she marries Grandcourt more out of compulsion than out of love and respect. Despite Grandcourt's money, her personal dislike for him is



such that, when she discovers the existence of his mistress Lydia Glasher and their two children, she feels relief at being freed from the necessity of choosing. Even when Grandcourt renews his suit, and she, if considerably more in need of money, she is still repelled by him at the same time as she is drawn to his wealth. Reversing her decision not to see him, she is without a clear direction when the final choice offers itself. She seemed to herself to be, after all, only drifted towards the tremendous decision but drifting depends upon something besides the currents, when the sails have been set beforehand and Gwendolen drifts into an engagement (*Daniel Deronda*, George Eliot, Wordsworth Publication, 1996.p.3480).

She has broken her promise to Lydia Glasher that she will not marry Grandcourt, and she knows the full baseness of her motives. She expects to keep all this a secret, and forgets the problematic Mrs. Glasher, but she does not yet know of her husband's ill motives. He knows her secret and marries her out of a perverse delight. With Gwendolen's acceptance of his terms, Grandcourt begins to build his empire of fear.

But her marriage soon entails a harsh awakening from her aimless pursuit of self-interest. To complement her own will, which had seemed imperious in its small girlish sway, she had found a will like that of an octopus which goes on pinching or crushing without alarm. A few months of marriage seems half her life and after every new shock of humiliation from Grandcourt, "she tried to adjust herself and seize her old supporter's proud concealment, trust in new excitements" (*Daniel Deronda*, George Eliot, Wordsworth Publication, 1996.p.474). Gwendolen finally gets rid of Mr. Grandcourt as well as of the yoke of disgusting conjugal life when Mr. Grandcourt drowns in the river. Leslie Stephen rightly comments that Gwendolen 'though ultimately saved, is saved as by fire'. (*Daniel Deronda*, George Eliot, Wordsworth Publication, 1996.p. 478)

Grandcourt had taken her to Genoa against her will, on a boating excursion, tightening his already pinching grasp upon her resistant will. The

boating accident in which Grandcourt gets drowned releases Gwendolen from his grip but plunges her into a greater state of grief. She has wished for his death. She has watched him die. And she has not saved him. Gwendolen ultimately attains moral regeneration when, in order to relieve herself from her guilty conscience, she confesses to Deronda her utter indifference at the time of Grandcourt's drowning:

But he was gone down again, and I had the rope in my hand no, there he was again his face above the water and he cried again and I held my hand, and my heart said, 'Die, and he sank; and I felt, 'It is done - I am wicked, I am lost': - and I had the rope in my hand - I don't know what I thought — I was leaping away from myself I would have saved him then. I was leaping from my crime, and there it was close to me as I fell there was the dead face, dead, dead. (*Daniel Deronda*, George Eliot, Wordsworth Publication, 1996.p.830)

The power of confession lies in trust and moral enlightenment. The inner reunion of thought and action depends largely on the presence of an outer voice of conscience:

It is hard to say how much we could forgive ourselves if we were secure from judgment by another. In this way our brother may be in the state of God to us, and his opinion which has pierced even to the joints and marrow may be our virtue in the making. (*Daniel Deronda*, George Eliot, Wordsworth Publication, 1996.p.758)

As Gwendolen's habit of proud concealment fails her in her deepening unhappiness, she begins to rely on talks with Deronda. In confessing her feelings to him she finds a deep rest from the self-suppression that is numbing her personality. She has married a man with a withered heart, though she was warned, and for reasons she will not admit, and so she must carry on and she remains all smiling and her heart and mind are all in despair. She pretends that



her life is the brilliant thing she wanted it to be hiding the reality behind a paralyzed mask of satisfaction.

Her family and friends are well-meaning and materialistic and cannot be trusted with her secret. Her uncle Gascoigne has a comfortable sense that Gwendolen is worth spending a little money because she will bring in a good marriage offer, a sense of the transactional value of her life that has an almost grotesque vulgarity despite his congenial easygoing nature. Her mother has never exerted her authority over Gwendolen, but instead submits to her. Consequently Gwendolen holds on Deronda with sanity, and he feels the intensity of her grasp.

She was bent on confession and he dreaded it. He was not a priest. But after her husband's drowning he supported her through her deepest despair. "And if I had told you, and knew it was in your mind", she confides, 'it would have less power over me. I hoped and trusted in that'. (*Daniel Deronda*, George Eliot, Wordsworth Publication, 1996.p.761)

Even though Deronda ascertains, she probably could not have saved Grandcourt, she knows that when he cried out and sank for the last time, she withholding her hand, and her heart said, 'Die'. (*Daniel Deronda*, George Eliot, Wordsworth Publication, 1996.p.833) Gwendolen, much in need of the "outer conscience", (*Daniel Deronda*, George Eliot, Wordsworth Publication, 1996.p.834) finds in Deronda something to cling to in the absence of other guides as a raft in a storm.

As the novel develops, Gwendolen slowly frees herself from egoism and self-pride and Daniel Deronda is the agent in this process, for she begins to regard him as her own better self. She discovers a moral authority in his eyes. Her responsiveness to Deronda is something unique in her life. It is perhaps due to some rare concurrence of circumstances and her tendency to become serious by avoiding triviality and evasiveness when alone with him. The hurried directness with which she spoke — the absence of all her little airs, as if she were only concerned to use the time in getting an answer that would guide her, made her appeal unspeakably touching.

In fact, Deronda impresses Gwendolen with his personal charm, moral integrity and depth of vision. He literally teaches Gwendolen to shed off her base and narrow outlook of life to embrace whatever is good and noble. The following is the reflection we get from the interaction between them :

Then tell me what better I can do', said Gwendolen, insistently. 'Many things. Look on other lives besides your own. See what their troubles are, and how they are borne. Try to care about something in this vast world besides the gratification of small selfish desires. Try to care for what is best in thought and action something that is good apart from the accidents of your own lot'.

'You mean that I am selfish and ignorant.'

He met her look in silence before he answered firmly - 'You will not go on being selfish and ignorant'. (*Daniel Deronda*, George Eliot, Wordsworth Publication, 1996.p.572).

Most of what Deronda says here testifies his essential nobility and struggleful life. Gwendolen's last remark, 'You mean that I am selfish and ignorant' (*Daniel Deronda*, George Eliot, Wordsworth Publication, 1996.p.577) is perfectly in character and invariably shows her uncertainty. Deronda saves her from this precarious situation by his honest and truthful response to her query. The result of this is the crucial moment in Gwendolen's long moral awakening.

During this slow awakening Gwendolen needs Deronda to sustain as well as to cause the process: 'Without the aid of sacred ceremony or costume, her feelings had turned this man, only a few years older than herself, into a priest; a sort of trust less rare than the fidelity that guards it.' (*Daniel Deronda*, George Eliot, Wordsworth Publication, 1996.p.578)

He shows this fidelity, but it is not easy, Deronda's occasional resentments, and his uneasiness in the role bestowed upon him by Gwendolen is continually expressed 'against his better will, he shrank from the task that was laid on



him; he wished, and yet rebuked the wish as cowardly, that she could bury her secrets in her own bosom. He was not a priest. He dreaded the weight of this woman's soul flung upon his own with imploring dependence.' (*Daniel Deronda*, George Eliot, Wordsworth Publication, 1996.p.582)

It is not only uncongenial but also difficult to maintain the role of a saviour and moral guide in Gwendolen who understands that her trust on Deronda is an imposition on him;

What I most desire at this moment is what will most help you. Tell me all you feel a relief to tell. Devoted as these words were, they widened his spiritual distance from her, and she felt it more difficult to speak; she had a vague need of getting nearer to that compassion which seemed to be regarding her from a halo of superiority, and the need turned into an impulse to humble herself more. (*Daniel Deronda*, George Eliot, Wordsworth Publication, 1996.p.582).

For a moment it seemed really difficult for Deronda not to become sentimental and not to utter wrong things : 'It could never be my impulse to forsake you', said Deronda promptly, with that voice which, like his eyes, had the unintentional effect of making his ready sympathy seem more personal and special than it really was'. (*Daniel Deronda*, George Eliot, Wordsworth Publication, 1996.p.876)

Though it is imperative that Gwendolen needs Deronda, the irony lies in the fact that she has, in the end, to face a life in which she can no longer lean on the man whom she has, so long, been considering her better-self. In Book 8, "Fruit. and Seed", Gwendolen returns to England expecting to rely on him, but Deronda returns to England to marry Mirah, and eventually to dedicate his life for the cause of Zionism. (*Daniel Deronda*, George Eliot, Wordsworth Publication, 1996.p.876)

The news that Deronda is a Jew and the he intends to go to Palestine to work for their cause proves to be a shock to Gwendolen and she is for the "first time dislodged from her supremacy in her own world, and getting a sense that her horizon was but a dipping onward of an existence with which her own

was revolving" (*Daniel Deronda*, George Eliot, Wordsworth Publication, 1996.p.870). In giving up her interest in Deronda, she undertakes a difficult rectitude towards him which is really painful.

With her acceptance that things are not as she wished them to be, she gives up and her self-assertion subsides before the bewildering vision of Deronda's wideranging purpose in which she felt herself reduced to a mere speaker. From the full sense of her supremacy Gwendolen has travelled mountainous distances to reach this new sense of a vast world that knows nothing of her claims. Through such resignation for the first time, she has accepted her separateness and freedom, and her responsibility for her own course. Gwendolen's acknowledgment to Deronda of the crevice between their lives is the essential starting point of a new moral life for her where she can care for what is best in thought and action.

At the end, after Deronda's marriage with Mirah, Gwendolen meekly admits his impact on her saying that "it shall be better with me because I have known you". (*Daniel Deronda*, George Eliot, Wordsworth Publication, 1996.p.876). Through such a reconciliation Gwendolen certainly develops and undergoes the enlightening disenchantment and ultimately comes to know herself and the world.

Gwendolen has to learn that one should transcend selfish desires and care for something that is good apart from the accident of one's own lot. Gwendolen has to bring about her own regeneration as Deronda is given a different mission by his creator. Besides, he has to marry Mirah the Jewess who had trodden on thorns with infantine feet. The day of their marriage is made sublime by sorrow as it is the day of Mordecai's death. 'Human happiness', as George Eliot writes, 'is a web with many threads of pain in it'. Aquil.Reshma. *George Eliot: Suffering and Self-Realization*, Image Publication & Distributors, Delhi, 1989. p.72)

Daniel Deronda's brief history is that of someone with very little history to tell. Raised as the nephew of Sir Hugo Mallinger, Deronda's first painful awareness of being different comes at the age of



thirteen when he learns from his tutor that wealthy men sometimes raise their illegitimate sons as nephews. Sir Hugo merely assures him that he lost both his parents when he was quite young, but Deronda nourishes a deep-seated uncertainty about his identity. This uncertainty rouses in him a sympathy for people who are confused or struggling, and prevents from seeking a place in a society where his birth might be always a matter of question or even disgrace. Though Sir Hugo intends him to have the education of an English gentleman, Deronda's school friends talk of home and parents aggravates and mortifies his sense of entailed disadvantage. His sympathy is generous but born of irresolution. At Cambridge he might have taken a high place if his motives had been of a more pushing sort, and if he had not, instead of regarding studies as instruments of success, hampered himself with the notion that they were to feed motive and opinion — a notion which set him criticising methods and arguing against his fright and harness when he should have been using all his might to pull. He inclines to no particular track, and longs for that sort of apprenticeship to life which would not shape him too definitely. Such reflective hesitation becomes merely an excuse for lingering longer than others in a state of social neutrality. His habit of drifting in a boat on the Thames, evidently a corollary of his mental habits, suddenly gives him an interest when he discovers Mirah Lapidoth attempting to drown herself.

Daniel Deronda finds out Mirah's brother through the pawnshops and bookstores of London. His efforts to help Mirah find her lost brother and mother lead him into a world of Jewish life quite separate within English society and into contact with a kind of vision wholly unlike that of his familiar society. Mordecai Cohen, the chief spokesman for this vision, is Mirah's brother and a Zionist seeking a successor to carry on his work once he dies from the consumption already well advanced upon him.

Mordecai's insistence that Deronda be his successor understandably causes that fastidious young gentleman to be in some difficulty. He finds Mordecai's ideal vision of an international community of nations a congenial vision and one

devoid of the partisanship that he himself instinctively dislikes. But, as this novel makes so clear, ideals seem to be one thing, and actuality quite another.

However, Mordecai's claim on Deronda is strange, bordering on the bizarre, and Deronda's shrinking seems thoroughly understandable. One of the difficult tasks George Eliot sets for herself in this novel is the task of moving Deronda, and her readers, from his understandable disbelief and reluctance, gradually, to belief and acceptance of Mordecai's charge; and making it seem even reasonable.

Revelations (Book 6) deals with the revelation that Mordecai is Mirah's long-sought brother, and the revelation by Sir Hugo that Deronda's mother, whom he thought long-dead, is alive and wishes to see him. *Mother and Son* (Book 7) takes Deronda to Genoa for the two extraordinary visits with his mother, now called the Princess Halm-Eberstein since her marriage to a Russian nobleman, but once the great singer Alcharisi who sacrificed even her son for the sake of a brilliant career as an artist. Even the fulfilment of a goal so congenial to George Eliot's vision of human possibilities has its heavy price, and Alcharisi pays hers when she faces death and is brought by the burden of fatal illness to confess the secret she spent a lifetime guarding. In confessing to her son she gives in at last to the imperative father whose orthodox Judaism allowed no room for her life. He returns to England to marry Mirah, and to accept the vocation her Mordecai has offered.

One need not go any far to find that Deronda instinctively longs to be sympathetic and useful to the suffering and the needy in the world but it is equally obvious that in the early stages he is rootless. In the absence of any specific clues as to his parentage, he takes himself to be an illegitimate child and feels cut off from specific communities. The fact, however, remains that in spite of this sense of alienation, Deronda always moves towards other people in selflessness.

Nevertheless as things stand like this, and in as much as his altruism suffers from certain



passiveness and lack of definition, even his selflessness does not seem to take him anywhere. But eventually with his varied experience pertinent to the discovery of his ancestral religion, contact and abetment to Gwendolen Harleth and pursuing of the altruistic mission of universal brotherhood through Zionism, Deronda comes to recognize the fact of spatial vastness of the world and is led to the transmutation of self-interest into social impulse.

Sometimes the life and activity of Deronda seem to be mere vindication of Judaism and for that matter, a model of racial idealism. However, its larger purpose rests on the altruistic conception of the moral life of human beings in terms of the realization of duty. This conception of duty is the same thing as the consciousness of social self which is a shared collective self where individual lives are blended with each other as the air. In ultimate analysis, it is true that in the realm of moral progress man's social nature finds satisfaction first in the family, then in the state, and finally in the race. In point of fact, it was one of George Eliot's convictions that the era of a common brotherhood, dissociated from national traditions and hopes, could come through adoption of a universal religion. Deronda's moral growth is proportionate to his capacity to be truly sympathetic and to share completely the fortune and feelings of his fellows. Deronda's ethical development is directly related to his increasing ability to communicate with Gwendolen Harleth and to facilitate her moral growth, but to come to realize that his future does not include her, Deronda's growing sense identification with the Jewish tradition in mirrored and facilitated by Gwendolen Harleth's concomitant growth from utter selfishness in a broader sense of herself and here fellows. For the first time in her life the larges destines of mankind become a matter of personal concerns to here. Every aspects of the relationship between Deronda & Gwendolen Harleth provides an example of how one individual facilitate the moral education of another. This is infact the underlying moral principle of George Eliot in all her novels. (Goerge Eliot Moral Aesthetic, Constance M. Fulmark.)

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