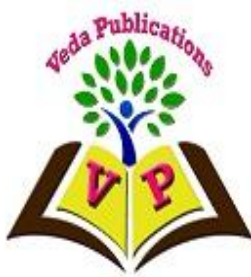


**A STUDY OF ROMOLA'S MORAL REGENERATION IN GEORGE ELLIOT'S *ROMOLA***

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*(Associate Professor & Head, Department of English, Belda College, Belda-721424, West Bengal,**India.) Email: jayantamukherjee1975@gmail.com*doi: <https://doi.org/10.33329/joell.64.19.49>**ABSTRACT**

Romola (1862 - 63) is a major work of George Eliot. *The Westminster Review* has rightly observed that the chief interest of *Romola* lies in the ideas of moral duty and right which are of very modern growth, and they can be appropriately displayed on a modern stage. The gradual transformation of Romola's attitude to her struggle to find a moral vision and direction in life is the central interest of the novel. Romola, at the outset of the novel, is strongly influenced by the attitudes of her father, a man of defiant and rebellious nature. He appreciates Romola's love for justice and freedom. Like her father she has an attitude to rebel against any authority that contradicts her personal will and subjective decisions. As such, she is contemptuous of the Church or of any external authority which might restrict her individuality and freedom of thoughts. After the death of her father, Romola begins experiencing many problems of life. She gets to know the true nature of her husband Tito and an extremely awkward situation crops up. Since the death of her father, there is none to direct her and therefore she is left alone at the mercy of her own judgment. Romola is totally upset when she discovers that Tito has sold her father's library and is a treacherous man. Her love for Tito quickly changes into an utter despise and complete rejection. She decides to break all her ties with Tito for ever. After an initial failure and Savonarola's fall, Romola sails into a pestilence and plague-ridden village. It seems clear that the village is symbolic of an imperfect world in its suffering and need. The whole world is metaphorically plague-ridden and hence an effort is needed to alleviate human sufferings to make life better. Plague, in this symbolic sense, existed in Florence. Hence it is a whole world seen through microcosm. This utter simplicity, in which Romola walks unscathed through pestilence and distinguishes between the living and the dead, is in a strange contrast to the sophisticated difficulties and problems of life which disturbed her earlier. This realisation illuminates her soul and enlarges her vision.

Keywords: *Education, Enlightenment, Moral Conflict, Re-generation.*

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Romola (1862 - 63) is a major work of George Eliot. *The Westminster Review* has rightly observed :

“We cannot escape from the feelings that the chief interest of *Romola* respond to the ideas of moral duty and of right which are of very modern growth, and that they would have been more appropriately displayed on a modern stage.” (Stephen Leslie, *George Elliot*, Macmillan, London, 1902 p.51)

The same sentiment is expressed by Straub Julia in “George Eliot's *Romola* and its shattered Ideals” : *Romola*, seems to be ill-suited to her historical period and not fit into this environment. She stands outside her milieu, rather than emerging from it. *Romola* is more than a young woman living Renaissance Florence since she transcends the specific condition of her historical context. (Straub Julia “ George Eliot's *Romola* and its Shattered Ideals,” *Nineteenth Century Gender Studies*, Issue 4.1, Spring 2008).

The gradual transformation of *Romola's* attitude to her struggle to find a moral vision and direction in life is the central interest of the novel. *Romola* is endowed with exceptional strength of feeling and energy. However her outlook of life, in the beginning of the novel, is narrow and rigid. She hardly understands the complexities of social experience as she has never really confronted with the problems of the external world. The nature of her upbringing with her father has restricted her life and provided her with only a narrow outlet of her emotion and hidden passion. She had little experience of meeting people outside her immediate family and had almost no contact with anything in the outside world which might have had a shaping influence on her. This has made her intensely subjective, introvert and egoistic, relatively uninfluenced by external factors apart from love for her father, Bardo. The first serious consequence of this is that she falls in love with Tito, the first attractive man she meets and eventually marries him. It is not surprising that her feelings, having been so restricted in their outlet, should immediately respond to his outward attractions.

Romola's attraction towards Tito reminds Maggie's response towards Stephen. In fact, unwrought passions and energies are dangerous and require some means of being controlled and disciplined. One of the major problems the novel is concerned with is how such a control can be effected.

Romola, at the outset of the novel, is strongly influenced by the attitudes of her father, a man of defiant and rebellious nature. Bardo has sought self-realisation through scholarship. He believes in the power of the personal will and appreciates *Romola's* love for justice and freedom. Like her father she has an attitude to rebel against any authority that contradicts her personal will and subjective decisions. She, like her father, is contemptuous of the Church or of any external authority which might restrict her individuality and freedom of thoughts.

After the death of her father, *Romola* begins experiencing many problems of life. She gets to know the true nature of her husband Tito and an extremely awkward situation crops up . Since her father has died, there is none to direct her and therefore she is left alone at the mercy of her own judgment. *Romola* is totally upset when she discovers that Tito has sold her father's library. She experiences an impulse of fury and ‘her whole frame seemed to be possessed by an impetuous force that wanted to leap out in some deed’ . (*Romola* p 298). In a fit of anger and contempt she says to Tito : ‘You are a treacherous man’; (*Romola* p 297). Her love for Tito quickly changes into utter despise and complete rejection. She decides to break all her ties with Tito for ever, as she says: ‘it cannot be; I cannot be subject to him. He is false. I shrink from him. I despise him’. (*Romola* p 332).

She resolves to obliterate all the outward symbols of marriage and engagements with Tito, However, when she finally decides to take off her betrothal ring, she faces an acute moral conflict, which is beautifully narrated by the author:

She put her thumb and her forefinger to her betrothal ring; but they rested there, without drawing it off. *Romola's* mind had been



rushing with an impetuous current towards this act, for which she was preparing; the act of quitting a husband who had disappointed all her trust, the act of breaking an outward tie that no longer represented the inward bond of love. But that force of outward symbols by which our active life is knit together so as to make an inexorable external identity for us, not to be shaken by our wavering consciousness, gave a strange effect to this simple movement towards taking off her ring. But a passionate resolution nullified all her doubts and procrastinations. (*Romola* p 332).

Romola, thus sticks to her decision and ultimately leaves her husband, Tito, as well as her homeland, Florence. This leads to her encounter with Savonarola. This act repudiates her claim to be subject to no authority but to her own free will only. Savonarola overcomes Romola's resistance to him by making her conscious about her moral turpitude of forsaking the duties and denying the solemn obligation which the holy tie of marriage imposes. She has already experienced a moral scruple intuitively when she takes off her betrothal ring. It is a fact that Savonarola cannot accept Romola's decision to forsake her husband and deliberately ignore the bond of love. He directly attacks Romola's conscience when he tells her :

'Ask your conscience, my daughter. You have no vocation such as your brother had. You are a wife . You seek to break your ties in self-will and anger, not because the higher life calls upon you to renounce them'. (*Romola* p 374).

'My daughter, there is the bond of higher love, Marriage is not carnal only, made for selfish delight. See what that thought leads you to; it leads you to wander away in a false garb from all the obligations of your place and name. That would not have been, if you had learned that it is a sacramental vow, from which none but God can release you. My daughter, your life is not a grain of sand, to be blown by the winds; it is a thing of flesh and blood that dies if it be sundered . (*Romola* p 375).

Savonarola also reminds Romola of her having narrow and restricted outlook of life and charges her with the vice of moral blindness : 'Your life has been spent in blindness, my daughter. You have lived with those who sit on a hill aloof, and look down on the life of their fellow men' (*Romola* p 371). Romola, in turn, desperately tries to come clean and justify her actions when he tells to Savonarola ; 'I was not going away to ease and self-indulgence ... I was going away to hardship. I expect no joy: it is gone from my life (*Romola* p 372). 'My husband... he is not ...my love is gone' (*Romola* p 375).

However, Romola miserably fails to convince Savonarola about the integrity of her purpose and she is put in a fix. Her mind is torn by conflict and doubts. In the face of adversities, helpless Romola meekly surrenders to his guidance. For the time being she decides to obey Savonarola; her impulse now was to do just what Savonarola told her. It is more the authoritarian influence and personal charm of Savonarola than her newborn faith in Christian theology, that she accepts the authority of the Church as the means of providing moral form for her life. She now devotes herself to moral actions and performs charitable work since her newly accepted religion demands this, though she avoids thinking about religious doctrine. She is uneasy in her submission as this is antithetical to her moral nature and education. As such she constantly suffers from a sense of moral conflict.

Romola's moral crisis occurs when she loses her faith in Savonarola, and with it her acceptance of religious authority. Her sudden change of attitude towards Savonarola is due to the fact that the latter believes that five men including her godfather Bernado are guilty of conspiracy and are destined to be executed. Savonarola vindicates the decision of his party in the following words : 'The cause of my party is the cause of God's kingdom'. (*Romola* p 374). Romola, however, strongly opposes it. She unveils the religious masquerade of Savonarola in utter indignation; 'I do not believe it; God's kingdom is something wider — else, let me stand outside it with the beings that I love'. (*Romola* p 375).



Romola, who had earlier been prepared to submit to him despite intellectual doubts, now had 'a sudden insurrection of feeling' (*Romola* p 371). that resulted into that collision. Romola boldly resolves to reject all forms of religious authorities and she drastically undermines the teaching and influence of Savonarola.

But it was an illumination that made all life look ghastly to her. Where were the beings to whom she could cling, with whom she could work and endure, with the belief that she was working for the right? On the side from which moral energy came lay a fanaticism from which she was shrinking with newly started repulsion'. (*Romola* p 371).

Her life seems to be without any direction and meaning:

And now Romola's best support under that supreme woman's sorrow had slipped away from her. The vision of any great purpose, any end of existence which could ennoble endurance and exalt the common deeds of a dusty life with divine ardours, was utterly eclipsed for her now by the sense of confusion in human things which made all effort a mere dragging at tangled threads; all fellowship, either for resistance or advocacy, mere unfairness and exclusiveness. What, after all, was the man who had represented for her the highest heroism; the heroism not of hard, self-contained endurance, but of willing, self-offering love? What was the cause he was struggling for? Romola had lost her trust in Savonarola, had lost that fervour of admiration which had made her unmindful of his aberrations.' (*Romola* p 516).

As Romola revolts against Savonarola's belief that evil ceases to be evil if it promotes what he regards as the good, she is led into rebellion against her role as a wife on learning the full extent of Tito's treachery. Romola's decision is right in her spontaneous opposition to the actions of both Savonarola and Tito, but Thomas Pinney's sweeping comment that 'Romola is right to rebel against Tito

and Savonarola' (George Eliot: *Romantic Humanist. A Study of Philosophical Structure of her Novels*; K.H. Newton, published by The Macmillan Press Ltd, 1981, P.69) is certainly debatable. In fact, it is a historical truth that the rebellions though purport to remove every form of authority always give birth to a new and more powerful authority. As Mr. Lyon is of the opinion in *Felix Holt* that, 'the right to rebellion is the right to seek a higher rule' (George Eliot: *Romantic Humanist. A Study of Philosophical Structure of her Novels*; K.H. Newton, published by The Macmillan Press Ltd, 1981, P.69)

Romola's rebellion is as mistaken as it was before, when she left Florence and asserted that she needed no authority other than her personal will. Romola leaves Florence *incognito*. She negates religion as in religion she fails to find any authority which can neither accommodate her feelings nor can guide her in moulding her life. However, her rebellion has only a negative force. With her life devoid of purpose she succumbs to despair: 'What force was there to create for her that supremely hallowed motive which men call duty, but which can have no inward constraining existence save through some form of believing love?' (*Romola* p 517).

Deprived of anything to sustain or direct her existence, she loses every sense of identity. This crisis is more dangerous than what she had experienced earlier because with the loss of her faith in Savonarola, there seems no possibility of finding any external support.

Romola's present crisis leads her to find a moral frame which can refine her impulsive feelings and reckless emotions, while utilising its power and energy. Savonarola's religious authority was also divorced from Romola's personal feelings. But rejecting her seems to have deprived her life of all moral fibre and left her with immense mental conflict and turmoil. In this situation the narrator's observations *vis-a-vis* Romola's reaction against Savonarola is important:

And if such energetic belief is often in danger of becoming a demon worship tender fellow feeling for the nearest has its danger too, and is apt



to be timid and sceptical towards the larger aims without life. In this way poor Romola was being blinded by her tears' (*Romola*, p.566).

Her outlook of life is too narrow and lacks larger moral vision. But where can she find such a vision which would not separate herself from her inner feelings? This situation leads her to despair: 'She reads no message of love for her in the far off symbolic writing of the heavens and with a great sob she wished that she might be gliding into death'. (*Romola* p 525).

After initial failure and Savonarola's fall, Romola emerges as the character who is able to survive the adverse experience of life and can discover a positive moral philosophy which can sustain a strong sense of individuality and personal identity. Instead of submitting herself to an external authority, she discovers this time that in her very quintessential self there lies the basis for the larger moral vision she has been searching earnestly.

She sails into a pestilence and plague ridden village where she thinks she might rest and resolve on nothing. A crucial passage follows:

She had not been in this attitude of contemplation more than a few minutes when across the stillness there came a piercing cry: not a brief cry, but continuous and more and more intense. Romola felt sure it was the cry of a little child in distress that no one came to help - But it went on, and drew Romola so irresistibly, seeming to be more piteous to her for the sense of peace which had preceded it, that she jumped on to the beach and walked many paces before she knew what direction she would take'. (*Romola* p 577).

This cry rouses an immediate and spontaneous moral feeling in Romola which is in response to another's suffering. No external authority is necessary to justify acting to help others. The prick of conscience and the stimulation of finer human feelings and sentiments added with varied experiences of life and social confrontation are the source of all moral knowledge and responses. Romola ultimately realises that

confronting the needs and sufferings of the world with natural human potentialities of feeling creates moral awareness. This gives a form to an individual's existence from which emerges the self that guides human life.

It seems clear that the village is symbolic of an imperfect world in its suffering and need. The whole world is metaphorically plague-ridden and hence an effort is needed to alleviate human sufferings to make life better. Plague, in this symbolic sense, existed in Florence. Hence it is a whole world seen through microcosm.

Romola miserably fails to understand this human suffering with sufficient intensity and clarity due to her short sightedness and narrow outlook of life. However the experience of the child crying stimulates her dormant virtues and fellow feelings. It bestows her with moral enlightenment and creates in her an urge to undertake spontaneous and direct moral actions to help others. She is now capable of understanding that Savonarola's ideal vision is itself the objectification of human feelings and sentiments and thus there is a value even if he believed that it had a theological source which Romola could not accept. Religion itself is the objectification of such human feelings as Romola realises in taking on the role of 'Holy Mother' to the villagers. She is, of course, the 'Blessed Virgin':

'You will fear no longer, father', said Romola, in a tone of encouraging authority; you will come down with me, and we will see who is living, and we will look for the dead to bury them. I have walked about for months where the pestilence was, and see, I am strong'. (*Romola* p 517).

This utter simplicity, in which Romola walks unscathed through pestilence and distinguishes between the living and the dead, is in a strange contrast to the sophisticated difficulties and problems of life which disturbed her earlier. Romola now regards her despair in the boat as a mere egoistic complaint:

'It disintegrated as soon as she heard the child's cry--but from the moment after her



waking when the cry had drawn her, she had not even reflected, as she used to do in Florence, that she was glad to live because she could lighten sorrow—she had simply lived, with so energetic an impulse to share the life around her, to answer the call of need and do the work which cried aloud to be done, that the reasons for living, enduring, labouring, never took the form of an argument. (*Romola* p 518).

This realisation illuminates her soul and enlarges her vision. It brings peace and stability in her and seems to complete her moral education. Moral action is the outcome of direct, spontaneous feeling and not of rational judgement, intellectual deliberation or theological justification. In Florence she had felt self-divided because her charitable acts were motivated, dictated and controlled by certain external force unknown to her inner self and feeling, whereas in the village her whole self is expressed in acting to relieve the villagers suffering. After her work in the village is over, she can see her relationship to Florence in a new light. She can now establish a proper relationship between herself and her own community; the emotions that were disengaged from the people immediately around her rushed back into the old deep channels of use and affection. Her entire self can identify with action to serve the community of Florence as it had done with the village community.

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