



## RESEARCH PAPER

# Echoes of Patriarchy: A Study of Gendered Language in George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*

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## ABSTRACT

This paper aims to investigate Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* from the gender point of view. In the analysis of the two excerpts, the study assesses how the use of language reinforces and subverts the Victorian gendered power relations. Using Deficit Theory presented by Robin Lakoff, (1975) and Dominance Theory (Zamarman & West, 1975) this study delineates the subtle distinction between speech, gender, and power in *The Mill on the Floss*, providing a richer understanding of the Victorian society's dynamics and its gender communication tradition. The results show that the male characters of this novel use command, explicitness, and dynamism, which are consistent with dominance theory because men use language to dominate. Their speech continues to portray the male dominance and rationality in the society. On the other hand, the female characters use positive and polite words and avoid direct communication, which supports the deficit model, asserting that women's language is less formal and less effective than men's. Their interactions also expose some instances of minimal resistance in defiance of the claim of weakness in a woman's language. In this opposing approach, the study demonstrates how Eliot challenged gender roles present in the past, revealing strategies through which language erases inequality and social norms. The study would offer a more nuanced understanding of gendered interactions beyond binary power structures. Empirical data can support or refine existing qualitative interpretations, adding rigor to literary-linguistic studies.

**KEYWORDS** Gendered Language, Deficit Theory, Dominance Theory, *Mill on the Floss*, Victorian Society, Power Dynamics

## Introduction

Language assists in conveying, yet demonstrates how an organization functions, authority, and how people behave. Of the most central things about a language, how it relates to gender determines societal organizations and roles based on dominant linguistic constructs. The gender and communication study finds that males demonstrate unique linguistic behaviors which are both shaped by and shape social expectations. Male and female talk differs based on history, mind, and society. The male dialect usually relates to vocalization, control, and dominance, in contrast to the female speech that usually includes politeness, evasiveness, and feelings. Male talk usually entails talking and domination, whereas feminine talk tilts towards politeness, ambiguity, and emotions. These differences are not only visual but are closely related to dominance structures; dialect can be used to enforce dominance or maintain oppression. In George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*, the opposition has the verbal forms of feminine and masculine forms of language structures. Tom, being a male character, often displays assertiveness and dominance in his speech, while Maggie's speech contains emotional depth, sensitivity, and the social restrictions that come with female characters. This speech deviation highlights the prevalent social

prejudice and sexist culture of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with echoes still remaining in present-day speech.

Deficit Theory presented by Robin Lakoff, (1975) argues that women's language is weak due to social conditioning. Women are often expected to be humble, emotional and indirect, while men's speech is considered more vocal and official. Lakoff recognized linguistic characteristics such as hedging, tag questions, indirect requests and excessive politeness as female speech characteristics, suggesting that these patterns strengthen the subordinate position of women in society. Dominance Theory (Zamarman & West, 1975; Dale Spinder, 1980) suggests that men use language to control women and maintain dominance. In mixed-gender conversations, men disrupt more, control the subject change, and use direct, official speech. This theory highlights how the language reflects and strengthens social hierarchies, which gives men as major data in both public and private discourse. These principles are deeply relevant to Victorian literature, where gender roles were strictly defined. Women were expected to be passive, nutritious and emotionally expressive, while men were expected to be rational, commanding and practical. In *The Mill on The Floss*, these gender speech patterns are clear from the way male and female characters communicate, which reveal the inherent ideologies that shape the Victorian Society. Through this study, we aim to analyze linguistic dualism between the male and female characters, to find out how their speech reflects the underlying gender ideologies and contributes to the widespread discussion of language and power.

## Literature Review

In the fields of sociological and feminist literary criticism, language and gender dichotomy are always considered important in terms of research related to famous literary works. Among such famous works, George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* social conferences, gender power structures, and patriarchal Victorian society as a great source to provide an insight on the interaction of male and female language determined by society works. In a review of this literature, the attitude of scholars is detected in the context of male dominance and vigor in suppressing language dichotomy, gender linguistic patterns, and male dominance role and women. The linguistic patterns of male and female language are not limited to the subject, but are determined by the extensive power structures of the society. Such is unveiled by analyses made by theorists such as Robin Lakoff (1975), Debora Tannon (1990), and Jennifer Quotes (1993). In the work of Lakoff, *Language and Location of Women*, she argues that female language is characterized by the use of politeness, excessive gentle, decoration and mitigation, while in the context of male linguistic patterns, the latter is characterized by their dominance and superiority. When works such as *The Mill on the Floss* are seen by the lens provided by such principles, scholars highlight the opposite between Maggie Tulliver and her family and male members of the circle. Maggie's speech is combined with a deep emotional approach and intensive self-reflection, meanwhile, Tom speaks with confidence and logic that rejects her feelings. The principle of deficit, leading by Robin Lakoff in his Seminal Work *Language and Woman Place* (1975), tells women that women's speech is characterized by hesitations, qualifiers, and indirectness, which reflect their subordinate social status. In *The Mill on the Floss*, Maggie Tulliver's linguistic patterns align with this theory.

On the other hand, dominance theory emphasizes the role of strength and control in shaping gender communication. Debora Tannon (1990), Jennifer Quotes (1993) and Zimmerman and West (1975) argue that male language is used as a tool to claim dominance and maintain social hierarchy. In *The Mill on the Floss*, Tom Tulliver's speech reflects this theory. His language is officially, prescriptive and often rejecting Maggie's feelings and approaches. For example, Tom often disrupts Maggie, determines conditions, and imposes

his desire, reflects his privileged position as a man in the Victorian society. This dominance is further reinforced by social criteria which consider male rationalism and decision making, keeping female voices marginalized. Sociological studies often highlight the role and impact of power in directing an interaction, acting as a continuous means of gaining and maintaining control power of discourse, thus by linguistic capital concept presented by Pierre Bordy is hereby informed. In Elliot's novel, it has been observed that the tone of Tom Tulliver is not only official, but also prescriptive, which helps in using family control over his sister. Some scholars such as Sara Mills (1995) corresponds women's struggle with language with struggle for agency. Maggie's words are constantly defined according to the patriarchal environment, which reflects the lack of the agency, through the language this subjugation reflects the criteria of the Victorian era that suppresses female voices in the face of male dominance. . The entire novel has a widespread impact of the male authority and discourse on female expression. Feminist literary scholars inspect and highlight such inequality and subjugation. Ellen Sholater (1977) revealed the notion that women of the Victorian era not only struggle with social obstacles, but also linguistic huts.

Maggie's constant dismissal makes her silence in terms of self-expression, which makes the male align himself as expected, therefore, her submission is not only social but also linguistic. Thus, the study of the language dichotomy in Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* serves as a source for gender differences, strength structure and intersection of sociologists. Through the interaction of female and male characters of the novel, Eliot throws light on wide social factors that contribute to female presenting and male dominance.

## Material and Methods

The study employs a qualitative research method to analyze linguistic dialectics between male and female characters in *The Mill on the Floss* of George Eliot. The qualitative approach is chosen for the ability to provide the depth of interconnection between the language, gender and social power structures.

## Data Collected

The dialogues which focuses on key interactions that highlight male and female linguistic patterns are extracted from *The Mill on the Floss*.

## Theoretical Perspective

In this study the Deficit and Dominance Theories are employed as the theoretical frame work for the data analysis.

## Results and Discussion

### Expression 1

"Well, you know best," said Mrs. Tulliver. "I've no objection. But hadn't I better kill a couple of nice fat birds and have the aunts and uncles to dinner? Then you may hear what my sisters, Mrs. Glegg and Mrs. Pullet, have got to say about it." (Eliot, 1860)

In the context of deficit theory, it is observed how women's language is often perceived as weaker, less authoritative, and more deferential compared to men's speech, reflecting an inferior or subordinate position in society. Mrs. Tulliver's opening phrase – "Well, you know best" – immediately signals a lack of assertiveness and deference to another's judgment. This aligns with the deficit theory, as her language reflects the expectation that women should acquiesce to the decisions of others (in this case,

presumably her husband or a male figure). Mrs. Tulliver's deferring statement suggests that her opinion is secondary, that she doesn't take an active role in decision-making but instead defers to the supposed expertise or authority of someone else. Mrs. Tulliver's suggestion to "kill a couple of nice fat birds" and have dinner with her relatives might be seen as an indirect way of suggesting a course of action. This aligns with another feature of deficit theory, where women's speech tends to be more polite, indirect, and hedged, avoiding direct confrontation or assertion. In contrast to deficit theory, the dominance theory isn't always about overt, authoritarian speech; it can also manifest through the social structures that women participate in, where their influence is often indirect but still significant. Mrs. Tulliver's language also subtly highlights the dominance of traditional social and familial structures. By mentioning her sisters, Mrs. Glegg and Mrs. Pullet, and suggesting that their opinions will influence the course of action, Mrs. Tulliver points to the power dynamics within the family. Although the language itself is polite and indirect, the underlying structure implies that decisions in her household (and more broadly in her social class) are influenced not just by individual choice, but by the collective authority of family members. In this case, the dominance is not just about men, but about the family's internal hierarchy, where each family member has their role in decision-making, and women are not entirely powerless. The mention of inviting her relatives for dinner – "to hear what my sisters have got to say about it" – shows that Mrs. Tulliver is operating within the expectations of family hierarchy and societal roles. The very act of suggesting a meal and the inclusion of her sisters' opinions illustrates the dominance of social rituals, like family gatherings, as a means of maintaining social order and cohesion. In this way, Mrs. Tulliver's seemingly innocuous suggestion reflects her adherence to and reinforcement of the social order, where family and class structure dominate the characters' decisions and communication.

## Expression 2

*"You see, I want to put him to a new school at Midsummer... I want to send him to a downright good school, where they'll make a scholar of him."* (Eliot, 1860)

According to the deficit theory the emotional framing presented in the dialogue above might reinforce the stereotype of women as primarily concerned with the domestic and emotional aspects of life rather than practical or intellectual matters. Even though Mrs. Tulliver expresses a desire for her son to go to a good school, she doesn't explicitly present the decision as something that is already set in stone. Her language could be interpreted as tentative – focused on expressing a wish rather than a concrete plan. This might reflect a common tendency in women's speech, according to deficit theory, where women's voices are often less authoritative, hesitant, or less direct in comparison to men's more straightforward, assertive speech. Dominance theory, in contrast, focuses on how language reflects power imbalances, particularly the dominant role that men are often assumed to have in society. Women's speech, according to this theory, tends to reflect their subordinate position in patriarchal structures. However, it also recognizes that women may assert dominance in different ways, such as through subtle forms of control or influence. Here's how Mrs. Tulliver's language could be analyzed from this perspective. She is asserting her role in shaping her son's future, which aligns with the dominance theory in that she is attempting to influence the path of her child's development. Mrs. Tulliver's desire to send her son to a "downright good school" could also reflect the role of women in maintaining traditional values and expectations in the domestic and familial spheres. While men often exert dominance in the public sphere (business, politics, etc.), women historically have had more power in shaping domestic and familial outcomes. Mrs. Tulliver is not in a public power role, but within the home, her ability to influence her child's education reflects a form of dominance that is tied to her maternal role. The emphasis on the son's future

education—"they'll make a scholar of him"—shows that Mrs. Tulliver is engaged in a form of dominance that is connected to her nurturing and caregiving role. As a mother, she seeks to give her child the best opportunities, and in doing so, she wields power within the family unit. Though the language is not overtly authoritative in tone, the maternal desire to shape her son's future allows Mrs. Tulliver to subtly assert influence over the family's future direction. The phrase "*I want*" signals that Mrs. Tulliver is taking control over a significant decision concerning her son's future. Even if her language is not forceful, the subject matter itself—education—carries weight and reflects the idea that she is making a decision that could influence the family's future success or failure. This demonstrates a more covert form of dominance in how she steers the family's course, especially regarding the development of her son's potential.

### Expression 3:

*"We don't ask what a woman does – we ask whom she belongs to."* (Eliot, 1860)

Deficit theory suggests that women's language and roles are often seen as lacking in power, authority, or independence, and that they are socially expected to conform to emotional, supportive, and nurturing roles within the family and society. This statement can be interpreted through the lens of deficit theory in several key ways. The phrase "*We don't ask what a woman does – we ask whom she belongs to*" highlights how women's worth and identity were historically defined not by their actions or achievements, but by their relationships—most often to men. This reflects a major tenet of deficit theory, where women are seen primarily through their roles in relation to others (husband, father, brother, etc.), rather than as independent individuals. Women are often not evaluated for their own work or accomplishments but are reduced to their connection to a male figure. This echoes the Victorian belief that women's value and identity were largely dependent on their relationship with a man, thus reinforcing women's societal deficit in autonomy. The statement implicitly critiques how women are denied agency. The focus is not on what a woman accomplishes or contributes, but on her social status as defined by whom she is "owned" by, often a male figure. This reflects the deficit theory view that women's roles were relegated to the private sphere, without the autonomy to define their own purpose or identity outside of the relationships they maintained. In essence, women were seen as extensions of the men in their lives, with their personal achievements or individual roles less valued by society. The phrase also suggests a passive existence for women, where their identity is shaped by external relationships rather than internal qualities or actions. This aligns with deficit theory, which contends that women's language and behavior are often subordinated, indirect, and passive, particularly in comparison to the more dominant, self-determining roles that men are afforded. Women's status is not derived from their own work or accomplishments but from their relationship to powerful men. This is a central tenet of dominance theory, which holds that men hold dominant power in both language and societal structures.

Maggie's encounter with the gypsies illustrates her imaginative and emotional nature:

### Expression 4

Maggie's encounter with the gypsies illustrates her imaginative and emotional nature as presented in the expression below.

*"I'm come from home because I'm unhappy, and I mean to be a gypsy. I'll live with you if you like, and I can teach you a great many things."* (Eliot, 1860)

Maggie's speech is characterized as idealistic and escapist. Her wish to "be a gypsy" indicates her frustration with her limited lifestyle. The use of the phrase "if you like" illustrates indirectness, the hallmark Lakoff locates in women's language. Though she indicates a desire to teach, which implies a measure of authority, the comment is not assertive but rather reflects a childlike desire for approval and acceptance.

Maggie's battle with Stephen Guest is one more aspect of the deficit model as it reveals the tendency of women to be introspective and use more emotional language.

### Expression 5

*"Oh, it is difficult, – life is very difficult! It seems right to me sometimes that we should follow our strongest feeling; but then, such feelings continually come across the ties that all our former life has made for us..."*  
(Eliot, 1860)

Maggie's dialogue reveals her internal moral struggle. The repetition of "difficult" and the phrase "it seems right to me sometimes" suggest hesitation and self-doubt, reinforcing the idea that women's speech is less assertive and more conflicted than men's. The contrast between "strongest feeling" and "the ties that all our former life has made for us" illustrates her emotional depth and her tendency to prioritize relationships and ethical considerations over personal desire.

Maggie's emotional state of mind is depicted in expression 6, while asking for forgiveness to Tom Tulliver.

### Expression 6

*"O Tom, please forgive me – I can't bear it – I will be good – always remember things – do love me – please, dear Tom."*  
(Eliot, 1860)

Maggie's speech is emotionally charged and subservient, with much of pleading and self-correction "*I will be good*". This supports Lakoff's claim that women employ apologetic and unsure language to reflect their lower status in male-dominated society.

### Expression 7

*"We don't ask what a woman does – we ask whom she belongs to."* (Eliot, 1860)

Women's identities are undoubtedly connected to men in every way, highlighting their lack of autonomy and independence. This linguistic occurrence implies that women exist in relation to males, rather than as independent entities.

### Expression 8

*"You will never govern well, Miss Deane... because no one will ever believe in your severity."*  
(Eliot, 1860)

Stephen's statement is both teasing and official. The expression translates to Lucy missing entitlement. Amplifying conventional gender norms. His assurance in stating this point indicates that men tend to use words, even when chatting about love. His jovial tone indicates dominance in dialogue, a characteristic of male communication in social ascent.

In a factory setting, the male over female communication in the conversation confirms the hierarchical order. Men are portrayed as being forceful and taking charge

while women are portrayed as energetic, introspective, and unsure. This supports both the deficit and the dominance perspectives making language differences not just a matter of personality but an aspect that becomes social. However, George Eliot does not perfectly fit these linguistic models. Maggie is an emotionally complex yet thinking person who deviates from traditional expectations at times. His dialogue, while meditation, also bears relation to ethical paradoxes, suggesting that the female discourse is sophisticated and not as frail as it is portrayed. Similarly, Stephen employs a colorful turn of phrase, although this indicates that he can speak persuasively. This is rather surprising given that man's way of speaking is only utilized to depict formal scenarios.

Eliot captures the roles of men and women in the 1800s regarding communication but also has some issues as well. Maggie's inability to speak and claim these freedoms highlights the erasure of female voices, whereas male characters are given assertiveness and authority to reaffirm patriarchy's structure. Eliot uses the poem to educate readers on how language helps reinforce and even dictate gender roles and identity.

## **Discussion**

The data analyzed above brings into light that the language that the male characters in the novel use is assertive, direct and dominating. They often command, question, and state opinions in a commanding manner. This coincides with the dominance model, whereby males utilize language to subjugate females.

One of the ways through which men dominate discourse is by the use of commands and imperative statements. They tell and scold especially female characters imposing their authority on other especially female characters. This subjugation of women can be evident in scenes where male characters are compelled to dominate women or make certain decisions for them. This is well illustrated in the Victorian perception of men as strong and powerful beings, whose main duty is to lead and make decisions in the family and society.

Another feature of male language is dominance and assertiveness. Male characters question each other's actions or morality thus appealing to be the guardians of society and morality. The language used by their peers is aggressive and non-introspective, it is accusatory rather than self-narrative. This is still in line with cultural beliefs that require men to be strong and not to be hesitant to assert themselves and make judgments.

As for the business-like and financial scenes, the male language seems to be much more realistic. Instead of using negative emotions or personal defeatist language, male speakers attempt to attribute their misfortune to an external structure such as law, business, or fate. This analytical, problem-solving approach to language use is one of the ways that we can see male language use and how it relates to the social construction of what is acceptable for a man – logical, objective, and rational. In the context of the conflict, they take responsibility and power more than displaying frailty.

Male characters use banter and speak more assertively, particularly when making romantic or flirtatious advances. They seize the initiative even in oral discourse, reinforcing their position with teasing yet commanding words. This exemplifies the gendered dynamic where men take the lead in relationships, determining how the relationship should unfold. Even when male characters express feelings, they are not overly expressive and cannot compare to female characters. They avoid emotional displays, instead conveying their emotions in a manner that upholds their position and decorum. This aligns with the Victorian sentiment that men should not display weak emotions, as such vulnerability was considered exclusive to women. Female voices in the novel are imbued with passion,

contemplation, and insecurity. Women's language further reinforces their second-class status in society, with their linguistic limitations aligning with the deficit model, which suggests that women's language is shaped by their subordinate social position. A key feature of female language is pleading and submissive speech.

Women tend to seek validation, hesitate, and word their declarations in a way that avoids conflict. This use of language is due to social conditioning, with women having been socialized to be yielding and obedient to masculine dominance. Apologetic wordings, indirect requests, and a general resistance to standing their ground firmly characterize their speech patterns. Women characters also tend to question themselves and introspect frequently, expressing their internal conflict and identity crisis and moral conflict. While male characters confidently speak their minds, women undermine their own feelings and decisions. This is a linguistic feature that conveys the social pressure for women to be happy yet responsible because they were taught to prioritize family, reputation, and social pressure over their desires.

Women's speech is equally as fluent as men's speech and is typically emotional and filled with ideals. They verbalize their conflict of feeling in poems, in words charged with passion which male characters rarely convey. This corresponds to the typical association of women with emotion over rationality, which continues to perpetuate the stereotype that women are guided by their emotions rather than their intellects. Their speech often conveys hope or remorse, and sometimes both, with strong appeals to contrast between what they desire and what they have. Another important aspect, which is also typical for women, is the elements of resignation and fatalism.

Instead of taking actions to deal with trouble, women react with displays of powerlessness. They present problems in a discourse that references suffering or predestination and reiterates the Victorian construction of woman as passive and long-suffering. Instead of an issue being presented as a problem with a solution, a woman will look at it as a problem that is burdensome and would only lead to trouble. Women also engage in expressive and other-directed language, especially when restricted by societal norms. It is frankly their need to be free or to live in a different world that is free from their pains. This is not the language of pragmatic problem-solving that we see in male language; instead it embodies women in a world of fantasy and not reality. A second cultural paradigm is of moral responsibility and self-sacrificial rhetoric in women. Female characters often articulate their suffering in terms of obligation rather than enjoyment, to conform to the traditional role of women, who are supposed to be selfless caretakers. This is well captured in the theme of female speech, which is fraught with inner conflict, the struggle between desire and duty. The difference that George Eliot has drawn between men and women in terms of language is not arbitrary; it is rooted in the conventions of Victorian culture.

Among the most influential ideas was the concept of separate spheres which stated that man was a member of a public sphere of work, politics, and decision making while women were confined to the private sphere of home, morality and emotion.

This split defined language by stating that men should be rational and assertive and women should be submissive and kind. Victorian culture also preserved the idea of male rationality and female emotions. It also defined men as logical, calculating and commanding while women are expected to be emotional, caring and mirroring. These are demonstrated through how characters speak; power-oriented male characters and assertive language, in contrast with female characters who engage in emotional and introspective language.



Furthermore, the novel portrays the theme of male supremacy over women's decision-making authority. Female speech is subordinated to their secondary role in society, which leads to the formation of a speech strategy that involves submissiveness and doubting oneself. And when women speak feelings strongly, they do so in a way that does not threaten the male hegemonic power structures.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, the usage of the chosen forms of speech in *The Mill on the Floss* reveals how male and female languages serve the purpose of reinforcing gender roles. The language used by the male characters in the novel is assertive, authoritarian and functional, as befits a patriarchal society. Female speech is emotional, reflective, and polite, which corresponds to the stereotype of the passive-sacrificial woman. It is an exploration of Victorian gender politics in terms of language; and how language works to construct and entrench power relations. Male and female speech is not simply a matter of personality or choice but is steeped in convention and social custom. The suppression of women's voices and the social endorsement of male dominance is portrayed by the characters in the novel. When analyzing these language patterns using the deficit and dominance theories, we are able to see how gender inequality is constructed and reinforced. The novel also comments on these dynamics while presenting the struggles that women, such as Maggie, have to endure in a world that keeps them oppressed.

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