



Mapping the Margins: Intersectional Analysis as a Philosophical Lens for Re-reading Ableism, Class, Gender and Race in George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) and Nicola Yoon's *Everything Everything* (2015)

تخطيط الهوامش: التحليل التقاطعي كمنظور فلسفي لإعادة قراءة التحيز ضد ذوي الإعاقة، والطبقية، والنوع الاجتماعي، والعرق في رواية جورج إليوت «الطاحونة على نهر الفلوس» (1860) ونكولا يون «كل شيء كل شيء» (2015)

Imene Bouguettaya

Department of English, Algiers 2 University, Algeria

imene.bouguettaya@univ-alger2.dz

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ملخص

يتناول هذا البحث العلمي رواية جورج إليوت «الطاحونة على نهر الفلوس» (1860) التي تعود إلى القرن التاسع عشر، ورواية نيكولا يون المعاصرة «كل شيء كل شيء» (2015) الموجهة للشباب، والتي يتم تحليلهما ليس فقط كأعمال فنية أدبية، بل كأعمال فلسفية أيضًا. يستند هذا التحليل إلى فرضية أن الأشكال السردية، ولا سيما تلك التي تكتبها النساء، تعمل كمواقع صارمة وشرعية للبحث الفلسفي، وغالبًا ما تستكشف أسئلة الوجود والأخلاق والمعرفة وطبيعة الوكالة المقيدة داخل الأنظمة الأبوية والاجتماعية والثقافية. الإطار التحليلي الأساسي لهذا البحث هو التحليل التقاطعي لكيمبرلي كرينشو. يركز هذا المقال على بطلتي الرواية مادي توليفر ومادي ويتير، ويستكشف كيفية قيام كل نص بتجسيد التفكير الفلسفي من خلال التحليل التقاطعي، موضحة كيف أن التفاعل بين الطبقة الاجتماعية والجنس والعرق والقيود الصحية والوكالة المحدودة المفروضة اجتماعيًا يشكل تجاربهم الحياتية. في الواقع، من خلال منظور التقاطع، تتحول الدراسة إلى مواقع للتفكير الفلسفي بدلًا من التعامل مع الطبقة الاجتماعية والجنس والعرق والصحة والوكالة كحقائق خلفية منفصلة. وبالتالي، من خلال تطبيق إطار التقاطع كأداة فلسفية لإعادة قراءة الطبقة الاجتماعية والجنس والعرق وقيود الصحة، تكشف الدراسة عن الاستمرارية التاريخية والتحول في الهويات المتداخلة للقيود التي كبلت بشكل منهجي دور المرأة وسلطانها المعرفية واستقلاليتها على مدى أكثر من قرن من التاريخ الأدبي.

الكلمات الدالة: التحيز ضد ذوي الإعاقة؛ الوكالة المقيدة؛ السلطة المعرفية؛ النوع الاجتماعي؛ التحليل التقاطعي؛ الفلسفة.

Abstract

The present scholarly investigation engages with George Eliot's nineteenth-century English novel *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) and Nicola Yoon's American young adult novel *Everything Everything* (2015), which are examined not merely as works of literary artistry, but also as philosophical compositions. This analysis is founded upon the contention that narrative forms, particularly those authored by women, function as rigorous and legitimate sites of philosophical inquiry, often exploring questions of existence, ethics, knowledge, and the nature of confined agency within patriarchal and socio-cultural systems. The core analytical framework of this investigation is Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectional analysis. Focusing on the protagonists Maggie Tulliver and Maddy Whittier, this article explores how each text enacts philosophical reflection through intersectional analysis, illustrating how the interplay of ableism, class, gender, race, and socially imposed confined agency shapes their lived experiences. In fact, through an intersectional lens, the study is turned into treats the novels as sites of philosophical reflection rather than treating these factors as separate background facts. Thus, through the application of the previously discussed intersectional framework, the study reveals the historical continuity and transformation of overlapping identities of constraint that have, systematically, confined female agency and limited female autonomy and epistemic authority across more than one century of literary history.

Keywords: ableism; confined agency; epistemic authority; gender; intersectional analysis; philosophy.

Introduction

Literature has always been more than mere narrative entertainment; it functions as a dynamic intellectual arena where perennial philosophical debates are naturally staged and examined. Historically, women have been pivotal in shaping this domain, producing seminal works in both literature and philosophy, often against formidable institutional and social barriers. Thinkers and authors like Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary Shelley are now recognized as foundational figures, despite their work being systematically marginalised in their own time. To label



these women as pioneers is, therefore, to accurately describe their early and crucial role in employing fiction to grapple with profound intellectual concerns, from the constitution of reality and personal identity to the ethical and psychological complexities of constrained action.

Prior to a detailed analysis of George Eliot and Nicola Yoon's works, we must first appreciate how narrative itself operates as a mode of intellectual investigation. It seamlessly merges the creative impulse of storytelling with the disciplined rigour of philosophical thought. In this light, fiction emerges as a potent vehicle for unearthing and scrutinising deeper truths about the human condition, particularly the strategies individuals employ to navigate the delicate balance between external limitation and inner freedom.

This article posits that writers such as George Eliot and Nicola Yoon are not merely novelists of psychological and socio-political insight but are, in a significant sense, philosophers in their own right. Their literary creations serve as conduits for ontological and epistemological inquiry, grounding abstract philosophical concepts within the tangible realm of lived experience (Pettersen, 2008). Through their narratives, these authors articulate pressing ethical dilemmas, subvert conventional understandings of identity and agency, and critically interrogate the very foundations of knowledge. A central preoccupation is their illumination of "confined agency," depicting how female consciousness and moral reasoning evolve under the weight of socio-cultural impositions. Historically barred from the formal halls of academic philosophy, women have adeptly utilised literature as an alternative venue to "do philosophy," cultivating hybrid forms, such as the novel, the essay, and the diary, that defy strict disciplinary categorisations. Hybrid forms are not merely aesthetic choices but constitute acts of intellectual resistance. Indeed, the Western philosophical canon has long excluded women and non-Western voices, effectively expunging their contributions.

In response, women have strategically turned to literary forms such as the novel, the essay, and the diary to construct viable frameworks for philosophical exploration. These genres anchor philosophical questions in the concrete specificities of class, gender, and race, thereby challenging and expanding traditional philosophical paradigms. The shift



in focus, from abstract theorisation to the embodied reality of marginalised experiences is a hallmark of women's philosophical writing. By giving voice and narrative shape to these experiences, women's literature relentlessly probes core concepts like identity, truth, and autonomy, illustrating how personal freedom is persistently negotiated within contexts of confinement. This very negotiation of confined agency represents a potent form of philosophical resistance, reconfiguring the relationship between individual thought, ethical decision-making, and social structures.

This study, therefore, examines how *The Mill on the Floss* and *Everything Everything* engage in philosophical reflection through the analytical lens of Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectionality. By focusing on the protagonists Maggie Tulliver and Maddy Whittier, it will analyse how their overlapping identities shaped by class, gender, race, and health mould their struggles for autonomy, epistemic authority, and their specific negotiations with confined agency. In doing so, the article will demonstrate how both Eliot and Yoon utilise literature as a legitimate philosophical space to critique and resist the social constraints that curtail women's freedom and self-determination. To end up, using intersectionality across different centuries validates its stability as an analytic framework for comparative diachronic analysis.

I have selected *The Mill on the Floss* and *Everything Everything* on the basis that they constitute distinctly parallel texts whose intertextual resonance invites sustained critical inquiry. By pairing *The Mill on the Floss* with *Everything Everything*, this analysis explores how domestic and social confinement functions as a catalyst for female intellectual and racial identity across disparate historical epochs. While George Eliot's Maggie Tulliver embodies the "stifled genius" crushed by Victorian patriarchal rigidity, Nicola Yoon's Maddy Whittier represents a contemporary reconfiguration of this isolation, shifting the narrative from tragic inevitability to a self-articulating, biracial consciousness. Ultimately, this intertextual resonance reveals a significant evolution in the cultural politics of agency, as the "sick girl in the glass house" deconstructs the very structures of imprisonment that once rendered the "fallen woman" silent. To be more explicit, by placing the nineteenth-century class stratifications and explicit patriarchy of *The Mill on the Floss* in dialogue with the twenty-first century systems,



medicalised surveillance, and racial dynamics of *Everything Everything*, Kimberle's intersectional framework reveals a striking historical continuity in the modalities of female oppression. This pairing demonstrates how, despite cultural manifestations, the underlying structures of domestic and social containment remain remarkably persistent.

1. Literature Review

The scholarly dialogue surrounding the confluence of philosophy and literature in women's writing is both vibrant and evolving. However, a conspicuous gap persists. While George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) and Nicola Yoon's *Everything Everything* (2015) have each garnered significant critical attention, they are rarely examined in concert. A vast body of scholarship of Eliot's novel are frequently anchored in feminist critique, whereas Yoon's work is predominantly situated within the confines of contemporary young adult romance or illness narrative. This disciplinary segregation has overlooked a fertile ground for inquiry into how women's literature, across disparate centuries, consistently probes with profound philosophical questions of freedom, constraint, and identity. Placing these two novels in dialogue reveals enduring tensions between personal autonomy and external limitation, articulated through vastly different cultural and literary milieus.

Scholarship on *The Mill on the Floss* has extensively employed feminist frameworks. For instance, the work of S.Yadav and A.Yadav, in their article "George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*: An Approach to Feminism" (2016), interprets the novel as a critique of patriarchal structures that systematically curtail women's moral, intellectual, and social development. Their analysis concludes that Eliot's narrative performs a sustained interrogation of the social and moral confines imposed on women in Victorian England, thereby exposing structural injustices and compelling a re-evaluation of gendered assumptions about development, duty, and worth.

A more recent and genre-focused intervention comes from Fraiman's article, "The Mill on the Floss, the Critics, and the Bildungsroman" (2020). Fraiman offers a bold reinterpretation, arguing that Eliot's novel deliberately subverts the conventional, male-centered Bildungsroman genre. The narrative, she contends, shifts focus from Tom's rigid and



morally narrow development to Maggie's repeatedly thwarted attempts at self-realisation. Maggie's journey, circumscribed by gender, family, and societal expectations, exposes the genre's inherent limitations in accommodating female experience. Fraiman posits that Eliot uses Maggie's story to reconceptualise the genre itself, suggesting that authentic development must encompass relational ethics and social entanglements, not merely individualistic progress. This critique powerfully reframes genre conventions to highlight the exclusionary nature of traditional narratives.

Conversely, critical engagement with Nicola Yoon's *Everything Everything* is typically anchored in contemporary frameworks. Fadhli and Desvalini's study, "Power Relation in The Novel *Everything Everything* by Nicola Yoon" (2023), employs a Foucauldian lens to analyse the dynamics of parental authority and youthful resistance. Their qualitative discourse analysis reveals how power operates through normative systems within the narrative, particularly in the relationship between the protagonist, Maddy, and her mother. This approach enriches the reading of the novel, framing it not merely as a romance but as a nuanced commentary on control and autonomy. Complementing this, Aprilia's work, "*The Analysis of Pauline Through Feminism Theory on Everything Everything novel written by Nicola Yoon*" (2019) utilises feminist theory to explore how institutional and familial restrictions, often reinforced by conventional gender roles, conflict with the heroine's desire for freedom and self-expression.

While these studies provide insights, they remain siloed. A critical lacuna exists in understanding how these two novels, when read through an intersectional lens, contribute to a transhistorical literary-philosophical tradition. This study aims to bridge that gap, employing Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality as its central analytical framework. This approach situates the struggles of Eliot's Maggie and Yoon's Maddy within overlapping matrices of gender, class, race, health, and institutional power, thereby illuminating both the historical continuities and transformations in the conditions shaping women's self-determination from the nineteenth to the twenty-first century.

Methodologically, this analysis is situated within the humanities, a field dedicated to interpreting the human condition. The humanities offer a



lens for rigorous reflection on fundamental questions of value and meaning. Unlike the positivist and empirical methodologies dominant in the social sciences, this inquiry employs a qualitative, interpretive design, treating the two novels as case studies. The primary objective is to uncover hidden meanings, non-obvious features, and multiple interpretations, thereby amplifying unheard voices and elucidating the complex philosophical negotiations within women's writing.

Following this methodology, the main concern of this article is to show how an intersectional reading of George Eliot's *Maggie* and Yoon's *Maddy* demonstrates continuities in women's self-determination across nineteenth and twenty-first century matrices of class, gender, race, health, and institutional power. Nonetheless, there are other sub-questions that can be highlighted, for instance, how women writers use their novels to express deep philosophical ideas. This question examines how literature written by women can function as a form of philosophical inquiry, especially when traditional philosophy has often ignored or excluded women's voices.

2. Theoretical Scaffolding

The philosophical resonance in the literary works of George Eliot and Nicola Yoon finds its most potent articulation through the lens of Kimberlé Crenshaw's groundbreaking theory of intersectionality. Introduced in her seminal 1989 essay, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex," this framework originated in critical legal studies to critique the law's frequent failure to address the compounded discrimination faced by Black women (Crenshaw, 1989). Crenshaw, a pioneering American legal scholar, argued that traditional anti-discrimination law, like the broader social justice movements of the time, often operated on a "single-axis" framework, treating gender and race as mutually exclusive categories of experience. This, she demonstrated, rendered the specific experiences of Black women who face both racial and gender discrimination in a synergistic, inseparable manner, legibly invisible (*ibid*). She powerfully described this analytical blind spot as a failure to "map the margins," where the true complexity of subordination resides.

The core tenet of intersectionality posits that systems of oppression such as classism, sexism, racism, and ableism are not discrete but interlocking. They converge to create a unique matrix of domination



for individuals situated at their crossroads. Instead of understanding social identities like class, gender, and race as separate additives, Crenshaw illustrates how they combine to produce distinct experiences of privilege and penalty (hooks, 1984). This makes intersectionality both a conceptual tool for understanding lived experience and a robust analytical framework for deconstructing how power operates structurally. It elucidates how institutions, from the legal system to the family, are co-constituted by these overlapping systems, fundamentally shaping an individual's access to power, epistemic authority, and agency.

The migration of intersectionality from law into the humanities, particularly literary and philosophical studies, has been transformative. It provides a critical vocabulary for analysing how characters are constituted not by a single identity dimension but by the confluence of multiple ones. While Crenshaw provided the term, the intellectual tradition of intersectional thought predates her coinage. The work of bell hooks, born Gloria Jean Watkins, is foundational in this regard. In works like *Ain't I a Woman* (1981) and *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (1984), hooks, though not initially using the term "intersectionality", performed a parallel critical labour (hooks, 1981). She rigorously analysed the interlocking systems of class, gender, and race, arguing that a feminism which focused solely on the experiences of white, middle-class women was not only incomplete but complicit in the very structures of domination it sought to dismantle (hooks, 1984). Her work insisted that centering the experiences of those on the margins, such as Black women and working-class women, was essential for a truly liberatory feminist politics, thereby making feminism more inclusive and critically attuned to power dynamics (ibid).

Applying this intersectional lens to women's writing, therefore, moves criticism beyond treating "woman" as a monolithic category. It allows us to see how a character like Eliot's Maggie Tulliver is not merely constrained by Victorian gender conventions but by the specific interplay of her gender, her family's precarious class position, and her intellectualism which alienates her from her community. Her struggle is not against patriarchy in the conceptual sense or in general but against a patriarchal system deeply inflected by class anxiety and provincial social mores. Similarly, in Yoon's *Everything Everything*, Maddy Whittier's



agency is circumscribed not just by her illness (SCID) but by how her medical condition intersects with her mother's medical authority, her racial identity, and her profound social isolation. Her confinement is both physical and deeply social. Consequently, intersectionality challenges reductive readings and foregrounds the nuanced, layered realities of marginalisation. It reveals that the struggles for autonomy and epistemic authority waged by Maggie and Maddy are not merely personal tragedies but are philosophically charged responses to systemic oppression. Although Eliot wrote long before the term was conceived, Maggie's character is a profound literary embodiment of intersectional principles, grappling with the inseparable forces of class, gender, and social constraints. Yoon's novel, a product of a more theoretically aware era, explicitly engages with how health, race, and family structure a young woman's world.

In a nutshell, employing Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectional framework to analyse *The Mill on the Floss* and *Everything Everything* does more than just illuminate character motivation; it positions the novels as vital sites of philosophical resistance. It demonstrates that the protagonists' conflicts are rooted in systemic, interlocking oppressions rather than individual failings. Through this lens, we can trace a compelling continuity in women's writing across centuries, underscoring its enduring power to serve as a sophisticated medium for social critique and a profound exploration of the constrained, yet resilient, nature of female agency.

3. Literature's Role in Shaping Thought

The evolution of literature, from ancient oral epics to contemporary digital narratives, charts the evolution of human thought itself. As the Cambridge Dictionary notes, it is characterised by "enduring artistic value," a quality evident in how works from Homer's *Odysseys* to Toni Morrison's novels continue to captivate and challenge audiences across time. This enduring power confirms literature's role not as a passive reflection but as an active participant in cultural and philosophical dialogue, preserving collective memory while simultaneously provoking critical thought about the future (Cambridge University, 2024).

Within this vast tradition, women's literature has carved out an autonomous discursive arena, often functioning as a covert field for philosophical resistance. Denied entry into formal academic and



philosophical institutions for centuries, women writers turned to the novel, the essay, and poetry as their laboratories for ethical inquiry. They ingeniously embedded complex questions about existence, ethics, and knowledge into the very fabric of their narratives. The works of George Eliot and Nicola Yoon are exemplary in this regard. They demonstrate how the novel became a legitimate and powerful vehicle for doing philosophy, a space where the abstract could be tested against the tangible realities of lived experience (Himanshi, 2025).

This aligns with a broader view of literature as a profound act of communication. The Russian philosopher Tolstoy (1897/1976) championed this concept, defining art as a “transmission of feeling” meant to unite humanity. For women writers, this transmission was doubly significant. It was a means of delineating their own marginalised perspectives and of cultivating empathy and critical awareness in their readers. By employing accessible and popular forms, they bypassed institutional gatekeepers, ensuring their philosophical and social critiques reached a wide audience.

Therefore, when examined through an intersectional lens, literature becomes an indispensable medium for understanding how structures of power shape individual consciousness. It allows us to see how the struggles for autonomy and epistemic authority in the lives of characters like Maggie Tulliver and Maddy Whittier are not isolated personal trials but philosophical dilemmas born from intersecting systems of gender, class, and health. In the hands of women writers, literature thus transforms into a crucial site of knowledge production, a space where feeling and knowing are inseparable, and where the act of telling a story becomes an act of philosophical and political liberation.

4. Women’s Struggle: From Social Change to Artistic Expression

Taking *the Mill of the Floss*’ date of publication into consideration (1860), the mid-Victorian era witnessed intense debates about women’s place in, for instance, conservative Victorian England. Despite their efforts to secure professional opportunities alongside men, particularly in the literary world, female writers faced significant obstacles. The reigning monarch, a staunch supporter of the patriarchal order, ensured that men wielded their power to suppress any attempts by women to advance. In this restrictive environment, female artists endured social



constraints that limited their creative expressions. Women were not expected to be innovative or even interested in literature; as Woolf noted in *A Room of One's Own*, “nothing could be expected of women intellectually,” as intellectual pursuits were considered a “masculine occupation” and “unfeminine.” Public opinion held that women were incapable of producing great “fine art” such as writing or painting, relegating them instead to “applied arts” like design and craft (Woolf, 1929).

This perception led many women to internalise feelings of inferiority, doubting their ability to become writers. However, figures such as Elizabeth Gaskell, George Eliot, and the Brontë sisters defied these stereotypes. Aware of their intellectual equality with men, they often adopted male pseudonyms to avoid rejection of their works; for example, Mary Ann Evans wrote *The Mill on the Floss* as George Eliot, Emily Brontë published *Wuthering Heights* under the name “Ellis Bell,” and Anne Brontë’s *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* appeared as “Acton Bell.”

George Eliot chose to write obliquely through fiction, giving her female characters a central voice to address women’s concerns. Like some other women writers, she used a male pen name, aware of public prejudice and negative receptions toward female-authored works. Through *The Mill on the Floss*, Eliot sought to condemn societal restrictions placed on women, using Maggie’s character to challenge a society that undervalued female contributions. Despite these hardships, women embraced the novel, then often considered a “female” genre, as a crucial platform for expression and social engagement. Overall, literature became a vehicle for critique, resistance, and advocacy.

The intellectual climate that supported these reforms was significantly influenced by philosophers like John Stuart Mill (1806–1873). A towering figure of Victorian thought, Mill wove the principles of liberalism and utilitarianism into a compelling argument for gender equality. He contended that political enfranchisement was not merely a right but a fundamental necessity for the moral and intellectual development of all individuals, staunchly advocating for universal suffrage. At a time when prevailing norms framed women as inherently inferior and in need of male protection, Mill offered a radical rebuttal. He denounced the legal subordination of women as not only morally “wrong in itself” but as a major impediment to societal advancement. In



his seminal work, *The Subjection of Women* (1869), he provocatively asserted that women's perceived limitations were not innate but the direct result of systematic suppression, arguing that their true capabilities remained unknown because they had never been permitted the freedom to develop them.

Mill's philosophy was matched by his activism. His tenure as a Member of Parliament and his leadership role in the National Society for Women's Suffrage provided platforms to transform theory into practice, repeatedly introducing the controversial demand for women's votes into political discourse. His vision for women's emancipation extended beyond the public sphere; he believed it would foster more profound intellectual companionship within marriage, thereby enriching personal relationships. This commitment to individual autonomy is the cornerstone of his broader philosophy, elaborated in *On Liberty* (1859), where he champions free thought and open discourse as essential for truth-seeking, personal fulfillment, and sound decision-making. For Mill, the core principles of individuality, freedom, and self-realisation were universal. He postulated that genuine individuality flourishes through the expression of one's convictions, and that freedom of speech is a prerequisite for developing one's talents and achieving self-actualization, provided no harm is done to others. It was, in his view, the state's duty to cultivate this environment through education and the robust protection of rights.

Much like in Britain, the American landscape for women writers was largely the same. Within the American context, women's struggle followed a similar trajectory from social constraint to artistic expression. Throughout the nineteenth century, although women possessed the intellectual and creative capacity to write, they were denied the legal and social recognition necessary to claim authorship. Under the system of coverture, a married woman's intellectual production was legally absorbed into her husband's identity, compelling many women writers to adopt male pseudonyms in order to circumvent restrictive domestic expectations and gain access to a wider readership.



5. Intersecting Identities and Confined Agency in *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) and *Everything Everything* (2015)

This section discusses how the philosophical themes are not isolated but intersect and reinforce each other within these novels. Using an intersectional framework, one can explore how class, gender, race, and health intersect to shape the protagonists' experiences in *The Mill on the Floss* and *Everything Everything*. Both novels offer rich ground for exploring how overlapping identities influence social exclusion, agency, and relationships.

However, it is worth bearing in mind that the analytical framework employed to examine the works of art, which seeks to understand how multiple social identities such as class, gender, race, and health constraints intersect to generate distinct forms of discrimination and privilege, has undergone substantial transformation from the nineteenth century to the twenty-first-century literature. The difference lies primarily in the axes of identity prioritized and the visibility of the resulting forms of oppression. While George Eliot's critique in *The Mill on the Floss* focuses on the implicit intersection of class and gender, Nicola Yoon's *Everything Everything* employs an explicit, multi-layered intersection of gender, race, and ableism. In other words, the application of intersectionality in literary analysis moves beyond mere identification of themes; it serves as a rigorous tool for tracing the mechanisms of constraint. The primary goal is to situate women's struggles for autonomy within the overlapping matrices of gender, class, race, disability, family position, and institutional power.

A critical philosophical consequence of intersectional constraint is epistemic injustice, which is the systematic denial of a person's capacity to know and define their own reality. The intersectional examination reveals whose knowledge is trusted or dismissed by analysing how overlapping identities shape a protagonist's epistemic authority. In both novels, multiple systems of oppression converge to deny the female protagonist the right to be the authority of her own life and truth. For Maggie Tulliver, her knowledge is deemed irrational due to the interplay of her gender and class. For Madeline Whittier, her knowledge of her own body and reality is intentionally fabricated and overridden by medical and maternal authority.



5.1 *The Mill on the Floss*: Maggie Tulliver's intersectional struggle

George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), set in the fictional town of St. Ogg's, chronicles the life of Maggie Tulliver, a protagonist whose intellectual passion and emotional depth collide with the rigid gender and class hierarchies of Victorian England. The narrative traces her development from a gifted, restless child into a complex young woman whose aspirations are systematically thwarted by societal conventions. Key relationships, particularly her fraught bond with her conventional brother, Tom, and her morally complicated connections with Philip Wakem and Stephen Guest, stage the central conflict between individual desire and social obligation. The novel's tragic denouement, a fatal flood that reunites and kills the siblings, serves as a powerful symbol of both irrevocable loss and a poignant, doomed reconciliation.

Eliot composed the novel against the backdrop of a society undergoing industrialization, which intensified class stratification and reinforced strict gender codes. Maggie's personal struggles, her yearning for education, her intellectual hunger, and her search for a meaningful life beyond domesticity directly mirror the constraints faced by women in the 19th century. It is crucial to note that Eliot herself, writing under a male pseudonym, channelled her own nuanced understanding of these limitations into her heroine. The patriarchal structure of St. Ogg's is embodied by Tom, whose constant exhortation to "You must submit" encapsulates the enforced passivity demanded of women. This pressure, combined with the family's financial ruin and the weight of community reputation, forms an inescapable web of circumstance that systematically curtails Maggie's agency.

Maggie's identity is defined by the intersection of her gender and her declining social class. Her fierce intelligence marks her as an outsider; the narrator observes she was "too clever for her station," yet this very intellect becomes a liability in a world that offers no avenue for its expression. Her lower-middle-class status denies her the educational opportunities granted to men of similar means and severely restricts her prospects for social mobility or a fulfilling marriage. This creates a devastating paradox. For instance, she is simultaneously "too clever" for the domestic role she is expected to perform and "not clever enough" to overcome the structural barriers of her class and gender. This is not a



personal failure but a systemic one, highlighting how societal structures conspire to limit potential.

Her non-conformity is further physically coded. Maggie's "dark skin, black hair, and dark eyes" deliberately contrast with the Victorian ideal of fair, placid femininity. She is consistently described as "wild," "contrary," and "unsuitably passionate," traits that translate her inner rebellion into a visible, and thus punishable, physical difference. This aesthetic bias, while not analogous to modern racial constructs, functions as a powerful marker of her social alienation, reinforcing her status as an outsider within her own community.

Philosophically, Maggie's journey is a profound exploration of constrained agency and epistemic injustice. Her engagement with texts like *The Imitation of Christ*, where she reads "faster as she went on, and her mind was filled with the sense that renunciation was the highest virtue" represents her desperate search for a framework to reconcile her desires with her reality. However, her insights and moral reasoning are consistently dismissed by a patriarchal society that denies women epistemic authority. She is permitted to have thoughts but forbidden from acting upon them, a tension that lies at the heart of her tragedy. Ultimately, Maggie's suffering, isolation, and sacrificial death are not merely personal misfortunes but a searing philosophical critique. Her fate illustrates the devastating cost of intersectional oppression, where the combined forces of gender, class, and social non-conformity create a set of constraints from which there is no earthly escape. Through Maggie, Eliot demonstrates how these overlapping systems of power foreclose the possibility of an authentic selfhood for women who dare to defy convention.

5.2. *Everything Everything*: Maddy Whittier's confined agency

Nicola Yoon's *Everything Everything* presents a contemporary exploration of constrained identity through its protagonist, Madeline "Maddy" Whittier, a biracial eighteen-year-old diagnosed with Severe Combined Immunodeficiency (SCID). This condition confines her to a hermetically sealed, sterile environment, a life meticulously managed by her physician mother and her nurse, Carla. The novel's central plot is catalysed by the arrival of Olly, a new neighbour, whose presence disrupts Maddy's sanitised existence and ignites her questioning of the



boundaries, both physical and epistemological, that define her world. Her subsequent quest for truth unveils a profound deception, namely her illness, which is a fabrication, a construct of her mother's trauma. This revelation forces Maddy into a radical journey of self-discovery, where she must choose between sterile safety and the perilous, unpredictable richness of lived experience, ultimately embracing a life of autonomy, emotional risk, and embodied truth.

Yoon's narrative is formally innovative, reflecting its digital-age context. The novel's hybrid, form weaving together diary entries, instant messages, emails, medical charts, and illustrations, mirrors Maddy's fragmented yet interconnected consciousness. This multiformat structure does more than simply modernise the epistolary tradition; it enacts a form of epistemic resistance. Through these mediums, Maddy actively curates and reclaims her narrative voice, challenging the authority of traditional, monolithic knowledge systems that have been exemplified by the medical charts and asserting the validity of personal, emotional, and visual ways of knowing.

Philosophically, the novel subverts the conventions of the young adult romance genre by embedding profound inquiries into truth, autonomy, and the ethics of care. The central plot twist reconfigures the entire narrative, transforming a story about living with illness into a searing examination of how protection can morph into oppression. Maddy's decision to leave her confinement is, therefore, not merely an act of teenage rebellion but a deliberate, existential leap. Her declaration, "Just because you can't experience everything doesn't mean you shouldn't experience anything," serves as the novel's ethical core, championing the necessity of embodied experience for authentic selfhood.

Maddy's initial identity is entirely externally imposed, defined by a medical diagnosis she never questions. The novel's opening line "My disease is as rare as it is famous" immediately frames her existence through a clinical and sensationalist lens. Her transformation begins with her relationship with Olly, which introduces emotional depth and unpredictability. Her realization that "I was happy before I met him. But I'm alive now, and those are not the same thing" marks a pivotal shift from a state of passive contentment to an active pursuit of a fully



lived life, revealing how relational love can expose the suppression of one's subjectivity.

The most profound constraint Maddy faces is epistemic injustice. Her mother, as a medical authority, monopolises control over information about Maddy's body and the outside world. The fabrication of the illness is the ultimate expression of this, systematically denying Maddy the capacity to know and interpret her own reality. As a biracial young woman, her voice is situated at the intersection of multiple marginalisations, yet her story powerfully centralises fundamental philosophical concerns about autonomy, truth, and self-creation. Her journey is a clear embodiment of existentialist philosophy, particularly Jean-Paul Sartre's principle that "existence precedes essence." Maddy's essence is not predetermined by a supposed illness; instead, she forges her own identity through her courageous choices to love, to leave, to risk everything. Her trip to Hawaii with Olly is the literal and symbolic culmination of this self-constitution, a leap into the freedom and danger of defining herself. Through Maddy's struggle, Yoon demonstrates that true agency is won not in the absence of constraints, but through the conscious act of rebelling against them to choose one's own path.

6. Results

The intersectional literary-philosophical analysis of *The Mill on the Floss* and *Everything Everything* reveals five major findings that demonstrate how both novels function as profound explorations of constrained agency shaped by intersecting systems of power (class, gender, race, and health).

6.1 Female agency is structurally constrained by interlocking systems

A central finding of this study is that neither Maggie Tulliver nor Madeline Whittier experiences constraint solely due to a single aspect of her identity; instead, their agency is circumscribed by the intersection of multiple social, cultural, and institutional forces. In *The Mill on the Floss*, Maggie's gender, combined with her class position, situates her outside the Victorian ideal of female domesticity and intellectual legitimacy. This positioning exposes her to social censure and limits her opportunities for self-realisation, reflecting broader patriarchal structures that have been extensively documented in feminist criticism of Victorian literature (Spacks, 1977). Maggie's struggles



illustrate how normative expectations regarding gender and social hierarchy operate simultaneously to restrict her choices and define her social worth.

Similarly, *Everything Everything* demonstrates that Maddy's perceived medical vulnerability intersects with gendered and racial marginalisation to produce an existence shaped by both familial and institutional authorities. Her confinement, framed as protection, exemplifies how societal anxieties about health, vulnerability, and normative behaviour converge to delimit autonomy (Arthur, 2016). This case underscores the relational nature of agency. It is not an intrinsic trait but a position enacted and constrained within overlapping structures of power.

These findings reinforce the relevance of an intersectional framework, as articulated by Crenshaw (1989) in understanding female subjectivity. Through such a lens, gendered limitations cannot be analysed in isolation from other axes of identity, such as class, race, or health status. The novels, accordingly, reveal how social, institutional, and cultural structures operate in concert to shape, restrict, and define the possibilities for women's action and self-determination.

6.2 Epistemic authority is denied through institutional and social mechanisms

Both novels critically depict epistemic injustice. The systematic denial or devaluation of a character's capacity to define, articulate, or interpret her own experiences. In *The Mill on the Floss*, Maggie's perceptive insights into her moral world, her emotional life, and her intellectual desires are continually dismissed or undermined by figures embodying social authority, such as her brother, Tom, and the broader St. Ogg's community. This dynamic reflects the rigid moral and intellectual hierarchies of Victorian society, which constrained women's access to epistemic recognition and authority (Showalter, 1977). Maggie's repeated marginalisation demonstrates how social and familial structures operate to limit women's capacity to be acknowledged as legitimate knowers.

In *Everything Everything*, a parallel form of epistemic denial emerges through the intersection of medical authority and parental control. Maddy's intimate understanding of her body and lived experience of



illness is systematically invalidated, illustrating how institutional knowledge systems, medical and social, can override personal experience. This confinement of epistemic agency highlights the tension between formal authority and individual insight, emphasizing how societal structures can shape, restrict, or dismiss what is accepted as valid knowledge (Fricker, 2007).

Together, these narratives reveal that epistemic authority is both contested and constrained, showing how power relations actively determine whose knowledge is recognised, whose voice is heard, and whose understanding of the world is legitimised. The novels illuminate the enduring mechanisms by which social and institutional systems maintain control over knowledge production, particularly in contexts where gendered hierarchies dictate who is seen as credible or authoritative.

6.3. The body becomes a text where power is inscribed

In both novels, the female body functions not as a neutral or passive vessel but as a site upon which cultural norms, social expectations, and power hierarchies are inscribed and enforced. In *The Mill on the Floss*, Maggie's physicality, her restless energy, strong will, and deviation from conventional feminine comportment, symbolically marks her marginality within a society that prizes obedience, restraint, and decorum (Spacks, 1977). Her embodiment of difference signals not only personal non-conformity but also the societal mechanisms that seek to discipline and limit women who transgress normative roles.

Similarly, in *Everything Everything*, Maddy's body, maintained under strict confinement for her "protection," becomes a locus of biomedical surveillance. This physical containment mirrors broader social anxieties regarding vulnerability, control, and what constitutes a "normal" or acceptable existence in health and society (Arthur, 2016). Her bodily experience demonstrates how authority, whether medical, parental, or societal, can directly shape the possibilities of individual agency.

This convergence across both works resonates with feminist theory, which emphasises the body as a central arena of power, regulation, and contestation (Butler, 1990). In these narratives, the female body reflects both internal and external constraints. It embodies the consequences of social hierarchies while simultaneously serving as a medium through



which individual resistance and identity negotiation occur. The novels, therefore, highlight how subjective experience and autonomy are continually mediated through the interplay of physicality, societal norms, and structural power.

6.4 Literature functions as a mode of philosophical inquiry

A major finding is that both works function as venues for philosophical reflection, going beyond simple storytelling. Eliot's realism interrogates ethical systems of duty, sacrifice, and identity within the rigid social constraints of Victorian England, illustrating how societal structures shape moral and personal development. Similarly, Yoon's contemporary novel employs a multimodal format including diary entries, emails, and visual elements to challenge and explore concepts of truth, freedom, and existential choice within a modern, complex social framework.

This approach aligns with scholarly views that literature, and particularly women's writing, can operate as a form of philosophical practice (Nussbaum, 1990). By embedding philosophical inquiry into narrative, these novels enable readers to engage with questions of autonomy, moral reasoning, and ethical decision-making in contexts that abstract philosophy may overlook. Fiction thus becomes a critical tool, allowing for the exploration of lived experiences and marginalised perspectives, and offering a rich, nuanced understanding of how individuals navigate the interplay between personal freedom and social constraint.

6.5 Historical continuities and transformations in oppressive structures

Last but not least, although *The Mill on the Floss* and *Everything Everything* emerge from very different historical and cultural contexts, they reveal continuity in the mechanisms restricting female subjectivity. Victorian social codes, shaped by rigid class and gender hierarchies, prescribed women's roles and limited their autonomy (Spacks, 1977). In contemporary settings, constraints persist through institutional practices, medical authority, and social expectations, often operating in subtler forms (Arthur, 2016). This continuity shows that oppression evolves rather than disappears. While Victorian constraints were overt and codified, modern mechanisms in contemporary contexts may be



bureaucratic or socially implicit. In this respect, women's agency is effectively curtailed and their voices, systematically, silenced. Both novels illustrate how intersecting identities class, gender, health and race shape the scope of autonomy across time. Maggie faces the combined pressures of gender and class (Spacks, 1977), while Maddy navigates a multi-layered intersection of ableism, gender and race (Arthur, 2016).

Intersectional feminist theory highlights that although oppression's forms adapt historically, its underlying logic persists, rooted in interlocking systems of power (Crenshaw, 1989). These literary works demonstrate that women's struggles for self-determination are shaped by enduring structures of domination, making the analysis of continuity and transformation essential for understanding constrained agency.

7. Discussion

This analysis demonstrates that despite the significant historical and formal divergences between George Eliot's and Nicola Yoon's works, the two novels are powerfully connected by their nuanced exploration of how intersecting identities forge the contours of female agency. Both Maggie Tulliver and Maddy Whittier navigate lives of confined agency, where their possibilities are systematically limited by the convergence of gender with class, health, and racial or aesthetic bias. Their respective struggles, Maggie's through intellectual and emotional passion in a rigid Victorian society and Maddy's through a literal and epistemological rebellion against medicalised control, reveal a transhistorical pattern of resistance against systemic, rather than merely personal, constraints.

A central finding is that both authors utilise the novel as a legitimate arena for philosophical practice. Eliot and Yoon challenge the traditional boundaries of philosophy, demonstrating that profound inquiries into ethics, epistemology, and existence can be conducted through narrative. Maggie's internal moral conflicts, shaped by her gender and class, serve as a critique of patriarchal determinism, while Maddy's journey to uncover the truth about her body stages a dramatic reclamation of epistemic authority from medical and parental control. In both cases, the protagonists' lived experience becomes the primary site for questioning what constitutes knowledge and how moral principles apply to marginalised subjects.



The motif of confinement operates on multiple levels, symbolising the broader social mechanisms that restrict female autonomy. Maggie's confinement is intellectual and social, encapsulated by her brother's relentless demand, "You must submit," which voices the Victorian patriarchy's enforcement of female passivity. Maddy's confinement is physical and epistemological, defined from the outset by the clinical statement, "My disease is as rare as it is famous." Her sterile home becomes a metaphor for a reality constructed and controlled by external authority. Both forms of confinement, though different in manifestation, function to shape and severely limit the protagonists' agency. Furthermore, the protagonists' physicality underscores their intersectional marginalization. Maggie's "dark eyes, dark hair, and restless spirit," repeatedly described as "wild" and "contrary," mark her as an outsider to the Victorian feminine ideal, compounding the social alienation she experiences due to her gender and class. For Maddy, her biracial identity, combined with her perceived medical vulnerability, creates a unique matrix of constraints that influences how she is perceived, protected, and controlled. In both narratives, the body itself becomes a text upon which social norms and prejudices are inscribed.

Ultimately, the philosophical responses of the two heroines delineate a shift from an ethics of renunciation to one of existential self-creation. Maggie's engagement with *The Imitation of Christ*, where she reads "faster as she went on, and her mind was filled with the sense that renunciation was the highest virtue," represents her tragic struggle to find meaning within the oppressive structures she cannot escape. In stark contrast, Maddy's declaration, "Just because you can't experience everything doesn't mean you shouldn't experience anything," champions a conscious embrace of risk. Her realization that "I was happy before I met him. But I'm alive now, and those are not the same thing," captures a quintessentially existentialist leap, affirming that her essence is not predetermined by her circumstances but forged through her own daring choices.

To conclude, this discussion affirms that applying an intersectional lens to these two literary works illuminates the enduring and complex nature of constrained female agency across centuries. *The Mill on the Floss* and *Everything Everything* stand as compelling testaments to literature's unique capacity to perform philosophy, giving voice to the



moral, epistemic, and existential struggles that arise at the crossroads of identity, and powerfully arguing for the right of every individual to author their own life.

Conclusion

Despite the century and a half that separates George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) from Nicola Yoon's *Everything Everything* (2015), the two works of art converge in their profound exploration of how young women forge a sense of self within a web of intersecting social constraints. Through the journeys of Maggie Tulliver and Madeline Whittier, Eliot and Yoon demonstrate that the struggle for agency is not a singular battle against gender inequality, but a multi-fronted war waged at the crossroads of class, gender, race, and health. By applying Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality, this analysis reveals that the protagonists' plights are not mere personal misfortunes, but the direct consequence of overlapping and mutually reinforcing systems of power.

Eliot's nineteenth-century realist novel exploits the confines of Victorian society to stage a deep philosophical inquiry into personhood, moral choice, and social obligation. Maggie's rich inner life and intellectual passion persistently challenge the era's rigid categories of knowledge and feminine virtue. In a striking parallel, Yoon's contemporary young-adult novel employs a narrative of medical confinement to explore parallel themes of perception, risk, and relational identity. Maddy's embodied experience reframes fundamental questions about what it means to truly know and to fully live. Though separated by genre and historical context, both texts function as vibrant sites of philosophical reflection, proving that literary narrative is not merely a vehicle for ideas but a legitimate mode of philosophical practice in its own right.

Placing *The Mill on the Floss* in dialogue with *Everything Everything* through an intersectional lens casts light on persistent philosophical tensions across time. It allows us to analyse Maggie's marginalisation, stemming from the implicit intersection of her class, gender, and non-conforming appearance with precision, without anachronistically imposing modern racial frameworks. Simultaneously, it highlights how Maddy's confinement is explicitly shaped by the confluence of her gender, biracial identity, and medical vulnerability. This comparative



approach strengthens the central argument that women's fiction has consistently served as a crucial arena for philosophical resistance, a space where ontological, epistemological, and ethical inquiries are not just described, but compellingly enacted.

In the final analysis, these two novels powerfully remind us that philosophy is not the exclusive domain of abstract academic discourse; rather, it is woven into the very fabric of narrative fiction. It lives and breathes in the stories of embodied lives, in the voices long excluded from the official canon, and in the relentless human struggle for autonomy and truth. Both Eliot and Yoon elevate their narratives beyond mere storytelling, affirming literature as an indispensable medium for understanding the complex interplay between the self and the systems that seek to define it.

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