

The Exploration of Gender Equality in Jane Austen's *Emma*¹

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ABSTRACT

Before the emergence of the feminist theory during the second half of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, women witnessed oppression, depression, and frustration in their lives. Women rights were robbed, gender was dealt with injustice, and the voice of women was very low in society. Therefore, writers, like Jane Austen managed to publish about women challenges in life and translate their publications. The aim is to raise the status of women and present their roles as equal as men. In Austen's novels we find a skillful description to the thoughts and feelings of people, examining the English social structure depending on the analysis of the self from the inner point of view. Women are seen as completely educated, mature, having freedom to work, and able to express themselves by choosing their sharers. The focus of the research is on Austen's *Emma* and the main characters in the novel. The current paper aims to identify the features and aspects of feminism found in *Emma* and to show the influences of feminism on the experience of the protagonists in life; marriage and social relationships.

Keywords: *Jane Austen; feminist theory; frustration; challenges; skillful; injustice.*

INTRODUCTION

Jane Austen (1775-1817), an eighteenth century English novelist, critic, and social commentator. She was an early feminist writer who raised and gave fiction its modern features. She participated in rising English literature by shifting from Neo-classicism to Romanticism. Though Jane Austen widely wrote about marriage relationships, she was never married. Marriage, for her, is a battle, a struggle for the sake of freedom, and rights. Her works are to some extent, autobiographical that she described her life discrimination through her protagonist characters. The autobiographic elements lie in the sense of marriage refusal, and cultural view to society spheres. Besides the illusions and follies of mankind during her time. Austen created her characters as sufferers to struggle for their rights and status in society. Austen declares that both men and women should have the same chance and opportunity in life. This does not mean inferiority from men; on the contrary, it is to raise women's values in society. This quality of gender is clearly shown in two of her novels; *Pride and Prejudice*, and *Emma*.

BACKGROUND

Jane Austen, in her six novel, encourages social values in relation to personal needs and desires. "Austen presented the familiar theme of women's economic plight with brilliant ruthless realism, as she demonstrated that women were practically forced to marriage" (Rogers:1989, 226). Austen encourages the challenge of female dependency and how they rely upon themselves at the time of the absence of man during the eighteenth century English literature. In *Emma* as in *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen explores the presence of the female characters; Emma and Elizabeth Bennet who married not for money or fame but for love.

Austen created her characters as educated intellectual persons. Education is so important to her that she regards it as an improvement of mind; therefore, she created her heroines with complete education. According to Austen, education improves the appearance of women and gives them attractive views in society, besides, creates self-respect and cultivation which raise women status. Therefore, she attributed the responsibility of the family to women to

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educate their sons and daughters well. Austen called for gender equality especially for middle class women because they always fight for equality.

As Austen creates her heroines virtuous, mature, and smart, she at the same time gives them qualities of flaws and imperfection and lack of luck to show real life. For example, though Emma is created as well educated, she has not completed her personality unless she joined with Mr. Knightly. The same as with Jane Fairfax, she is described as “a very charming young woman-but not even Jane Fairfax is perfect. She has a fault. She has not the open temper which a man would wish for in a wife” (Austen:1977,255). The lack of perfection of Austen’s characters is seen by Dawn Potter through the following: “Austen heroines are complicated experiments in the delineation of human social error, an almost Hogarthian effort to render our general inner decay-and they are greater than Hogarth’s portraits” (2008:256). Potter, then adds : This is “because, rather than stopping at caricature, they coax us into both loving these women as human beings and accepting our inevitable share in their flaws” (ibid).

Much research has been done on the writings of Jane Austen. The criticism is mostly similar but the difference is in the way of interpreting the idea, themes and theories. For example, a study conducted by Anne Marie Preston from Iowa State University (2012) entitled *Language of Control and the Marriage Plot in Emma and Jane Eyre*. Preston has analyzed Austen’s novel from the sociocultural viewpoint. She focuses on the marriage relation of the protagonist, Emma and Knightly, states that this relationship basically depends on social class and gender. Preston concludes that successful marriage relationships may associate with power differences in society.

At the time we speak about Jane Austen’s feminism and her thoughts towards women, there are a number of objections against these thoughts. A study conducted by Marilyn Margaret Butler (1975), *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* denied the femininity of Austen. Butler concludes that “while Austen expresses thoughts and ideas in her works, these are reactionary but not literal, and Austen is not a feminist writer” (3). Butler states that “Jane Austen’s novels belong decisively to one class of partisan novels, the conservative. Intellectually, she is orthodox Her important innovations are technical and stylistic modifications within a clearly defined and accepted genre” (3-4).

Contradicted ideas to Butler are declared by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, in their work, *Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), sum up their opinion about Jane Austen that “For all her lady like discretion ... Austen is rigorous in her revolt against the conventions she inherited” (120). Gilbert and Gubar assert that Austen is rebellion, dissatisfied, and controversial to all ideas against women. We can understand that Austen is feminist.

Another likewise study managed by Cecilli J. Mullins (2013) entitled *Negotiation in Emma: Jane Austen’s Inversion of the Role of the Antagonist*. The study is an analysis of Austen’s style in creating the character of Emma using corpus linguistic analysis. Mullins concludes that Austen succeeded in producing plot with psychological tension and characters who are related to each other and to the audience. This makes the reader feel the change in Emma’s behavior with the passage of life according to different situations in which she plays the role of both protagonist and antagonist at the same time.

A study directed by Aya Nasution (2018), *The Struggle of Women Found Jane Eyre Novel by Charlotte Bronte* is also about women oppression and destruction in general. Nasution wrote her thesis about oppressed women who lived during the eighteenth century. She employed comparative studies between men and women in a patriarchal society. The comparison resulted in women struggle for the sake of freedom, occupation, and education.

Preston’ study, Mullin’s, Nasution’s work, Gubar and Gilbert share many things in common. They are different in forms but similar in themes and content though they utilize different literary theories. All deals with manly dominated society, oppressed women, complex intellectual characters, social and marriage relationships. However, Butler’s study is controversial.

JAN AUSTEN’S PERSPECTIVE ON WOMEN

In her sixth novel, *Emma*, Austen presents her view-point on the way of living and social relationships of women in comparison to men. Her view completely differs from the common view of the writers and critics of her time which suggested that man is dominant. However, the idea of Jane Austen is that women are as rational and intellectual as men. Therefore, she created characters seeking marriage for the sake of freedom, rights, and wealth. All Austen’s protagonists are women with very great and high qualities. In a comparison between men and women, Austen attributed the girls’ faults to the surrounding. She states that it is the society that teaches women, by this, she means that men should be responsible of training and educating women, and this is one of the rights that should be granted

to women. For example, in *Emma*, Austen created Mr. Knightly as the one who is responsible of teaching Emma (Deirdre:2004, 26).

As we previously stated that education is so important to Jane Austen, she considered it as an improvement of reason, and this should be the final step of education. Austen's heroine characters are usually created as physically attractive, aiming at completing education as they lack many things. Emma Woodhouse neglects her piano practice and her education is perfect also. According to Austen the perfect appearance is not as necessary as education though she focuses on it. Emma is created as a rich and beautiful young woman but her personality is not full. This can be understood from the opening lines of the novel: "Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever, and rich with a comfortable home and happy position, seemed to unite some of the best blessings of existence, and had lived nearly twenty-one years in the world with very little to distress or vex her" (27). According to Austen, it does not matter how the person appears but it is necessary to be educated. This means that the inner world is more significant than the outside world.

Meekness, according to Austen, is something not true and unaccepted. It destroys personality. Besides it is a fault rather than virtue. The position of women, as she described it, in the 19th century was very low that they could not express themselves and present their voices even inside their houses. Women writers were not allowed to publish what they write; they published their products secretly and couldn't declare. Austen shows the reader how women devotes their time and efforts to their houses and families but not to society. When Emma met Harriet for the first time she seemed very happy because she is no more than a lady. Emma expressed her feelings, saying: "I suppose you have had a better education than I have, but if you understand anything more of what is going on in the world you must understand how little I know or care about it. You see I am a woman of very small importance" (43). This suggests how women can act inside their homes and they should have an idea about what happen around them. Moreover, women are not called for acting outside their houses.

Gender equality, according to Jane Austen, should begin at home. The family support is necessary inside the house because as she thought it gives women power to act outside and it determines the personality of women. Moreover, it gives them ability to solve their problems logically.

Emma is a symbol of all mature women in the world at the time of Jane Austen. Emma is presented in such a way in order to prove the identity of Austen via fiction. She depicts the experience of a young woman who struggles for rights and offers social issues. Austen confirms Emma's social relationships through certain techniques such as conversations and dialogues between Emma and the other characters; family, neighbors, and friends. This indicates the function of femininity which all modern women aim at. Emma is described by Bruce Stovel (1992) as being intelligent making harmony to the oppositions and her "desire to be herself, her desire for Knightly, and her desire to be good... coincides in such a way that a vision of harmony, not sacrifice or division, reigns"(2). These are some of the qualities of modern women in all societies.

In *Emma* as in most of Jane Austen's works, we can easily identify two types of presented relationships; formal and mutual love relationships. The connection between Emma and Mrs. Knightly and the relation between Jane and Frank are established for love regardless to money because Austen wants to overcome the common thought which says that rich men should marry rich women or at least from the same social rank. However, she created the opposites; rich men who are in relation to poor women resulted in marriage. On the other hand, a formal relationship is created between Harriet and Martin; Elton and Augusta. This type of relation is based on similarity of social and economic ranks. Austen concludes that the relationships which are based on love make the life of the families better.

EMMA AND THE FEMINIST FEATURES

Initially, to differentiate between what is femininity and feminism, we should recognize what each definition refers to. Femininity, according to Matthew Wood, refers to gender binary. It may involve psychological and sociocultural features that are traditionally associated to gender/female sex. The term is used to refer to the "varying degrees of masculinity and femininity through personal identity" (2018:18). Armstrong (1993), on the other hand, defined femininity as something related to "nostalgic tradition of imposed limitations" (894). While feminism, according to him, refers to gender studies appeared as a reaction to the privilege of masculinity over femininity which gives power to man rather woman in society. Feminism is "a social movement whose goal is raising the status of women" (Lorber:2001, 1). Feminism started in the late nineteenth century and developed in the beginning of the twentieth century with the help of the pioneers at that time.

The journey throughout Emma's life in fact demands a deep understanding to the inner world of the awakening woman. From the starting page of the novel the reader can fully understand that although Emma is a wonderful

brilliant character, there are a lot of things to do further which are left and delayed throughout her life time. These things are from the far past of Emma's life. Austen presents the protagonist as such: In a scene that Austen wants to convey to the audience that Emma's life is a series of unfinished actions, she depicted words delivered by Mr. Knightly when describing Emma to confirm the idea "Emma has been meaning to read more ever since she was twelve years old The list she drew up when she was fourteen-I remember thinking it did her judgment so much credit that I preserved it sometime ... she made out a very good list now" (35). These words indicate that there are some actions have not been completed during Emma's life and need to be finished.

As feminism is seen by Hooks (2000) an end of "sexism, sexist exploitation and oppression" (2), the feminist feature in *Emma* is also presented through paradoxes. For example, the situation in which Mr. Knightly talks about Emma, he produced some controversies such as "good books", "very well", "very good list" which mean the opposites. Moreover, the contradictory actions performed by the protagonist implies that Emma works much but finishes little. Austen tries to create a reader that is motivated in perceiving the action. What makes the reader interact with the text is the entrance to the inner world of the consciousness of the character, and slip to her mind because the author's generous enables her to deal with everyday life situations of the character to represent modern life.

The shift from Mr. Knightly's description to Emma into the inner feelings of the character is a technique employed by Jane Austen to show the time span of the change from the outside to the inside world. "The hair was curled and the maid sent away and Emma sat down to think and be miserable. It was a wretched business indeed" (131). Another point is that when Mr. Harriet discovered that Emma is in relation with Mr. Knightly and knocked her conscious: "It darted through her with the speed of an arrow that Mr. Knightly must marry no one but herself" (314). By this, Austen allowed the reader investigates Emma's inferiority, makes the protagonist reveal her inner feelings, and lets the audience sympathize with the events happened throughout the life of the character.

Although Emma's inner affection tends to Mr. Knightly, he never admits to marry any woman. Emma's admiration is expressed through the following lines: "I must see somebody very superior to anyone I have seen yet to be tempted. I have none of the usual inducements of women to marry. For fortune I do not want" (13). Within this context, we can judge that Emma profoundly admired Mr. Knightly for the sake of getting freedom and achieving a part of her rights.

The constancy of Jane Austen in displaying the eighteenth century view on women and men and the relationship between the outside and the inside world of the characters is to prove reality and make her novel more realistic in spite the depiction of some romantic action. This what Rogers confirm in his work "Austen's view of women is to make her action more convincing" (226). Austen created Emma as a woman of formulated goals in life who moves farther than herself, she prefers to control whoever lives around her in order to achieve her aims in life.

Austen created Emma as a married woman but never gives up. She chose her destiny, directed her life events by herself, and guided her own future. She married the man who is similar to her intellectual, the one whom she loved and adored. Emma faced different challenges throughout her experience in life but she overcame them that she used words as weapons to defend herself instead of walls and war shields to stay behind.

In *Emma*, Jane Austen succeeded in using her own private distinctive style to represent reality through fiction. She presented everyday life of a manly dominant society to confirm the idea that says that women are rational creatures, think, feel, learn, and grow. She also claimed that women need to be liberated, from the feminist point of view.

Emma is proud of her successful matching; therefore, she always encourages herself to do so. For example, when she decided to make Harriet a perfect wife to Mr. Elton, she said: "Encouragement should be given....she would form her opinions and her manners. It would be an interesting and certainly a very kind undertaking; highly becoming her own situation in life, her leisure, and powers" (19). The unwitty Harriet is subjected to Emma's decisions that she immediately detached herself from Martin and joined with Elton. Emma wants to impose herself on her relatives and friends to raise the woman identity in her society.

In the light of the description of the character of Emma, Bradley (1929) states that "she has a generous nature. She is self-confident, and she likes to be first; but she is not vain. She is faultless in her relations with her father, and, though she will not take advice from Knightly, her readiness to take reproof and to make amends for her errors is more than magnanimous" (33). Bradley described Emma as she appears, he does not knock the door to her inner psychology.

WHY FEMINISM IN THE WORKS OF JANE AUSTEN?

Jane Austen's contemporaries and those who came after her cried for women frustration at that time. They discriminated social realities and beliefs to deprive women from what is called room. Jane Austen is one of the writers who managed to put their ideas and thoughts in their works. Austen's sensitivity towards women creates within herself motives to write about the role of women in society, their voice, and rights. Feminism to Jane Austen is very significant that she depicted the experiences of oppressed and discriminated women of her time in her works. She always encourages women; her heroines are usually seen as creative, brilliant, intellectual, and knowledgeable. As a challenge and reaction to the traditional view of women, Austen presents her thought of women consciousness which confirm the role of female characters in society.

Emma is one of Austen's intellectual rational characters but she is the most complex woman in the novel. In *Emma*, the focus on the protagonist is seen on mental life besides the link between self-knowledge and social behavior which are dealt with as one entity. The element of feminist freedom is very vivid in the novel that the heroine is torn between her will and her ability to act. Emma profoundly realized her responsibilities which are related to the capacity to achieve things "It is the inevitable feminine features in *Emma* which are described in a rational lucidity" (Kroeker:1977:77). Emma always combines between two dissimilar things; lady and a gentleman; reason and heart; dream and reality.

The 'freedom of choice' is depicted in most of Austen's novels. Austen shows the value of "freedom of choice" when she created Emma as witty, beautiful, and famous in society besides social position and freedom. Emma's freedom let her push against the limits and violate certain traditions trying to distinguish herself from the dangers that threaten the lives of oppressed women in her society. The estimate relations of Emma and Mr. Knightly is seen through her repeated description to the merits and deeds of Knightly. Mrs. Elton is another person who fits Emma and as similar as her view in life. She is described as "a vain woman, extremely well satisfied with herself, and thinking much of her own importance; that she meant to shine and be very superior" (275). Elton's superiority leads her to achieve what she wants.

The feminist perspective of Austen in *Emma* lies in depicting habitual ironies and contrasted actions to stand for the blindness of social views on women in the eighteenth century. The educated woman, Emma appeared in the blind society "Her moral growth is closely associated with an improvement in the respect she accords to her, accepting her social responsibility as a woman" (Kirkham:1983, 127). Emma witnessed several changes in attitudes towards herself and other people who surrounded her. The most significant change is her attitude is her error in perception which is immediately corrected by Mr. Knightly "never had she felt ... grieved at any circumstance in her life" (367). At last, Emma realized that she is wrong and this is reflected in her mental life announcing that she is in need of a man who should stand with her to correct her false attitudes. Therefore, she conceived that wealth is not enough for a girl who seeks knowledge and education.

One of the techniques that are used by Jane Austen to depict reality and to discover what is behind the mind of the characters is contrast (Copeland:2011, 117). Contrast is seen in all of Austen's works. For example, in *Emma*, Austen creates Emma as contrasted to Jane Fairfax. Emma is seen from the character's viewpoint as sometimes unpleasant. While Fairfax is "a more sympathetic person than Emma her-self (Booth:1961,100). Ultimately, Austen succeeded to convey a real image of the eighteenth century English society in her works which is reflected in the image of female characters especially.

CONCLUSION

Jane Austen is one of those who proved her position in the development of English literature. As she is a feminist writer, she presents through her heroines the challenge against the patriarchal society. *Emma* is one of Jane Austen's novels explores the status of an awakening independent woman who is relying on her father for financial issues and married for love. The novel is feminist because it shows how females are restricted and ruled by males whether at home or outside the home. Emma is the embodiment of all oppressed women during Austen's time. She is presented as brilliant, intelligent, rebellion, and rational. Austen asserts that marriage relationships should be entirely built upon kind-ship and friendship, and this is seen in the relation between Mr. Knightly and Emma. Finally, Austen reflects her own life in her works that she was the only woman in her time discussing the logical and social issues of women. Eventually, reason and heart; fortune and virtue are combined in the character of Emma, this suggests what maturity means. By this, Emma is regarded as "a masterpiece of feminine understanding" (Blythe:1977, 14). Austen expresses her view on feminism through the character of the protagonist relay on the theory of feminism which calls for women rights.

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