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Jane Austen's Implicit Feminist Literary Narrative: Breaking the Norms

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Abstract: *This paper was conducted to apprise and depict Jane Austen's feminist thought, highlighting the depiction of women in the contemporary Regency era and her fiction. For the study, first-hand data was acquired from the corpus of Austen's literary narrative in the shape of dialogues and conversations among characters. For data analysis, the textual analysis tool was used. Data was analyzed under the feminist critical theory. The findings of the study show that Austen's novels like Emma, Pride and Prejudice, and Sense and Sensibility demonstrate female characters facing multiple moral and social restrictions. Being in an open conflict with the prevalent cultural and social attitude, they struggled for autonomy and feminine identity in society. In the course of this fight with the social structures, they underwent grave tests and situations, perfecting them morally and socially. Austen's novels echo the idea of women being the foundational feminist element of her literary narrative. She has drawn heroines who were intelligent, strong, and autonomous. All these were the features of feminist ideal women. Besides, the findings also reveal the fact that feminine consciousness is reflected in Austen's earlier novels. Through her narrative, she struggled to change the attitude of contemporary society towards the institution of marriage, female inheritance, women's education, etc., which are prime social problems.*

Key Words: Jane Austen, Feminism, Women, Regency Era, Social Structures

Introduction

Adopting a masculine agenda, romantic literature underrepresented women, arousing criticism from the feminist corners. In the contemporary literary discourse, men were depicted as defensive, progressive, and intellectual, while women were subservient, fragile, and incompetent. Mainly dominated by male authors, women had little say in the literary discourse. Frankenstein (1977) — a narrative collection of romantic literature — argues the sexist behavior of romantic literature owing to its negative portrayal of women based on their gender roles, identity, and masculine traits of contemporary society. Literary discourse of the romantic age demonstrates the marginalization of women, keeping them at bay, away from education and economic and social participation.

In the course of the romantic age, women and their roles were debated in both the corners — the society and the scholars. Volumes of work were produced by authors commenting upon the changing roles of women. Women, too, produced mass volumes highlighting their identity crises aimed at the egalitarian treatment of women by society. Edgeworth (2005), Wollstonecraft (2016), and Robinson (2004) — to name a few — fought for the rights and autonomy of women. They believed that among the many factors which were hindering women's progress, illiteracy stood at first. Uneducated women were unable to realize their rights and could not resist the established taboos. Hence, in the first phase, Edgeworth, Wollstonecraft, and Robinson advocated women's education.

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In order to change the existing social structures, literary authors of the Romantic era, despite having different backgrounds, experiences, and political and social belongings, advocated women's rights, freedom, and democracy. Each of these authors held subjective versions of the social milieu. The subsequent discourse had a grave impact on the coming generations. Bringing to the light of human consciousness, the pro-women discourses produced scholarly theories and frameworks affecting every corner of the world.

The Romantic era witnessed little presence and impact of women in politics. Women were only household wives, having no right to vote or be voted. Keeping them at a distance from politics, education, and economic participation, women were treated as slaves with their prime duty to look after children and household chores.

Literature holds a mirror to every society, giving a realistic representation of its culture and people. Jane Austen has highlighted different social issues in her novels with the depiction of women at its core. She has presented a contrasting image of women in her novels: women in contemporary society and Austen's ideal women. In Austen's era, women had no power. The word women stood as a synonym for weakness and dependence. Austen challenged the norms and presented women as self-confident, powerful, and intelligent, aiming to change the prevailing thought. Austen was a modernist, demonstrating her reluctance to follow the rules. She broke the social rules by challenging contemporary thought and views. Austen fought against the prejudices of the upper class and class consciousness.

Austen depicts the role of women and their status in society. The novelist is sarcastic in her remarks about women who behaved as puppets in the hands of men. Through her narratives, she wanted to ignite women's minds, making them realize their potential. Her novels are her watchwords, demonstrating whatever she experienced in contemporary society. She extended the elements of passion and reason to her female characters. Through her discourse, she critiqued the institution of marriage and divorce. Another important aspect of her novels is her sedition against the established social norms. Giving a voice to the voiceless women, Austen depicted women as self-confident, holding their own beliefs.

Jane Austen — the master of characterization — usually begins her stories depicting women in traditional roles obtained by men in order to perfect their lives. The staunch feminists questioned the position of women in the male-dominated society. Her narratives show how women can change men's minds. In the case of women, feelings and passion were abjectly ignored, limelighting only the institution of marriage.

Austen wrote her novels at a time when women were initially thinking about feminism — a range of political, economic, social, and religious movements seeking equal rights and opportunities for women. Austen and Wollstonecraft are the progenitors of feminist thought in literature. DeLamotte (1990) considers these two forces gravely affecting modern-day feminist thought. Austen and Wollstonecraft both highlighted the depth of women's competence in which they can act independently. Social, economic, political, and religious boundaries existed for women, hindering their entrance to many corners of society. Austen and Wollstonecraft's major point of view was the belief in the equality of women in every walk of life. Another major theme found in Austen's novels is the struggle of the heroines to prove their superiority and grace in the male-dominated world.

Like the mainstream feminist thought, Austen believed that the main obstacle hindering women's elevation was ignorance and illiteracy. In this account, the author has criticized many of her uneducated and ignorant female characters every now and then. For example, Lucy — a female character in the novel *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) — is tagged as illiterate and ignorant (*Sense and Sensibility*, 118). Likewise, Mary Bennet — a female character in the novel *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) — is gravely criticized for lacking logic and education (*Pride and Prejudice*, 121). Contrariwise, Austen has idealized Elizabeth Bennet, Anne Elliot, and Elinor Dashwood on account of their struggles to contribute to society. For instance, we see Anne Elliot is capable of making her own decisions, which is a feminist trait. Likewise, Elizabeth Bennet displays her intelligence and self-identity.

Rationale for the Study

The 20th century saw a rise in feminist thought and philosophy across the world. Philosophers — and

laymen alike — argued the longstanding obstacles hindering women's emancipation, paving the way for the equal political, economic, educational, and social rights of women. Jane Austen — the famous romantic pro-feminist novelist — developed the feminist narrative in the male-dominated 19th century through her novels. This study is an attempt to explore Austen's progeny of feminist thought that has gravely affected the feminine discourse up to this day.

Significance of the Study

This study is ultra significant for the students of critical theory and literature as it attempts to highlight the implicit social assumptions that prevent women from fully comprehending how social structures work. These implicit assumptions produce false consciousness, hindering women's progress in the world. Hence, uncovering these implicit assumptions and avoiding their subsequent worst impact on women will undoubtedly carry great significance in the feminist discourse.

Data Analysis Tool

For the current study, keeping in view the nature and purpose of this scholarly piece, the author opted to adopt the tool of textual analysis for data analysis. Under the tool of textual analysis, the data was analyzed in four different steps, namely content analysis, rhetorical criticism, performance studies, and interaction analysis. In the course of content analysis, specific messages and their characteristics were identified, enumerated, and analyzed. In the step of rhetorical criticism, messages and their persuasive forces were systematically described, analyzed, and interpreted. Under the step of performance studies, the aesthetic value and performance of the text were described.

Analysis and Discussion

Austen's Notion of the Ideals of Women

In Austen's novel *Pride and Prejudice*, conversation among characters gives us a lucid picture of the ideals of women, making them 'accomplished women' in contemporary British society. At frequent places in her novels, we face arguments about the skills and talents of women, then known as 'female accomplishments.' Elizabeth Bennet, Mr. Darcy, and Miss Bingley discuss these 'female accomplishments' every now and then. Miss Bingley states: "A woman must have a thorough knowledge of music, singing, drawing, dancing, and the modern languages, to deserve the world; and besides all this, she must possess a certain something in her air and manner of walking, the tone of her voice, her address and expressions, or the word will be but half-deserved, (*Pride and Prejudice*, Ch. 8)".

Subsequently, aristocratic families pushed their women to master singing, music, dancing, drawing, and modern languages. However, it was a social taboo to make women eminent artists public actresses or entertainers. The demand of society was polishing young girls inside a circle of social boundaries. Learning the female accomplishments was aimed at making women skilled and attractive enough to be privately displayed in limited social circles by the time of her youth. Women were encouraged to display their skills and talents in different private social gatherings. This exposure of skilled-cum-attractive girls in private gatherings was aimed at showing her to society as a potential wife.

In Austen's world, other ideals of women were cleverness, proficiency in speech, virtue, honesty, and wit. Austen has glorified Elizabeth — the protagonist of *Pride and Prejudice* — through these ideals. In social gatherings and in the neighborhood, Elizabeth is admired for her lovely character, cleverness in her opinion, brilliancy and proficiency in her conversation, honesty and virtue in her dealings, and wit in her behavior. Women's learning was aimed at making women useful to men. It wasn't only about making women ornaments but making them useful and polite ornaments.

Austen, in her unfinished novel *Sanditon*, has depicted the shortcomings of the accomplishments of women through the two female characters — Miss Beauforts. The young Beauforts had 'complexions, showy figures, an upright decided carriage, and an assured look' (daily). After this, Austen depicts the minds of the Beauforts as "very accomplished and very ignorant, their time being divided between such pursuits as might attract admiration and those labors and expedients of dexterous ingenuity by which they could dress in a style much beyond what they ought to have afforded" (*Sanditon*, p. 42).



However, in 19th-century British society, in the long run, a woman, despite the possession of numerous female ideals and accomplishments, must find a wealthy and affluent spouse in order to be considered esteemed and ideal. In the romantic society, the principal accomplishment for a woman was securing an ideal husband.

Austen's Notion of Women's Education

"Women were not encouraged to study. High education for them meant deviating from conventional feminine roles".

Through her novels, Austen depicts 19th-century society, highlighting multiple social issues with education at the core. She highlighted the need not only for women's education but also the need to reform it. Inspired by the renowned feminist author Wollstonecraft, Austen advocated female education through her novels at a time when it was either ignored or considered a means to marry off women. Austen's advocacy of female education is portrayed through her well-read and educated women characters.

In the Regency era of British society, educational inequalities existed for women owing to the prevailing belief that women need not be well-educated. Higher education was only available to men. Women were not given any educational opportunities till the last quarter of the 19th century. Studying classical languages was not encouraged for women. It was a prevailing thought that women should learn modern languages, mastering proficiency, and politeness in conversation. As there existed educational disparity for women, only men were best suited to study classical languages, mastering classical philosophy. This discriminatory attitude prevented women from attaining scholarship in philosophy, history, and science, which required proficiency in the classical languages. Besides, in order to manage the household accounts, the society wanted women to learn basic mathematics and arithmetic.

Women's higher education was feared on account of multiple reasons. In contemporary British society, there exists a framework of conventional femininity. Getting higher education was next to moving out of conventional femininity. Society only accepted half-educated girls. Highly educated women were feared, putting at stake the chances of their marriage. The Bluestockings — a group of the 18th century-intellectual women — opted for higher education despite the prevailing social taboos. As a result, they were gravely criticized and tagged as ugly, aggressive, and angry by the press. Highly educated girls were considered unfit for marriage and family.

Summarily, above all, women's education was aimed at gaining basic everyday knowledge and politeness in conversation in order to attract the best suitors and, in the end, become useful wives. For instance, in the novel *Emma*, Austen gives a reference to Mrs. Goddard's school. Austen stated that here, "a reasonable quantity of accomplishments were sold at a reasonable price" (*Emma*, chapter 3). Harriet, in order to display her potential as a wife and attract the best suitors, studies and lives in Mrs. Goddard's school. Besides, as discussed earlier, through the depiction of the Beauforts sisters, the author has presented her contrasting views of the 'shallow women' — the educated but socially wrong — versus the 'accomplished women' — the well-read, socially fit intelligent heroines of Austen. Beaufort's sisters, as mentioned earlier, whose education was aimed at attracting ideal husbands, used their accomplishments to attract wealthier suitors. "The name Beaufort is French for beautiful and strong, but that's clearly meant ironically because it's the opposite of what these English sisters are" (wondrous). Austen has advocated the concept of accomplished women — the well-read, intelligent heroines.

However, it was considered socially undesirable for women to exceed or equal to men in education.

Another prevailing stereotype was the contemporary belief that women are stupid. For instance, in the novel *Mansfield Park*, Fanny Price — the humble cousin — joins the Bertram family; she is frequently dubbed as stupid, revealing the social attitude towards the girl's perceived stupidity. Later on, we learn that Fanny is brighter and more helpful than her cousins in the household.

Another female educational attitude that prevailed in the Regency era was self-study or education without attending educational institutions. Many girls were engaged in self-study, or they were taught by their parents themselves. For instance, in *Pride and Prejudice*, we see the five Bennet sisters self-studying and learning at home, making use of their father's library.

Austen's Notion of Women's Marriage and Divorce

“What is important to remember is that wives became their husbands' property upon marriage” (Sense and Sensibility).

Jane Austen's novels represent the theme of marriage and divorce every now and then, betoning the ideals of perfect marriages. The institution of marriage in the Regency era was bound by legal and social strictures. The pursuit of equality and idealization in marriage was an earnest challenge owing to the existence of multiple customs and laws for marriage. For instance, Lord Hardwicke's Act of 1753 was introduced to break the irregular and secret marriages in contemporary society, which witnessed some wealth-hunting men abducting and marrying girls of fortune. The Hardwicke's Act illegalized such marriages, making the early-cum-public announcement of marriages compulsory. Subsequently, such marriages vanished in the course of time. Besides, as per the act, special permissions were required to marry under-21 girls, pulling curbs on young couples. However, special licenses were granted by the Archbishop of Canterbury to the affluent to marry without banns as per their will through the Anglican Church. For instance, in *Pride and Prejudice*, Mrs. Bennet worries that Mr. Darcy might marry Elizabeth through the special license of the Archbishop of Canterbury. Likewise, to bypass Lord Hardwicke's Marriage Act of 1753, couples who were under 18 and marrying without parental permission headed to Gretna Green — a village in Scotland bordering England, to get married. Marriages performed beyond the Scottish border were legally recognized in England. Thus, we see in the novel *Pride and Prejudice* that when Lydia elopes with Wickham, the Bennets presume the couple to have gone to Gretna Green. Lydia's elopement implies the fact that marriage and romance were not personal choices but rather decided by the family.

Another dominating theme of Austen's fiction is divorce. In Christianity, divorce was legalized by Henry VIII. Thereafter, men enjoyed the power to divorce wives, while women did not. Hence, a double standard and a legal disparity existed for both sexes. However, wives could also sue for divorce by proving some causes like adultery or mistreatment. But that was rarest limited by financial hurdles. Besides, in case of separation, children were given to husbands, which also disheartened women to sue for divorce. Subsequently, Britain experienced an average of 03 divorces a year.

Every now and then, we experience the reflections of divorce in Austen's fiction. For example, the affluent Mr. Rushworth, in the novel *Mansfield Park*, divorces his wife, Maria Rushworth, after she runs off with Henry Crawford. The readers are told that “Mr. Rushworth had no difficulty in procuring a divorce (Craig, 2014).” However, suing for a divorce was cumbersome, for it required proving adultery, criminal conversation, infidelity, etc.

By adopting a reformist and liberal approach, Austen challenged and altered the institution of traditional marriage. Austen's matrimonial narrative focused on the feelings and emotions of women over the materialistic attitude of the Regency period.

Another prevalent social evil was the belief that one should marry for love or money. Despite Elizabeth's abject rejection of Mr. Collins, Charlotte willfully accepted him, albeit feeling irksome in his company. However odd it was, Charlotte sacrificed her feelings and emotions in order to safeguard herself economically. However, Austen's advocacy differed. She preferred marrying for love over marrying for money. Austen's novels clearly demonstrate the projection of feelings and romance over financial-cum-family strictures.

Marriages were more materialistic, carried for financial gains (Thompson, 1984). In Austen's fiction, we see parents prompting their children to sue wealthy spouses because marriages could affect the whole family. Unmarried women meant more economic burden for the family. Hence, marrying them off was deemed advantageous for the whole family, or else a financial ruin was imminent. For instance, in *Emma* and *Persuasion*, we see Miss Bates and the widowed Mrs. Smith facing economic dangers. Wealthy matrimonial suits protected families from financial ruin. Likewise, in *Mansfield Park*, we see Thomas Bertram extending his help to his wife's whole family. Such marriages even protected the most vulnerable segments of society; hence, the pursuit of wealthy spouses was a deep concern for the whole family.

Likewise, we see in Austen's novels that breaching the promise of marriage by a male suitor abjectly



lessened the chances of marriage for a woman by other suitors. Thus, in *Sense and Sensibility*, we see Edward Ferrars struggling to keep his engagement with Lucy in order to avoid the impending Breach of the Promise of Marriage.

Summarily speaking, seeking a divorce in the Regency era was both scarce and only available to the affluent. Hence, in the course of the marriage settlement, economic and social strictures were taken into consideration.

Austen's Notion of Social Rules

"Austen's novels continually investigate moments in which the rules of romance, courtship, and social behavior are tested or broken" (Handler, 1999)

According to Waldron (2001), as is a novel of manners meant to depict, every now and then, we see Austen questioning, testing, or breaking social norms — especially social behavior and romance — having varied consequences, ranging from minimal to maximal, at the end. For instance, in *Sense and Sensibility*, when Marianne leaves alone with Willoughby, people gossip all around. Although they were subject to temporary rumors, the incident did not ruin their reputation because the community presumed they were already secretly engaged or about to engage. On certain occasions, breaking social norms and rules can lead to the ruin of reputation and relations. For instance, when Isabella — in the novel *Northanger Abbey* — attempts to exchange her fiancé for a good match, she ends up losing both, coupled with the ruin of her social reputation. However, Austen's fiction reveals that most of the people who defy rules remain unscathed. Following social rules and legal choices in romance and matrimony always leads to honor in society.

In Austen's fiction, social norms and rules are lastingly monitored (Irvine, 2005). Characters watch and gossip about others who deviate. Putting limits on social behaviors, we see in Austen's narrative rules being always stricter. As a whole, the narrative demonstrates forms of standard social behaviors. Likewise, relations between young women and men are closely observed. In her novels, events, gatherings, and parties happen, followed by discussion among characters. The readers notice that Lucas, Mrs. Gardiner, Elizabeth, and other major characters observe the behavior and intentions of other characters. At the core, Austen has depicted a society where independence is denied to women being given limited physical and mental space (Sulloway, 2016). In the novels, most of the events happen indoors, in the presence of many characters. The story moves ahead through conversations and rumors that both transmit and distort news. At the heart, Austen's fiction shapes a sense of consciousness that one is being heard, watched, and judged.

Austen projects a range of values like responsibility, religion, class, equality, rights, dignity, and honesty (Emsley, 2005). She is constantly instructing her readers on the skills of how to bear others' opinions and mold one's own. However, every now and then, we experience that opinions always substitute truth and are always misunderstood for it. In the course of time, a general affirmation of opinion over truth is projected. For instance, we read Darcy saying, "My good opinion once lost is lost forever" (Ch. 11). Likewise, we read Elizabeth saying, "It is particularly incumbent on those who never change their opinion, to be secure of judging properly at first" (Ch. 18).

Austen's Feminist Argument

Austen is not a feminist in the modernist sense of the term (Brown, 1973). But, when studied deeply from the perspective of critical theory, every now and then, in her literary narrative, she implicitly alludes to the need for equality between men and women. Her novels depict that inequality beleaguered women in the Regency era as they had fewer social, legal, and economic rights. The property was owned by scarcely any except the few aristocratic women (Tobin, 1990). Likewise, the educational opportunities did not knock at the feminine doors; hence, women could not enter universities and formal professions. In a similar fashion, women were utterly dependent on men economically (Deyo, 2016). All these obstacles barred women from progress, keeping them at bay from independence. Resultantly, for a woman, a father and a husband meant survival in the pre-espousal and espousal life, respectively. However, when magnified from a scholarly point of view, it becomes obvious that it is the prevalent social structures and practices that help these prejudiced exercises grow.

After being spotted by scholars like Barry (2009), Wollstonecraft (1792), Woolf (1929), Mills (1869), and Beauvoir (1884), feminists, philogynists, and philanthropists struggled to fight for women's equal rights, achieving positive results. Austen, in the same move as these mainstream authors experiencing all this, Austen girded up her loins to tackle the feminine issues through her literary narrative. When studied from the perspective of feminist critical theory, Austen's novels can give newer meanings and dimensions owing to her struggles for women's liberation. By portraying strong female characters like Emma, Elizabeth, and Mrs. Bennet, Austen set the precedent of ideal, modern, and unconventional women in society. In the prevalent society, modesty, obedience, and domesticity were the characteristics of women. Women were supposed to conform to the different limiting and restrictive social norms like marriage, education, decorum, etc. However, Austen rebelled against the norms seeking independence for women in the different social and legal walks of life (Johnson, 1988). Elizabeth Bennet and her sisters demonstrate this unconventional attitude in the novel *Pride and Prejudice*. We saw Elizabeth defying social expectations by rejecting Darcy's marriage proposal, telling him, "I am a free spirit, and I have the right to choose my own path in life" (*Pride and Prejudice*, 1813). Likewise, through the character of Lady Catherine de Bourgh, Austen proved that women could live a powerful and influential life in society.

Conclusion

Jane Austen's literary narrative depicts an artistic portrayal of women's roles in the contemporary era. While they were subject to multiple restrictive social roles and expectations, Austen presented a wide range of female characters with varying psychological traits surviving different psychosocial obstacles and paving the way for their socio-economic autonomy. By depicting complex, capable, and intelligent heroines in her novels, Austen has challenged the prevailing prejudiced attitudes, roles, and expectations by navigating the feminine themes of love, social mobility, independence, and education in a world full of restrictions and limitations for women. Likewise, this significant portrayal paved the way for an ultra-realistic depiction of women in future literature.

Likewise, the feminine consciousness is reflected in Austen's earlier novels. Through her narrative, she struggled to change the attitude of contemporary society towards the institution of marriage being the prime social problem. The conjugal story revolves around Elizabeth — her rejection and acceptance of Collins and Darcy, respectively. This rejection was the befitting demonstration of feminism as she openly challenged the prevailing societal norms. Albeit Austen's female characters lived a barring life, the watchword of her novels was not restriction or repression of women, but rather the struggle for how women could develop their womanhood in a restricted society. Austen's representation of the social life demonstrates her feminine outcry. This representation is characterized by defining moral life, the quality of societal existence, believing in the interdependence of human beings, and the need for social cooperation leading to feminine consciousness. Feminine consciousness, developed by Austen, meant a psychological perception and social consciousness adopted for the purpose of individual security and collective survival in society.

Summarily, like the many other innovative writers of her day, Austen is a classic novelist much read. Her novels, such as *Emma*, *Pride and Prejudice*, and *Sense and Sensibility*, demonstrate female characters facing multiple moral and social restrictions. Being in an open conflict with the prevalent cultural and social attitude, they struggled for autonomy and identity in society. In the course of this fight with the social structures, they underwent grave tests and situations, perfecting them morally and socially. Austen's novels echo the idea of women being the foundational feminist element of her literary narrative. She has drawn heroines who were intelligent, strong, and autonomous. All these were the features of feminist ideal women.

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