

Feminism in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma*

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Abstract: Feminism today has acquired a negative connotation that associates this movement with fanaticism and misandry. It is difficult to find an explanation why such misconception substituted the real goal pursued by feminism. For centuries women were discriminated and oppressed and it took a lot of courageous females and their sacrifice to bring about changes. One of such women is believed to be Jane Austen, whose novels "Pride and Prejudice" and "Emma" served as the feminist manifesto of the Victorian Era. In order to reveal the inadequacy towards females during her time, Austen has created works where Elizabeth Bennet and Emma Woodhouse became the embodiment of feminist spirit. Emma Woodhouse is a young, rich, spoiled girl who lives with her father. She tries her skills at matchmaking, but ends up dreadfully unsuccessful. The story about Elizabeth Bennet, and how her relationship of HATE towards Mr. Darcy changes to LOVE by the end of the novel.

Keywords: "Pride and Prejudice", "Emma", Jane Austen, feminism, patriarchy.

INTRODUCTION

The rights and freedoms women have today were achieved through the hard work and sacrifice of brave females. One of such women was Jane Austen, who with the help of pen and paper managed to reveal the faulty perception of women in the Victorian Era. While today Austen has received huge criticism from the researchers for her superficial comprehension of the problem, like the focus only on wealthy cluster of society, it is important to remember that women who were born in rich families did not encounter with the problems of the poor [1].

The distinction between the social layers in the Victorian age was immense for a wealthy woman to know anything about the poor. Moreover, Austen did not choose to write straight forward manifestos, like Mary Wollstonecraft did, she preferred to use irony and laughter in order to emphasize the burning issues. It is possible to find Austen's works too light and non-provocative in terms of feminism, but at the same time, the author managed to criticize British patriarchal views and do not offend anyone or utilizing reprisals.

While the details of her biography are scarce, it is believed that Austen became a writer due to her family and education. She was surrounded with intellectuals, books, and progressive thought, as her parent's fostered intellectual education of their children and valued their point of view [1]. Initially, scholars emphasized that Jane Austen became particularly interested in language of a novel, and the ability to appeal to the readers with the help of writing [1]. Her

first works was the attempt to change the rules in fiction predominated in those days. She tried to eliminate the traces of idealistic and excessively romantic writing.

Early in her career, Austen embraced popular methods of narrative and fashionable tools of making the writings more pompous and exalting. The author tried to write comedic situations that would affect the sensibility of the story and to change the rules existing in the literature of that time. Austen was overwhelmed by the ideas of French philosophers and liberation of traditional principles in literature and social life. However, later she received the same moral education her peers did and Jane had to succumb to the traditional view of the Victorian Era. Her early works were also full of fictional stereotypes, like the love conflict or overdramatized daily activities and exalting heroes. Simultaneously, Austen managed to test her talent and to change couple of things in literature. She matured and mastered her talent as a writer by trying new forms of expressing the views of her characters and adding her personal vision of the problem.

Mary Wollstonecraft, who was a well-known feminist and a revolutionary, criticized Austen for her shortage of seriousness regarding the characters Austen was creating [1]. However, Austen was more interested in the faultiness of the social reality; she did not strive to be a rebel. While she did not desire to become in the opposition, Austen tried to find harmony in the conditions she was living.

Several researchers criticized Austen in "Pride and Prejudice" for her inability to create unified

character, but instead making Elizabeth Bennet a sentimental and overly romantic person. She was an innocent fool due to her final decision to marry Mr. Darcy. However, Austen has created Elizabeth's character deliberately due to the time period and inability of Victorian women to choose a different fate. Indeed, she ought to create complex heroines with bright personalities. Austen wanted to show the women of her Era, who had contradicting views and be the part of their environment at the same time. The main problem is that how *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma* are made the feminist manifestoes of their era.

Problems of the study

Inequality of genders is a long-suffered problem that has not been resolved yet. Despite sacrifice of many courageous women and their strong will to fight for their rights, females are still not equal with men because there is only a submissive part for a woman. While in different countries the situation varies significantly, in the Western world that seems to foster freedom and equality there are still tons of indicators that women are not equal. Females are still paid less than males, they are promoted more seldom, and women are sexualized and harassed. A lot of professionals in many fields do not accept a female leader due to their prejudice. Also, women are often perceived to be achieved only if they are married and have children. In a lot of cases their professional attainments do not matter.

At the same time, when this issue is raised, females are advised not to make a fuss and be grateful for the current situation. Somehow feminism gained a negative connotation in the modern life. It is possible to notice how this movement is ridiculed and mocked by claiming that the ideas brought by feminism are not serious. It happens because females are still considered as frivolous and emotional beings, whose rights and problems have to be ignored. Women were pressured and denied the basic human rights for centuries, but even in the conditions of constant discrimination and prejudice towards feminism there are brave women who oppose this inequality.

Research Questions

1. What indicators reveal that *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma* are feminist manifestoes?
2. Why Elizabeth Bennet and Emma Woodhouse are considered as feminists?
3. How their position in life hindered/helped their place in the Victorian society?
4. Why Jane Austen decided to show feminist ideas through these heroines?

Objectives of the study

The current research aims to evaluate two works of Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma* in order to reveal its value as the feminist manifestoes. It is

believed that the main characters of the story, Elizabeth Bennet and Emma Woodhouse, represent the feminists of the Victorian Era. Therefore, the current study aims to assess the development of the heroines and their characteristic features in order to determine the relevance of this statement. The methods chosen by Austen to depict the characters and the progressive women of their Era are evaluated as well to recognize the value of the works and the role of feminism within the novels. As numerous researchers find the feministic nature of Austen's works as controversial, it is important to explore this issue through the peer-reviewed literature and the novels as well. Finally, the study has the goal to investigate the relevance of feministic issues for the Victorian women, and its impact on their social circle, and activity.

METHODOLOGY

In this case, qualitative design is considered the most relevant and suitable for the purposes of the current study. As the main issue here is to research the summation of the previous inquiries and to present a contemporary perspective on the topic, qualitative research can be helpful.

The present inquiry aims to present the further recommendations for the development of new solutions within the current topic. In this case, quantitative research will not be possible, as the questions of the current project do not require the empirical results. Hence, it is believed that the statistical analysis is not applied in the current inquiry. As the research has the purpose to explain the core of the problem and the reasons of its development, qualitative research will be the most effective way to reach these purposes. Research questions indicate the qualitative design as well, as all of them concern the nature of the current problem.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Both *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma* were analyzed from different angles by numerous researchers. There are different points of view towards the legacy of Jane Austen and her works in terms of feminist heritage. Nevertheless, almost all scholars have found a consensus regarding the ability of the author to highlight the topical issues in the Victorian age as well as the position of women from the upper class. While some find her literary language too frivolous and superficial, the others imply this manner was Austen's personal style of writing. There is also an idea that the author has chosen ironic style purposely in order to target the audience, who was not ready for the straight forward manifestoes and fights for women rights that will be developed later by suffragettes. Austen created the stories that, despite their romantic content, emphasize the subordinate and helpless position of women in the society.

Feminist Motives in *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma*

One of the central motives of unfair attitude to females was illustrated in *Pride and Prejudice* through the legal rights of women of those days. Austen depicts the right of entailment in the novel that was restricted for women. Specifically, future ownership of real estate was limited only to male children or, if there are only females, the right was shifted to their husbands. In the novel, Mr. Bennet did not have male children and, therefore, his house in future will be owned by Mr. Collins, his cousin, despite the fact that Bennet has daughters.

In the novel, Mrs. Bennet is terrified of such prospects and the idea that her children will have no right to live in their own house, she says, oh! My dear, I cannot bear to hear that mentioned. Pray do not talk of that odious man. That your estate should be entailed away from your own children [2]. The disability to bear right of entailment does not leave a chance for the eldest daughter to retain her position in the society, unless she finds a husband. Women in the Victorian age were forced to marry as soon as possible to simply survive in the society [3]. It is important to remember that there were no jobs for women or any chance to improve their financial position by themselves.

In the result, women like Charlotte Lucas in the novel choose to accept and adjust to the patriarchal society, who marries only due to disinterested desire of an establishment [2]. Charlotte explains her marriage as the acceptance of the rules in a male-dominated society, where the possibility to survive depends on woman's entitlement to a man. She explains to Elizabeth her position in life by saying, I am not romantic you know... I ask only for a comfortable home...I am convinced that my chance of happiness with him is fair [2].

This citation illustrates the fact that women have to secure their future with marriage, despite their desires and potential. While Austen makes Charlotte to be the opposite of Elizabeth, her pragmatic position is understandable and clear. Researchers argue if Emma can be perceived as feminist work due to the controversial character of the main heroine. A traditional view of the novel regards to the process of maturation every human has to undergo in order to find a place in the society and to be accepted in the peer group. However, such vision is both obsolete and oppressive. It relates to the social responsibility of a woman to adjust to community demands and patriarchal view. In the highly hierarchal and masculine society, a female has to be a subordinate rather than a person with all rights and freedoms. Emma resists her need to marry for certain time and tries to direct her energy to match-making of other women.

It is possible to imply that her interest and intention for this process serves as her unrealized desire

for self-expression and the ability to make at least some decisions. In the end, marriage subsumes Emma to the patriarchal rules of the society and social norms of Victorian Era. Austen deliberately made Emma to be morally and socially improper to the time period [4]. Her difference from the other females was fully recognized when she realized her feelings to Mr. Knightley. It is possible to notice her initial autonomy to patriarchal authority, while her marriage becomes an adjustment to the place in the society. It is true that Austen's Emma ends with the 'happy ever after' scene depicting three happy weddings, where every couple is in their respective place.

By finishing her novel in this way, Austen provides an aesthetic closure, which strengthens an integral concept of necessary social harmony that could be achieved only through social rank and proper position of each gender [5]. In this system, all the women have their proper position under the rule of their male partners, where willingness and happy subjection to phallogocratic society is a must.

Emma does not understand why she has to adhere to social rules, even when she tries to engage into the match-making and coqueting. She argues, I always deserve the best treatment because I never put up with any other [6]. According to researchers, such assertions of autonomy require a better analysis of Emma's character, as it is possible to see a controversy in her personality features and points of view [7]. Emma both endorses the patriarchal values of marriage and at the same time resists to embrace them herself.

There is a certain tension between her inner desires to rule and to become actively engaged in the life of others and her ability to accomplish this desire only through the matchmaking. Overall, Emma is unusual representative of her class gender in the Victorian Era, because she is both a class snob who foster the moral values of patriarchal society and a rebellion who tries to escape the fulfillment of her responsibilities as a wife and a proper woman of her class. She fully realizes the need of a woman of her class to marry and find a good husband; however, Emma emphasizes the pragmatic reasons for this requirement rather than romantic intentions. It is possible to imply that the main heroine embodies her resistance in the form of the most accessible activity a woman of her class can afford. It is considered that the match-making Emma uses for her coping with the unfair rules of phallogocratic society has a purpose to hide her masculine desires to override the destiny predetermined for her as a female [8]. She is openly coquettish and feminine and it is even possible to imply that her manners are exaggerated intentionally in order to substitute her inner desires. It is quite clear that Emma wants to become the maker of her own destiny,

which is unfortunately impossible for a woman of her class and time.

So as *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma* are not straight-forwardly a feministic novel, Austen has written it to reveal the faultiness of the historical time she was living by depicting real women who lived in the Victorian society. The author makes her novels realistic and relevant to a certain historical time, where there was no place for open rebellion and resistance to the strict societal rules. The full-blown feminist movement will start decades after Austen's time. Therefore, the criticism of Austen's inability to illustrate open opposition to the patriarchal society is not correct. Jane Austen was the woman of her time, who could not write about things that were not characteristic to the time period she was brought in.

Elizabeth Bennet and Emma Woodhouse as the Feminists

As it was noticed earlier, Elizabeth Bennet is not a revolutionary, but at the same time, she has her own opinion and bright intellect to understand how unnatural women are treated in her society. She does not oppose to the institute of marriage in general, but Elizabeth finds the marriage under the pressure to be defective. Elizabeth uses her romanticism as the opposition to the requirement of the patriarchal society for a woman to settle down. She explains her position regarding marriage to Catherine, I am only resolved to act in that manner, which will, in my own opinion, constitute my happiness, without reference to you, or to any person so wholly unconnected to me [9]. In this manner, Elizabeth articulates her personal position regarding the place in society. Despite the fact that she will remain a housewife, she chooses to marry for love, rather than to blindly follow the rules of the society.

While Elizabeth's feministic intentions are controversial in the traditional understanding of this concept, her thoughts and intentions point to her desire to disregard the strict rules she was living in. It is possible to mention how Elizabeth emphasizes the equality and the possibility to be equal at least in one instance. In this case, the main heroine advocates for women's rights and illustrates the importance to have equal rights with men, even if it only embodies in the financial and social status.

Elizabeth is both deeply intellectual and romantic; she is feminine and does not oppose to her nature and intention to love and be loved. At the same time, she struggles against the position of a woman as an attribute to a man rather than a partner. Austen uses a happy ending in *Pride and Prejudice* as the manifestation of love and the ability to choose for a female. Austen herself has never been married and the reasons for this choice are not clear due to the scarce information about her life [10]. At the same time, it

makes her to be the follower of the beliefs she encapsulated in the Elizabeth's character.

As to Emma, she tends to be different from Elizabeth in several instances. Emma denies romanticism and emphasizes the practicality of being married to a decent man. Some researchers see this personal feature as pathological narcissism. There is a truth to this statement, as she chooses to manipulate others in order to express her libido by the means of matchmaking. Emma is opposed to marriage herself, but uses her powers to make the others do their duty. However, it is not narcissism, but lack of any possibility to be actively engaged into her personal life. There is a lack of control over the future that every female experiences in Emma's environment. However, Emma does not want to follow the same path, because she tries to realize herself at least in one activity where she feels in control.

There is another explanation of Emma's behavior proposed by researchers. It was theorized that the main heroine tries herself into match-making due to loss of her mother [11]. Specifically, Overmann [12] argues that Emma, in her melancholic refusal to commit matricide, avoids her task by keeping up a metonymy of desire to fend off the energetic maternal thing threatening to engulf her (p. 222). It is considered that Knightley becomes an embodiment of a punitive, sadistic patriarch who suppresses Emma's desire to remain above the societal standards. Moreover, researchers see Emma's willingness to finally settle down with Knightley due to her desire to replace the care of her mother [13]. At the same time, it is believed that her marriage will produce the same melancholia she subjected herself to, as initially Emma does not express any romantic feelings or the desire to marry in general.

At the same time, such point of view tend to be overcomplicated for Emma, as Austen did not develop the character in this direction, neither did she introduce any psychoanalytical ideas into the canvas of her work. It is quite clear though that Emma suffers from her inability to express herself in any other activity rather than match-making. At the same time, she tends to be a strong personality with a well-developed ego for her ability to control the fate of others. Her later acceptance of the inevitable fate makes the ending of the story quite disappointing, but at the same time, the historical time period depicted in the book presupposes woman's fate as a mother and housewife.

RESULTS

After the analysis of *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma* it is possible to imply that there are several indicators making both novels feminist manifestos. While each story was constructed with the help of

different material, they have several common characteristics.

- First of all, both heroines of the novels have their own point of view different from the visions of their peers. Each of the characters is concerned over their future and sees the flaws in the societal approach to women and marriage.
- Secondly, both of them serve as the markers of inequality towards females and try to fix it in terms of their life.
- Finally, in her novels Jane Austen raises burning topics relevant to the historical period. The author shows that even wealthy women do not have legal right of ownership, are discouraged to think critically, and became accessories to their husbands.

At the same time, Elizabeth and Emma are different characters and choose distinctive means of opposition to the strict rules. Elizabeth Bennet is a romantic girl who does not understand why she has to dedicate her life to a random person just due to the material comfort. She realizes that her feelings, emotions, and thoughts matter despite the societal beliefs of her contemporaries. While her mother is devastated that her children might not be fortunate due to their inability to inherit property, Elizabeth is concerned about the prospect of being married to a person she does not care about. By meeting Mr. Darcy, Elizabeth accomplishes her desire to marry for love, not for practical reasons. At the same time, she understands that she is equal to Darcy due to her social and financial status.

Emma is a different kind of woman. She is more pragmatic than Elizabeth and it is also possible to imply that Emma has a masculine type of character that is not perceived as normal in her environment. Unlike Elizabeth, Emma tries to oppose the patriarchal rules by subjecting other women to practical marriage. She refuses to embrace it as well because she does not see herself as a wife or a subordinate. Emma wants to be a leader, but there are no means of accomplishing this desire.

She cannot become a professional in any activity; she also does not have a chance to become someone other than the housewife or mother. Being single meant to be unsuccessful and even excluded from the social circle. Therefore, Emma puts her energy into match-making and coquetting in order to avoid the marriage herself. While *Emma* is a romantic novel that ends with the happy marriage of the main heroine, it is possible to claim that there is a tragic issue to it. Women like Emma were born in wrong time period, as there were no methods to tame their energy and apply it into something productive.

In this context, Elizabeth seems to be more suitable for her time than Emma. Ms. Bennet embraces her duty as a housewife; she does not express a desire to be someone else. Emma tries to go over the top, but eventually adjusts to the conditions of her time. By making her heroines different from the other characters, Austen implies that as faulty as the perception of women might be, they still had to adapt to the norm existing in the community. It is possible to claim that Austen does not make Emma and Elizabeth rebels, because the story will be way more tragic. Austen does not criticize either of her characters as well. Moreover, she creates the reasons for her heroes to act in the manner they do that. For instance, she makes Catherine from *Pride and Prejudice* a reason why she got married. Austen does not oppose Elizabeth to women from her circle; she simply makes her different in terms of goals and thoughts.

It is possible to find flaws in the characters, like Emma's egoism or Elizabeth's overly romantic nature. However, each of the heroines freely speaks their mind and does not afraid to become different from their peers. At the same time; Elizabeth and Emma were not affected negatively for their positions. Both married to their counterparts from the same social class. Each of the stories ended happily and traditionally regarding the norms relevant for the Victorian age. Austen did not mean to create a conflict between the points of views of the heroines and their social circle. The main reason why Austen decided to illustrate feministic ideas through Emma and Elizabeth is the distinction of her personal vision towards the place of females in the society. It is possible to claim that Emma and Elizabeth, at least partially, bear autobiographic roots of the author. As there is lack of information about Jane Austen, it is quite clear that the personalities of both heroines are the collective image of Austen's peers and herself. Austen's novels have the features of the feminine ideas, yet they were still in the form of passive opposition towards the existing norms simply because Victorian women did not have means of breaking rules.

CONCLUSION

After the evaluation of both novels written by Jane Austen, it is possible to see the author from a different point of view. During the process of reading it is hard to notice any opposition to the patriarchal rules or feministic ideas; it is more effective to read between the lines, as Austen managed to encapsulate her vision in irony and laughter. The author does not give harsh and aggressive statements, her opposition is not straight-forward. Austen puts her heroines in the most common environment she has known about and creates the situations typical to the Victorian Era. The reaction of Elizabeth and Emma to the strict and discriminative society is different than their peers, as they do not want

to put up with the unnatural and flawed rules where they can only be the accessories.

Apparently Emma and Elizabeth want to be equal with men and want to control their lives. They both are sure their point of view matter no less than the position of their male counterparts. At the same time, they do not have the ability to survive in the patriarchal society by opposing to its norms and values. Therefore, they both try to adjust and to find a way to at least choose their husbands rather than being settled by parents. Unfortunately, it was the only thing Emma and Elizabeth had chance to choose. It is quite difficult to understand for a modern day female, but in the time of Victorian Era, adjustment to the society and environment was the only way to maintain happy and accomplished life. While neither of the heroines were true revolutionary, the days when this type of opposition becomes relevant were near.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Feminism today has acquired a negative connotation that associates this movement with fanaticism and misandry. It is difficult to find an explanation why such misconception substituted the real goal pursued by feminism. For centuries women were discriminated and oppressed and it took a lot of courageous females and their sacrifice to bring about changes. One of such women is believed to be Jane Austen, whose novels *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma* served as the feminist manifesto of the Victorian Era. In order to reveal the inadequacy towards females during her time, Austen has created works where Elizabeth Bennet and Emma Woodhouse became the embodiment of feminist spirit. Both Elizabeth and Emma are strong female characters who want no one except for them to control their lives. These two girls in Jane Austen's novels want to make their own choices, not to be dependent on social rules and opinions of others, to build the future by their own which was, of course, unusual for women to act like that in those times.

Emma Woodhouse and Elizabeth Bennet are representatives of those women who do not obey and act like they want to, decide by themselves and express their thoughts freely either positive or negative ones. Emma was one of those who like to handle everything by her, even someone else's lives which explain her desperate desire to be a match-maker. I strongly believe that acting this way she felt power which women in her times usually lack. Yes, she was sometimes arrogant, selfish and stubborn but at the same time she had the best intentions and in the end decided her own future by choosing the man she wanted and not that those around her. Elizabeth is a girl with a spice who could easily reject to dance with a man everyone admired just because she wanted to show her personality. Just like

Emma Elizabeth decides her future by accepting the proposal of a man she liked, not her relatives or parents. That is why feminism in Jane Austen's novels is expressed by the will of women who want to be independent in their decisions, who want to go against old rules and prove that every person either it is a man or woman are equal and have the right to think freely and do what they believe is best for them without blindly obeying to someone else's desires and beliefs. Thus Jane Austen's works are a great field to start exploring feminism by the simple's examples like the right of every woman to at least build their love life on their own disregarding ancient social norms.

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