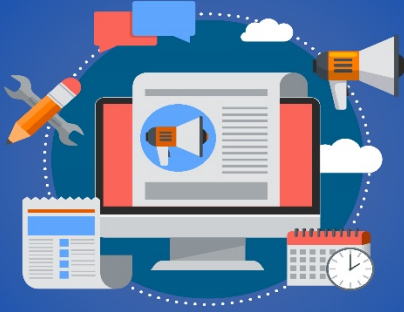


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Enlightenment Feminism and Jane Austen

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Abstract:

The objective of this article is to explore nuances of feminism in Jane Austen with particular reference to *Pride and Prejudice*, *Emma* and *Persuasion*. In the context of continuing debate on “Is Jane Austen a feminist?” my contention is that Austen subtly calls for a restructuring of society in which the limitations of patriarchal ideologies are questioned to uphold greater freedom of expression for women. I would argue that though Austen’s heroines are not self-conscious feminists (as the term ‘feminism’ entered the literary vocabulary much later), yet they are exemplary of the first claim of Enlightenment Feminism—that women possess reason and the same moral nature as men, and are capable of taking their own decisions. In the process, I shall make a comparative analysis of feminism of Austen and that of Wollstonecraft.

Keywords: Feminism, Jane Austen, Mary Wollstonecraft, Enlightenment Feminism, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Emma*, *Persuasion*.

Introduction:

The 200th death anniversary of Jane Austen (in 2017) has augmented interest in her works and generated an increase in Austen criticism. It embraces critical study of her works in the light of Romanticism, Feminism, Environmentalism, Marxism, Aesthetics, etc. This essay revisits Jane Austen’s works to explore pro-feminist character of her world with particular reference to *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), *Emma* (1816) and *Persuasion* (1818). My argument is that Austen subtly calls for a restructuring of the society in which the limitations of patriarchal ideologies are questioned to uphold greater freedom of expression for women. I would contend that though Austen’s heroines are not self-conscious feminists, yet they are exemplary of the first claim of Enlightenment Feminism—that women possess the same

moral nature as men, and they are capable of being governed by reason and taking their own decisions.

Is Austen a Feminist?

In the context of feminism in Austen, the subject of prime interrogation is: Is Austen a feminist? Significantly, this issue in Austen has emanated mixed response from the critics. Lloyd Brown (1973) found Jane Austen's themes "comparable with the eighteenth-century feminism of Mary Wollstonecraft" because they question "certain masculine assumptions in society" (324). Brown made an insightful reading of feminism in Austen to which I shall have occasions to refer later in this essay. Gilbert and Gubar (1979) in *The Madwoman in the Attic* find Jane Austen subversive, covering her discomfort, dissatisfaction, and rebellious dissent with conservative, conventional plot strategies, thereby attaining "a woman's language that is magnificently duplicitous" (169). Margaret Kirkham in her book *Jane Austen, Feminism and Fiction* (1986) makes a sustained analysis of feminism in Austen with two significant theoretical contributions. First, she lists Austen as an Enlightenment Feminist, which means that Austen believed that reason is a better guide than feeling, and she "showed that women were no less capable of rational judgement than men" (xiii). Second, she gives a historical explanation of Austen's ironic subtext. According to Kirkham, Austen's novels appeared belatedly, in the aftermath of the anti-feminist reaction which followed Mary Wollstonecraft's death (in 1797), a time when open discussion of feminist ideas was almost impossible (161).¹ Her irony, therefore, was a way to "say what was unsayable in public otherwise" (162). Austen employs "apparently conservative material in order to question rather than confirm" (21).

Like Kirkham, Claudia Johnson in *Jane Austen: Women, Politics and the Novel* (1988) finds that central to Austen's point is that women are capable of reason and thereby accountable for their choices. While unapologetic heroines such as Emma Woodhouse and Elizabeth Bennet defy every "dictum about female propriety and deference" (xxiii), their rationality and responsibility for their mistakes is the truly radical concept. Johnson first establishes that Austen's limited subject matter reflects neither a limited political understanding nor an acquiescence to a male-dominated culture, but rather, "a consciousness of how the private is political" (xx). Thus, both Kirkham and Johnson find resentment behind the seemingly conservative materials of her novels.

Sulloway, like Johnson, sees Austen as a moderate feminist attacking the restrictions placed on women even as she worked within them, “As a member of a clerical family, she was anxious to spare herself and her family any ugly notoriety, and so she adopted policies of thematic and rhetorical caution” (4).

Critics, who are on the other side of the argument, object on the ground that many of her stories focus on marriage as a narrative goal and she operates within her two inches of ivory with a conventional theme. However, I have to disagree that this makes her “unfeminist.” As stated by critics discussed earlier, her treatment of the subject of love and marriage makes Austen a feminist. Paradoxically, beneath the apparently unfeminist subject is concealed the feminist concern. The opening sentence of *Pride and Prejudice*, which reads “It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife” (1), is not only a satire on excessively materialistic standards in marriage, but also an exposure of the assumption that marriage is a totally fulfilling goal for women. Women like Jane Fairfax and Charlotte Lucas are caught in the whirlwind of money and marriage and are examples of the dilemma of a woman without money. While the intelligent and sensible Charlotte has to settle with the foolish Mr Collins, Jane Fairfax who was an equal with Emma with her education and refinement but money, was almost on the verge of accepting the occupation of a nurse. But that does not mean that the author recommends marriage for women without occupation and money. Here, Austen truthfully delineates the position and predicament of women of her time. She also critiques the implicit male’s proprietary view of women as possessions.

Moreover, Jane Austen was one of the first authors to write about women for women. She was publishing her works between 1811 and 1816, when marriage was virtually the only respectable “occupation” for women and writing for publication was considered particularly scandalous because it propelled women directly into the public arena. When Jane Austen—unmarried and 36 years old—published her first novel, she became an exception to this rule. Kirkham admits that “it will not do to approach the female authors of this period and divide them into genuine feminists versus the rest, for at this period to become an author was, in itself, a feminist act” (33-5). It was an act of resistance, indeed, when Austen published her first novel *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) and credited the authorship to “By a Lady” and the next one, *Pride and Prejudice* to “By the author of *Sense and Sensibility*”.

Also, Jane Austen took to writing novels when writing novel was looked down upon as a genre and was associated with female gender. Virginia Woolf mentions Jane Austen while addressing the issue of genre and gender thus, “If a woman wrote, she would have to write in the common sitting-room . . . she was always interrupted. Still it would be easier to write prose and fiction there than to write poetry or a play. Less concentration is required. Jane Austen wrote like that to the end of her days” (Ch. 4). Austen herself connects the question of genre and gender in *Northanger Abbey*, “The novel is a status deprived genre . . . because it is closely connected with a status deprived gender” (qtd. in Gilbert and Gubar 131). When Mr Collins was asked to read to the young ladies in *Pride and Prejudice*, he “readily assented and a book was produced, but on beholding it . . . he started back and begging pardon, professed that he never read novels, . . . he chose Fordyce’s sermons” (65). In an age when reading *The Spectator* was considered a faculty of mind, while turning the pages of a novel was designated as frivolous, Austen defended novel thus: “Although our products have afforded . . . only some work in which greatest powers of mind are displayed, in which the most thorough knowledge of human nature, wit and humour are conveyed to the world in the best chosen language” (*Northanger Abbey* 25).

Jane Austen and Mary Wollstonecraft:

Mary Wollstonecraft, a representative voice of feminism of Austen’s time, talked about the woman’s question more overtly than Austen in her work *A Vindication* which was a response to Rousseau, and his assertion that men and women differ intrinsically with respect to virtue: a moral disjuncture resulting, according to Rousseau, from man’s natural possession and woman’s natural deficiency of reason. Wollstonecraft argued that it was lack of educational opportunities that would contribute to a woman’s lack of reason. Wollstonecraft talked about the prevailing opinion about women in her age:

Women are told from their infancy, and taught by their mothers’ example, that a little knowledge of human weakness (properly called ‘cunning’), softness of temperament, outward obedience, and scrupulous attention to a puerile kind of propriety, will obtain for them the protection of man; and if they are also beautiful, that’s all they need for at least twenty years. (13)

She boldly retaliated against such perception, “Why must the female mind be tainted by coquettish arts to gratify the sensualist, and prevent love from subsiding into friendship, or compassionate tenderness, when there are not qualities on which friendship can be built? Let

the honest heart show itself, and reason teach passion to submit to necessity; or, let the dignified pursuit of virtue and knowledge raise the mind above those emotions which rather embitter than sweeten the cup of life, when they are not restrained within due bounds” (21). There is no direct evidence that Austen had read Wollstonecraft. But the issues she dealt with in her novels and the emphasis on reason and education of women connect her to Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication*. The ensuing sections of the essay would focus on the feminist elements in the selected novels of Jane Austen by analysing her major thematic concerns like education, rationality, love and marriage.

Woman, Education and Accomplishment:

Lloyd Brown draws attention to the fact that Jane Austen’s profeminism is exhibited in her treatment of a vital female “question”—the education of women—and finds *Pride and Prejudice* pertinent in this context. In the essay discussed earlier, he sheds light on the prevalent idea of female accomplishment of the time recommended by male authors:

As far as those “accomplishments” are concerned, Fordyce and Gisborne are agreed that women should avoid what are defined as masculine areas. According to Fordyce, “argumentative talents are only sought by those masculine women who seek to share the male province of education;” and Gisborne defines accomplishments as “ornamental acquisitions” (dancing, French, Italian, music) which are designed to supply innocent and amusing occupations and to keep the mind in a state of placid cheerfulness. (329)

Mary Wollstonecraft attacks such views of women’s education, when she refers to those books, which tend to degrade one half of the human species, and render women pleasing at the expense of every solid virtue. Her idea of the “perfect education” is “the use of the understanding in the way that is most likely to strengthen the body and form the heart—i.e. to enable the individual to attain such habits of virtue as will render him or her independent” (14). In fact, in *Pride and Prejudice* Austen has articulated similar idea about an accomplished woman in a conversation between Miss Bingley and Mr Darcy. Miss Bingley subscribes to the general idea prevalent in her time and says, “A woman must have a thorough knowledge of music, singing, drawing, dancing, and the modern languages, to deserve the word; 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.” Darcy adds, “and to all this she must yet add something more substantial, in

the improvement of her mind by extensive reading” (36). Elizabeth’s rejoinder is sceptical, “I never saw such capacity, and taste, and application, and elegance . . . united” (36). However, her scepticism is not a denial of Darcy’s norms, but an ironic confirmation of the dominance of ornamental and snobbishly superficial accomplishments in her world. It is noticeable that in contrast to Mary’s intellectual absurdities, Lydia’s animality and Miss Bingley’s snobbery, Elizabeth is a great reader, possesses wit and vivacity and conforms to the idea of an accomplished woman. The “quickness” of Elizabeth Bennet which her father admires and her “liveliness of mind” which attracts Darcy are similar to that superior understanding which Mary Wollstonecraft attributes to sound accomplishments. In fact, Elizabeth is one of my feminist icons. Anne Elliot and Emma Woodhouse are Austen’s accomplished women too.

Rationality and Woman:

As quoted in Brown, Gisborne and Fordyce associated glory of the female sex with female tenderness, modesty, delicacy. Jane Austen refers to Gisborne in her *Letters* (169) and to Fordyce in *Pride and Prejudice* (65). Austen’s heroines refuse to subscribe to such philosophies pertaining to woman’s glory. Elizabeth declines Mr Collins’ proposal and is highly incensed at his preconceived notion of female character that it is customary of female sex to reject a man on first application and it is in conformity with “true *delicacy* of female character” (106). She objects, “Don’t consider me now as an elegant female, intending to plague you, but as a *rational* creature, speaking the truth from the heart” (emphasis added, 107). Brown points out that, Mr Collins, like Richardson, believed that it is “a heterodoxy” that a woman should be in love with a man before he declares his love, though in his case the woman didn’t love him. Conversely, Jane Bennet’s incomprehensibility and the “modest” concealment of her regard for Bingley are perfectly in accord with Richardson’s prescription, but they simply convince Bingley, and the watchful Darcy, of her indifference (197). Thus, Jane Austen’s satire on Richardson’s illogical notion of modesty raises questions about the male’s attitude toward female sexuality—especially the man’s assumption that sexual instincts in women are, or should be, suppressed to a purely responsive level.

Austen critiques the prevalent ideas of female modesty and tenderness in other novels too. In *Persuasion*, Mrs Croft in a tête-à-tête with her brother Captain Wentworth asserts her physical sturdiness, energy, intelligence and most importantly, her rationality with the following feminist statement, “I hate to hear you talking so, like a fine gentleman, and as if women were all fine ladies, instead of *rational* creatures” (Emphasis added, *Persuasion* 72).

Jane Austen rejects a biologically inspired concept of human perception and feeling. In the same novel, Anne Elliot claims for her sex the faculty of loving the longest and she attributes it to sociocentric influences rather than to biological female traits: “It is, perhaps, our fate rather than our merit. We cannot help ourselves. We live at home, quiet, confined and our feelings prey upon us . . . You have always a profession, pursuits, business of some sort or other, to take you back into the world immediately, and continual occupation and change soon weaken impressions” (229). In response, Anne hears from Captain Harville: “I believe in a true analogy between our bodily frames and our mental; and that as our bodies are the strongest, so are our feelings” (230). Now Anne does seize upon this “spirit of analogy” as she calls it, in order to claim that, by the same token, a woman’s feelings are “most tender.” But she does not appear to accept the biological analogy except as an ironic means of turning Captain Harville’s argument against him. Mary Wollstonecraft is more scornfully direct than Anne Elliot, but her argument is essentially the same. Female constancy is a result of social conditioning, rather than inherent “sentimental talents” and she views that a mistaken education, a narrow, uncultivated mind, and many sexual prejudices tend to make women more constant than men. The textual parallels between *Persuasion* and *A Vindication* imply that there is a significant connection between Jane Austen and Mary Wollstonecraft on the subject of female feelings and rationality of women.

Treatment of Love and Marriage:

Austen advocated marriage of equal minds based on mutual love, friendship and esteem for one another. Though love is considered essential for marriage, marriage has also its base in rationality. May be that’s why Emile Bronte accused her that passions were unknown to her. Elizabeth finds that in spite of his being a lover, the marital felicity of Jane and Bingley to be “rationally founded because they had for their basis the excellent understanding, and the super-excellent disposition of Jane, and a general similarity of feeling and taste between her and himself” (335-36). There is no denying the fact that this situates the marriage of Jane with Mr Bingley and that of Elizabeth with Darcy among the most satisfactory of the marriages in Austen.

Emma’s marriage to Mr Knightley is unique among the marriages of Austen’s heroines because she marries her social and economic equal. While the majority of Austen’s heroines experience increased agency through upward mobility, Emma’s marriage plot is completely divorced from the questions of money. Emma’s romantic relationship with Mr

Knightley is “feminist” because it facilitates Emma’s increasing rationality and self-knowledge. Furthermore, Mr Knightley, as the Enlightenment feminist’s ideal of a man of sense—in that he values Reason and Nature in women as well as in men—is considered a desirable husband, and the equality of husband and wife is emphasized. The decision to either accept or refuse a marriage proposal is also an empowerment of which Austen’s heroines like Elizabeth, Emma and Anne are fully aware, and so comes here the concept of a woman’s rights in regards to matrimony. That Austen reserves a woman’s right to matrimony is evident in the refusal of many of her female characters. In terms of matrimonial practices, Emma is an unconventional novel because it affirms the existing social hierarchy in a different way and deviates from the conservative as Mr Knightley is prepared to renounce his own home to marry Emma which is unusual of a man in his rank of his time or any time (364-65).

Private is Political:

The often-quoted conversation to cite feminism in Austen is from her last completed novel, *Persuasion*. It is a conversation between two friends, Captain Harville and Anne Elliot on the subject of constancy in love. It starts with a reference to Captain Benwick, a common friend of theirs, who ceases to mourn for his deceased fiancée to rejoice in his newfound love. It goes on, however, well beyond the personal. Harville defends the case of man and says, “Well, Miss Elliot . . . we shall never agree, I suppose, upon this point. No man and woman would, probably. But let me observe that all histories are against you—all stories, prose and verse. . . . Songs and proverbs all talk of women’s fickleness. But, perhaps, you will say, these were all written by men” (230-231). Anne retorts, “Perhaps I shall. Yes, yes, if you please, no reference to examples in books. Men have had every advantage of us in telling their own story. Education has been theirs in so much higher a degree; the pen has been in their hands. I will not allow books to prove anything” (231).

Feminist theories are one set of manifestations of that dialogue. For instance, the critical establishment for a very long time said that Austen (though she lived through the Napoleonic wars) never alluded to the “great world outside” and wrote only about the sheltered world of family life (familiarily called her “two inches of ivory”). Yet it is remarkable how revolutionary ideas are quietly being nudged into “inner space” here. Arguably, the conversation articulates the feminist notions that the literary establishment is not just male but likely to be male-biased as well, that women have been historically

disadvantaged because of education, history and literature. The quoted passage is “a feminist rejection of gender hierarchy, and a restatement of the Enlightenment principle that the authority of established texts is not sufficient to guarantee their truth” (Irvine 141).

Jane Austen’s novels raise another important issue. This is the role of rank and status in her world. Austen critiques various institutions as they discriminate against women: the laws of inheritance in *Pride and Prejudice* and *Persuasion*, for example (though she is not obviously in the business of criticising the hierarchical structure of English society itself.)

Conclusion:

To conclude, Austen’s novels clearly spell out that her heroines are strong, independent, intelligent and defend their own choices which feminism requires for women. Sometimes feminism calls for a revolution in an apparently public arena as the case of Votes for Women Movement in the Britain of the 1920s or the campaign for parliamentary seats for women in the India of the 1990s. At other times it may happen quietly in the exchange of a private conversation as in *Persuasion*. That feminist theories seem to go underground at times, or speak largely in private space, is itself a comment on the way in which women have been silenced or marginalised at all times and in all places. Feminist theories try to identify such biases and then negotiate them by sensitising readers to their existence and organising strategies of resistance against such biases.

Also, Austen views women caught in the trappings of a patriarchal society, aware of its practices, yet under compulsion to exist in it as there was no way to escape or opportunity to accept. Her novels allow for the play of conflicting perspectives to feature the clash between resistance and acceptance, rebellion and conformity. It is obvious that Jane Austen did not engage with contemporary feminist concerns like questions of androgynous marriages, so-called “new” moralities in sex, or with the socioeconomics of equal opportunities. Nonetheless, her themes are feminists from the perspective of late eighteenth century.

Notes:

1. After Wollstonecraft’s death, her widower the philosopher William Godwin, published a *Memoir* (1798) of her life, revealing her unorthodox lifestyle which led to anti-feminist reactions and which inadvertently destroyed her reputation for almost a century. Her advocacy of women’s equality and critique of conventional femininity

gained the forefront only with the emergence of the feminist movement in twentieth century.

2. Since Austen's Feminism has been called Enlightenment Feminism, it is worthwhile to shed light on Enlightenment. The year 1607 to 1800 has been well known as the Age of Enlightenment. Alternately called the Age of Reason, the age is marked by the philosophies of Bacon, Kant, Locke, Rousseau, Voltaire and their celebration of reason. Speaking of 18th century in particular, Rousseau in *Emile* (1762) declared that boys need education to develop their natural instinct for reason and freedom which suit them for public life. In contrast, education for women should be designed to fit them for domestic life. The French Revolution (1789) added a new dimension to the debate. In Declaration of the Rights of Man, it was declared that active citizens were property owning males above the age of 21 and passive citizens were women and domestic servants. Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication* was a reaction to the prevalent idea regarding women.

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