Abstract

In this paper, the researcher examines two works of Jane Austen: Pride and Prejudice and Emma. Feminism primarily responded to the condition of women in the society. It has two basic premises: one, ‘woman’ presented in literature by male writers from their own viewpoint and two, ‘woman’ presented in the writings of female writers from their point of view. Accessibility to the written word and increased literacy of both sexes meant that more and more women were reading in the late eighteenth century. Their worlds were expanding, and many took the next step by becoming writers. Publications of all sorts began to flourish, and, as a result, more opportunities became available for female authors to break into a traditionally male literary world. With moderate literary and financial success, these women writers experienced confidence and a sense of achievement. Women were, in fact, quietly working their way into the mainstream and exerting an influence over the females coming after them. Jane Austen was one of these writers. The main characters, though, were women who were increasingly unafraid to speak their minds. Austen’s protagonists are females who speak and think independently and are intelligent and articulate; they possess a female awareness that is being focalized, and vocalized, by their own sex. Most importantly, her characters verbalize an expanding feminine perspective of men, society and women’s place in the society.

Keywords: Jane Austen, Evergreen Female.

Introduction

The researcher intends to show how women define themselves through marriage and how patriarchy imposes itself in the lives of these women as portrayed in these novels. Jane Austen portrays women who entered into the process of self-realization and moved back and forth in time through all levels of the process to the top level of making their own decisions about their lives. Some women searched for strength and independence and some accepted their lives as it was. Jane Austen has been successful in illuminating the conditions of
women who are caught in a net of relationships, conditions that are partly created by them and partly created for them.

This paper follows a gynocritical approach and applies a feminist point of view when reading and discussing Austen. Austen’s novels *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma* are re-read and re-evaluated from a feminist perspective in order to call attention to Austen’s awareness of women’s second-class position in her society. Women’s experiences in Austen’s time are compared to women’s experiences in society today in order to illustrate, in some way, the tremendous progress the feminist movement has made. In addition, by examining what Austen reveals about the material reality of women in her time, it is possible to explore the legacy that modern women have inherited.

The social and moral codes of Jane Austen’s time laid a definite pattern for a woman. In spite of the patriarchal nature of society, a major change in the sensibility and sensitivity had begun to take place. Jane Austen was deeply influenced by Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* published in 1792, which reflected her ideas on feminine rationality, status of women in society, their education and marriage. Taking the lead from Fanny Burney, Jane Austen sought to revise the traditions of the novel as a means to authenticate stereotyped definitions of women, envisage themselves anew and thereby provide models for change. The prevalent notion about Romanticism and Sentimentalism so commonly found in Richardson’s novels had no impact on Jane Austen. Her heroines like Emma Woodhouse and Elizabeth Bennet exhibit a gradual progression from a state of naivety to rational maturity. While Jane Austen’s fiction is thus essentially domestic, revolving around love and marriage, which she considered as a means of self actualization.

As opposed to self-effacing, unassuming but firm Elizabeth, Emma is refreshingly lively and vibrant. She is the only heroine in Jane Austen’s novels to be the mistress of the mansion. Jane Austen firmly believed that property has to be managed with propriety. Twenty-one year old Emma enjoys best blessings of existence, beauty, intellect, material resources, comfortable home and happy disposition. She has had the best of nature and nurture. Jane Austen points out the inherent disadvantages of such an advantageous position in Emma’s overbearing and imperious manner. Jane Austen emphatically points out the urgency of women giving up their feminine vices of unnecessary meddling in the affairs of others. If women are to make their way up, they have to put an end to their tribal imaginings and fantasies. Jane Austen is on the lookout for an ideal woman by portraying different prototypes and testing them in varied situations. She seems to be tentatively experimenting with various permutations and combinations of traits in her quest for an ideal woman.
Equality is the basis for all relationships, and marriage, being the most intimate form of relationship, cannot be meaningful without it. Jane Austen’s emphasis on intellectual equality as the basis for marriage is an oblique disparagement of male preference for beauty. Jane Austen is at pains to make her heroines intellectually equal to their male counter-parts. Her stress is on merit, rationality, elegance and moral autonomy. It is this that sets her apart from both her contemporaries and predecessors and makes her a feminist before her times.

If read from a feminist perspective, Austen’s fiction draws our attention to issues such as women’s lack of education, the effects of not being given access to knowledge, marriage as a patriarchal institution of entrapment, and women’s identity. Her fiction reveals the effects of educating women for a life of domesticity, and illustrates that such an education is biased, leaving women powerless and without any means of self-protection in a male-dominated world. Although contemporary women in the Western world mostly enjoy equal education opportunities to men, they suffer the consequences of a legacy which denied them access to a proper education. Today, some feminists believe that because women did not have access to higher education for so many years, they failed to produce great women artists like Chaucer or Cézanne. In addition, it illustrates some of the realities and pitfalls of marriage. Austen subtly refers to women’s disempowerment within marriage and explicitly warns women that marriage is a patriarchal institution of entrapment and that it often leaves women feeling unfulfilled. The issue of marriage as a patriarchal institution has been thought important and has been addressed by feminists because it contributes to women’s powerlessness. Feminist scholars today find it imperative to expose all forms of power in order to eradicate women’s subordination.

Austen’s novels, however, are not merely novels of powerlessness but of empowerment. By creating rounded women characters and by giving them the power to judge, to refuse and to write, Austen challenges the stereotyped view of woman as either overpowering monster or weak and fragile angel. In addition, her novels seem to question women’s inherited identity and to suggest that qualities such as emotionality and mothering are not natural aspects of being a woman. Because she suggests ways in which women might empower themselves, though within patriarchal parameters, one could argue that she contributes, in a small way, to the transformation of existing power relations and to the eradication of women’s servile position in society.

In this paper, the researcher compares women’s position in the twenty-first century to that of women in the late eighteenth/early nineteenth-century. Though such a comparison may be regarded as a futile exercise, the researcher believes that it could give us some idea of the
extent to which feminism has developed since the beginning of the nineteenth century. Moreover, investigating the role women played in society at the end of the eighteenth century could help us understand the legacy contemporary women have inherited. Being made aware of women’s disempowerment in patriarchal society in the early nineteenth century could help us to understand why women were dissatisfied and why they started insisting on equal rights later on in that century. If we look, for example, at what Austen’s novels reveal about women’s education in the late eighteenth century, it is evident that a decent education and certain areas of expertise were the prerogative of men. Comparing this to education today, it would appear that male privileged education belongs to the past. In most of the countries, men and women have access to equal educational opportunities. Yet, signs of a legacy, which kept women from enjoying equal educational opportunities to men, can be seen in the present day.

Austen’s texts could be read as questioning male domination and as subtly suggesting women’s empowerment. Some scholars may argue that Austen hardly succeeds in offering women the prospect of empowerment since all her heroines end up submitting to their traditional role and to patriarchal authority when they marry. This does not mean that we should discard her feminist awareness. Instead, it would seem useful to infer from Austen’s novels women’s second-class position in society in the late eighteenth/early nineteenth-century. By doing so, we may begin to see the ways in which feminism has progressed as well as start to understand the kind of legacy contemporary women have inherited.

Instead of exalting the value of tradition and virtue in her prose, Austen defied it and made a case for feminine rights. While most of Austen’s characters want to marry, they always want to choose their own suitors and marry for love which is something that was unheard of during Austen’s lifetime. Elizabeth Bennet, in *Pride and Prejudice*, is dependent on her family and at the mercy of Mr. Collins who holds the entail to the family house if she never marries, only wants to marry if she can find the deepest love. Society was very patriarchal during these times; men were in control of all monitory assets. When a man died, his money was actually passed on to the closest living male heir and the women were left penniless. Austen did help pave the way for modern day feminists. She had views on women and marriage and women’s rights in general and she made that known in her writing.

*Jane Austen’s Emma* is in many ways a novel about society and its workings, as it explores one’s worth and the position in which they fall within the tiers of social order. To be a woman in the nineteenth-century was, for most, to be at the bottom end of such a structure.
Austen’s novel presents a woman who is of the highest rank of society, wealthy, and in possession of a lifestyle of near complete independence from men. Emma Woodhouse defies the social code which was embedded into culture of the time, and serves as a role model to those of her society. Her views on marriage are unusual, as she declares that a woman should not be inclined to marry. As well as, she acts as the social and intellectual equal of the highest men in society, including Mr. Knightley. Emma is considered a novel centered on feminist ideals, as Emma Woodhouse represents a digression from the social stereotypes that have held back equality between sexes throughout history.

Bibliography