



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 3. Issue.2.,2016 (April-June)

INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA
2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

VAMP OR VICTIM: A CRITICAL STUDY OF THE ANTI-HEROINES IN JANE AUSTEN'S
NOVELS

SUCHISMITA SARKAR

Assistant Professor, Department of English
Dinabandhu Mahavidyalaya
Bongaon



ABSTRACT

Jane Austen's heroines are remarkable in their own ways. In one hand Elizabeth celebrates the spirit of "conceited independence, when Elinor demonstrates the reward of her virtuous patience .Despite of her numerous faults, Emma remains a respectable young lady with some sort of caprice. Cathereen is depicted as immature but a good hearted heroine .None of the heroines characters are without any blemishes. Quite surprisingly her anti-heroines are rather stereotypes, as if born to be tagged as vamps. If their social, financial, and mental conditions are examined properly, in the light of that genial consideration, one can find enough extenuating circumstances for them. This article is an attempt to analyze the social milieu and the predicament of women in Georgian era .By means of that it can be established that the so called vamps of Austen's novel are merely the victim of that particular social system.

©KY PUBLICATIONS

Jane Austen's novels are remarkable for their authentic delineation and reliable accounts of a women's life in Georgian era, their lifestyle, the manners and customs of contemporary society which were indispensable part of a woman's life. It is quite surprising that socio-political issues, wars, revolutions were completely excluded from her writings though it was possibly done intentionally after some meticulous consideration on her part. Her novels demand serious attention only because of the subtle method she utilizes to highlight the predicament of women in that particular social milieu wholly insupportable for the development of their mind. Financial crisis and insecurity generated out of the fear of uncertain future has been prevalent in her novels, as we find the protagonist of sense and sensibility, Elinor in a destitute state. After her father's death she, her mother and two sisters are reduced to poverty and unwittingly become visitors to their own house. Instead of complaining she complies to the condition and convinces her sister that property shifts from father to son not to daughter. Likewise suffers Elizabeth Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice* for her father's property had been entailed and Fanny Price in *Mansfield Park* who is sent to her wealthy aunt because her parents cannot afford her. Eventually Jane Austen's heroines are rewarded with fortunate alliance with their respective desirable partners. But the fact remains that she only treated her heroines

sympathetically, when her anti-heroines simultaneously undergoing almost the same kind of hardship as the heroines do were neglected, castigated, and severely criticized by the author herself. In that particular era so stringent upon women one may enough extenuating circumstances for them. Such indifference to her own sex may lead to opine that she was not quite impartial to women but her idea of womanhood was tinged with man's concept about women. Moral qualities, virtue like tolerance and patience have been the most celebrated aspect in her novels like *Persuasion* and *Sense and Sensibility*, although these are principles set by the male-dominated society. One who adapts these norms prescribed by men and only applicable to women is hardly capable of attaining the true, independent spirit of womanhood. Astonishingly her anti-heroines are full of aspiration and spirit of independence which her heroines lack, and it is for their spirit of independence which obtains no appreciation at all. Jane Austen offers no encouragement to them although they engaged themselves in coping with their own plight. In this context a probe into character of Mary Crawford in *Mansfield Park*, Lydia Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice*, and Isabella Thorpe in *Northanger Abbey* will vindicate and substantiate these statements.

If we observe the age, the milieu in which they belong to ostensibly some genial considerations can be made for them. The Georgian era was quite a difficult time for women. Women were supposed to be meek, submissive, and passive creature marked with insipidness and pettiness. They were subjected to eternal slavery and confinement. They cherished the idea of improving their looks to please young men. A prosperous marriage to an affluent gentleman was the only means to secure a status in society as well as financial stability. The scheme of securing a rich husband was infused in their heads from the very initiation of their adolescence. Incompatible partners and unhappy marriages were welcome in order to secure the lady's future. Like Charlotte Lucas in *Pride and Prejudice*, other women with comparatively less attractive looks were often compelled to choose the unhappy alternative. As she herself reinforces-'I am not romantic Lizzy. I never was. I always asked for a comfortable home....'. And afterwards she confides to Lizzy that she can bear the solitude cheerfully and finds herself quite content with her situation in life. Marriage was more materially important to woman rather than a social institution, for one may not particularly like the way of Lydia's getting husband, but being well married was the precious achievement for women. Disadvantage of uneven marriage has been cited in *Mansfield Park* where the beautiful and clever Maria marries Mr. Rushworth only for his large fortune. Eventually after their elopement Mary Crawford mentions the material point-'For one moment's stupidity Maria had thrown away everything she gained by her marriage' which is so very true in every respect. Such a social constraint related to marriage had often propelled young ladies towards the labyrinth of immorality.

Men and women shared an unequal power relation substantially leaving nothing in women's share. They were treated as commodity to be traded in marriage. Minimal education was provided and instead of sufficient education they were made to learn numerous things only to please men. The notion of an accomplished woman includes the art of frivolity and artificiality, as we find it in Miss Bingley's speech where she asserts that woman must inculcate-'a certain something in her air, in her manner of walking, in the tone of her voice, in her address and expression.' Numerous arts like painting tables; cover screens net purses; drawing, singing, dancing and playing musical instruments were essential for a lady who aspired to be accomplished. In short they were moulded in a form desirable to men. A young lady must be equipped with all these talents required for their marriage. The whole upbringing of a girl seemed to be a procedure of manufacturing marriage material and prosperous marriage was their primal concern. Married women were often allowed to take precedence over unmarried sisters.(the way Lydia Bennet behaves to Jane after being married.)Being unmarried was a not only a shame on her part but also quite difficult for a lady. The helplessness of woman was never illustrated so evidently before William Blackstone's Commentaries on the Laws of England in which he points out the insufficiency in legal system causing suspension of woman's legal existence. He informs that as long as the woman is married, her actions are under her husband's cover. No other man can sue her except through prosecuting her husband. On the contrary a single woman is unable to sue the man who had wronged her. Thus the first feminist, and social worker Caroline Elizabeth Sarah Norton suffered miserably as a victim of injustice. She was possibly the first woman was prosecuted for discarding her

violent and ruthless husband. Instance of her undeserved sufferings can be perceived in these lines taken from her political pamphlet *English Laws for Woman in Nineteenth Century*-'In consequence of the imperfect state of law I have suffered bitterly and for a number of years. I have lately been insulted, defrauded, libeled.....'

Moreover there was no alternative source of self-employment though the job of governess or school teacher was a common choice to woman who were supposed to earn their own living as in *Emma*, the highly accomplished Jane Fairfax was destined to be a governess. Woman's restraint in declaring their preference about profession has been the pivotal concept of Virginia Woolf's *Profession for Women* and she exemplifies how they are denied access to the profession of law, medicine, education. Even her own literary career was hindered in various way, as she received no education of Greek language. Imprisoned and constrained by dominant ideologies of womanhood she realizes the taboo about expressing female passion prevented her from telling the truth about her experience as a body. Mary Wollstonecraft's epoch-making *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* is an authentic of the hardship suffered by women during Georgian era. Women as Woolf mentions it, were subordinate, meek, and submissive. Their looks were of paramount concern. To inculcate artificiality and submissive attitude and not to exercise reason were the points of her opposition. Writers like Rousseau and Dr Gregory mentioned that woman should only be concerned with their natural proclivities of being modest, chaste and beautiful and were desirous to enshrine women as virtual slaves at home. The propaganda was itself written as a protest after reading Charles Maurice de Tallrand Perigord's report to French National Assembly in 1791 which stated that woman should always receive domestic education. On the contrary she illumines the fact that inability to participate in public sphere resulted insipidity and pettiness in woman. In chapter 8 and 9 she highlights the aspects of morality and vindicates that men imposed the burden of morality on women's shoulder yet men also be chaste. And she premises that women's faults don't result from any natural deficiency but stem from their low status in society and insufficient education. In this particular point John Stuart Mill's opinion coincides with Mary Wollstonecraft as he suggests in his essay *The Subjugation of Woman* that education may provide them with best qualities which may after all benefit their husbands. Simultaneously he highlights the insidious effect of having an uneducated wife. In his opinion men put duress on them considering they are unable to take the pains offered by those professions. Mill illumines the fact that women may excel equally as men if they are allowed to practice in those fields unexplored by them. Furthermore Marital laws remained his primal concern of discussion for he relates it to slavery as he writes-'there remain no legal slaves, save the mistress of the house.'

In such a milieu where women's plight is nothing more than a legal slave, they received minimum opportunity to express themselves. Instead they were compelled to mould them as 'the figment of male imagination', just as men conceived them, the archetype of ideal woman, a sacrificing mother, a faithful and devoted wife, a perfect homemaker. Such a concept about women conceived by men spares no concern for the woman herself and critically endangers her identity. Ostensibly women who didn't conform to these norms prescribed by a male-oriented society or even defy them were labeled as immoral or wicked. Susan Guber and Sandra Gilbert in their masterpiece *Madwomen in the Attic* argues that Jane Austen a distinctive female duplicitous voice by simultaneously conforming to and subverting patriarchal literary standard. Her female characters are constructed as either angel or monster. Even the punitive measures taken in her novels seem to be more than the actual crime committed by women.

Spirit of independence in women was criticized in that era and being aware of the fact Jane Austen consistently applauded and criticized the quality in her novels. Once she made Isabella Thrope to exalt it-'My spirit you know is pretty independent' though we aren't quite sure whether it had been the crucial instrument in her catastrophe or her conceit had incurred her seduction. Miss Tingley informs Catherine about Captain Tinley's vanity-'He has his vanity as well as Miss Thrope and he is accustomed to..having his ways. Although we observe a huge celebration of female independence in *Pride and Prejudice* by the actions of the protagonist Elizabeth, but Jane's dearest creature wasn't spared from severe criticism. To Miss Bingley it seemed-'abominable sort of conceited independence'. Likewise the character of Mary Crawford in *Mansfield Park* is the quintessence of the spirit of independence. She is mature, practical, calculative and manipulative, to some

extent immoral in her process of thought but never so in her actions. It is the desperate thought to secure her comfortable future, as Lydia Bennet and Isabella Thrope. If they transgress the moral codes, it would be venial as such actions are done in pursuit of their own happiness and it is us who congratulate Elizabeth for the bold assertion- 'I am resolved to act in a manner which will constitute my own happiness.'

'Harmless little flirtation' is a phrase often applied to Jane's morally corrupt anti-heroines. Isabella Thrope retorts Catherine after she clarifies that she isn't engaged to his brother John- 'Well, I dare say we should all be allowed a little harmless flirtation. 'Before Lydia Bennet's slanderous elopement with Mr. Wickham, it was a kind of flirtation to her. Mary Crawford was verbally abused by Edmund Bertram for applying this particular term to indicate Maria and Mr. Crawford's illicit relationship. But in prudential light it may be perceived that Jane's heroines entertained such attentions too. As for Catherine herself admits that Mr Thorpe had been very kind and attentive to her and she received his attentions with pleasure. Elizabeth finds Mr. Wickham so suave in demeanor that she instantly falls for his charms if not for him. Emma Woodhouse falls for Frank Churchill being unaware of her true emotions. These are instances of pretention of love after all.

Immoral behavior, extramarital affairs, illicit relationships resulted from unhappy nuptials, the baffled attempt of capturing opulent partners, and finally the restraint imposed on women. Society offered little opportunity to express their view or even their consent of a proposed marriage. As we find in *Mansfield Park* the half willing Maria Bertram marries Mr. Rushworth considering his fortune, not his disposition adverse effects of such an uneven marriage revealed itself only after Maria's elopement with Mr. Crawford, an adulterous villain. Her reputation is ruined by the action performed under sudden impulse of the moment. She is discarded by her family only her aunt Mrs. Norris accompanied her in her deplorable plight. Another instance of a romantic elopement occurred in *Pride and Prejudice* where Lydia Bennet elopes with the infamous scoundrel Mr. Wickham while embarking on the adventure of elopement she has the least idea that Wickham may not marry her and after taking advantage of her she may be left in disgrace. Being immature she only beamed in joy whenever he thought that she had done that which her elder sisters were incapable of. Lydia Bennet is not to be blamed for her irrational or immoral behavior all the time her intention was to secure an affluent partner by hook or crook though she might have been unaware of what danger lurks behind such undertakings. She had the least idea that it is not only her reputations she is jeopardizing but the possibility of a good marriage of other Bennet sisters had been materially damaged by Lydia's "one moments stupidity". Lady Catherine de Borough's words though Sir William Collins' lips were apt in this context- "for who will connect themselves to such a family". Apart from Lydia's immaturity there was another reason behind her rash behavior. Her father's estate was entailed and after his demise the entire property would be possessed by Mr. Collins. One of the sisters had to marry very well to raise the fortunes of other's sisters. Mrs. Bennet had been depicted as a mother obsessed the thought of marrying their daughters. It was her behavior that infused the idea of "Officers in Lydia's head". In marrying Mr. Wickham she intended to secure a social position ensure the fortune of the Bennet's simultaneously. She may be to some extent a simpleton but the idea of marriage which moulded her character was propagated by the phallogocentric society. Though society "may not particularly like her way of getting husbands" but she was instigated by these social norms all the time.

Likewise Isabella Thorpe in *Northanger Abbey* the beautiful, vivacious friendly lady suffers from a destitute status. Her character is tainted with particular affectations and conceit peculiar to people of fashionable society in Bath. She is a charming lady without any fortune to fulfill the necessities of life and retain a social standard she is supposed to marry a man of large fortune. Initially she mistakes James Morland for a young man of large fortune and engages herself to enthrall him. Later she realizes that James isn't rich at all. Immediately she alters her affection to Captain Tinley, a man of large fortune. She rationalizes her shift towards a better alternative with these words- 'And if no one were allowed to change their mind where would we all be?' Unfortunately in this husband hunting game Isabella falls prey to the vicious design of Captain Tinley. She is exploited, deceived and left in disgrace. If her situation in life hadn't urged her, she wouldn't have been so desperate to choose path of immorality.

Mary Crawford of *Mansfield Park* is often represented as manipulative, and immoral. She inspires admiration of men making women envious. She talks to amuse. She is accomplished in music, plays her harp fabulously. Such a woman possesses the quality to manipulate as she considers the pros and cons of a secured future. Because of her stepfather's ill manners she must settle as soon as possible. Being practical she considers money to be the best recipe of happiness, as she herself relates-'A large income is the is the best recipe I ever heard of happiness. She is profoundly shallow because the fashionable society of Bath requires the quality of being shallow. She perceives matrimony as "all deceit and disappointment" and she must be shallow in order to deceive as "they are more likely to be deceived than disappointed. 'To capture a wealthy husband is no strategy but "only the use of our natural powers". After entering Mansfield's Park she decided to bewitch the elder Bertram. Later her attentions diverted to Edmund with she broke off after realizing that he is determined to be a clergyman. Obviously she decided so after some material considerations. Though she later was desirous to marry Edmund but Henry Crawford's scandalous elopement damaged the possibility of proposed marriage. The shocking revelation of Edmund concerning Mary Crawford highlights the features of her characters which do not conform to the traditional notions of an ideal woman. First of all the point of Edmund's objection was lack of modesty in her as she discusses the situation without the embarrassments he feels for a woman. Here again the long cherished notions of a male mind is shattered by Mary's individualistic approach. Edmund's shock increases with Mary's use of the folly for the scandalous elopement as it dilutes the gravity of the offence and also displays how trivially he deals with morality. Apart from morality Mary tried to calm Maria's discontent with more value. Mary realizes from the beginning that Maria was displeased with Mr. Rushworth. She believes that I suppose morality is no excuse for a woman's being in a constant plaintive state. Though she calls it a folly but it does not mean that she promote their actions throughout the discussion Mary's intention was to extenuate his brother's offence. Immediately she offers a less moral but practical solution. She asks Edmund to let Henry and Maria marry so that they can secure some footing in society. Her frank open behavior and expression of her true 'woman's self' dilapidated Edmund's notion of woman. He said, "the woman, I thought I love does not exist. She was a figment of my imagination."

After discussing the predicament of the anti-heroines in Jane Austen's novels we may confirm ourselves into the conclusion that Jane Austen herself was not impartial in describing female characters. Her notions are much influenced by that of patriarchal society which are often imposed on each and every woman from the very beginning of their adolescence and are supposed to bear these burdens till death.

Works cited

- Austen, Jane *Pride and Prejudice*, Norton Critical Editions, 3rd Edition
 _____., *Mansfield Park*, Penguin Classics, reissue edition
 _____., *Northanger Abbey*, Lady Susan, The Watsons, Sanditon (Oxford World's Classics) reissue edition.
 _____., *Sense and Sensibility*, Penguin Classics, reissue edition
 Wollstonecraft, Mary *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, <http://www.bartleby.com/144/>
 Mill, John Stuart *The Subjection of Women*. www.earlymoderntext.com/assets/pdfs/mill18..7.pdf
 Woolf, Virginia *Profession for woman*. iws.collin.edu/grooms/wl2woolf.pw.pdf
 Gubar, Susan and Gilbert, Sandra *The Mad Woman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and The Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination* (Yale University Press, New Haven, 1979)
 Vickary, Amanda *The Gentleman's Daughter: Woman's Lives in Georgian England*, Yale Nota Bene, New Edition
 Blackstone, William *Commentaries on the laws of England*. www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/30802?msg=welcome_stranger
 Laurea, Tesi di *Anti-Heroines in Jane Austen's Novels*.
<http://dspace.unive.it/bitstream/handle/10579/1503/812709-1156856.pdf?sequence=2>
 Norton, Caroline *English Laws for Women in Nineteenth Century*.
<http://digital.library.upenn.edu/women/norton/elfw/elfw.html>