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PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN CHARACTERS IN JANE AUSTEN'S NOVEL- *EMMA*

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ABSTRACT

This paper is an attempt to explore the feministic approach of Jane Austen in portraying women characters in the novel Emma. It is also an effort to understand the position of the female characters in the novel and society. A sublime component will be on the patriarchal insinuation in the novel Emma. The characters will be assessed as individual entities represented by the author. The paper will base the characters on feministic criticism. Focus on Austen and similar female writers will be drawn to understand their judgement on patriarchy.

Keywords: Feministic approach, patriarchy, feministic criticism, Jane Austen

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This research paper intends to explore the topics further with reference to the novel Emma written by Jane Austen originally published in the year 1815. The novel allows female characters to rise as unique individuals than single dimension type with apparent characteristics found in the literary canon. The paper uses the feministic approach as Austen's novels revolve around women-centred themes. This provides an opportunity to understand works written by women for women (Fetterley, 1978).

The young Emma known as a spirited and resourceful woman buzzes around the society of Highbury. The character has constantly misjudged societal affairs and her judgements have frequently been criticised by the male counterparts. As a result, her decisions were put to test by the consequences. The character does not exhibit an idealised projection for man's desire nor is it of man's resentment. Emma is not predictable as she is a voice of the writer.

The novel Emma is a beautiful blend of the Romantic essence with the observations of problems of real world while keeping the style and tone in correspondence with the Age as well as the issues. The similarity between Emma and Elizabeth Bennett (Austen, 1813) is that their personalities give the book some verisimilitude. Austen and many women did not enjoy the role and labels being assigned to them by others (Brown, 1973). Emma and other characters of Austen are good examples of this disposition. Many characters of Austen like Ms Bates, Mrs Bennett, and Harriet Smith have distinct modes of feelings. Each character represents a role assigned by their judgement and experience. Emma voices about her opinions and decides to act based solely on her interest and judgement. Ms. Bates is an old spinster who is clever in her methods to live off her neighbours in Highbury. Although she can be found peculiar, Ms. Bates still has an active participation in social

events which can be attributed to her unique sense of judgement and perception. Jane Fairfax is secretive but strong enough to establish her marriage and is mature to understand her position and accomplishments. Did they all choose the same medium of speech and action? Some are subtle and some evident, but all decided their own destiny. This is the irony in Austen's female characters. They are all unique and decisive, but chose what Patriarchy wanted.

The times recognized Austen as an essential figure in expressing the frustrations of the rigid and sexist societal order. But Feminist critic Julia Prewitt Brown is vividly uncomfortable with the view of Austen's "cowardly accommodations" with the patriarchal order. However, the opposing views- feministic expression and accommodation with patriarchal order have in common is the tendency to make the patriarchal order Austen's essential subject matter from a 'female perspective'. A concern of 'Gynocritics', a term introduced by the literary critic and feminist Elaine Showalter for dealing with works written by women in all aspects and in all literary form, is to identify the feminine subjects. The world of Austen provides us with major concerns faced by women such as birth, nurturing, mother-daughter, woman-woman understanding and many others. In Emma, Mrs. Weston assumed the role of surrogate mother towards Emma. The mutual respect between each other shines a light on female understanding. Similarly, the relationships between Emma and Harriet Smith, Jane Fairfax and her grandmother Mrs. Bates all portray various female understandings.

Austen's views resonate with the sub-community of women writers with her portrayal of female knowledge. The profoundness in it is against the recognition of women as mere objects of the time. Emma is an example of a confident woman who is aware of her integrity and not afraid to use them even when it was scandalous. Ms. Bingley (Austen, 1813) also chooses to conquer her status and did what she thought was right. Ms. Bingley's non-platonic approach towards Mr. Darcy, disregard towards the Bennet family, and dismissal of their social etiquettes are nothing but products of her thoughts. The story of *Pride and Prejudice* did not justify Ms. Bingley's behaviour, but she was another victim of patriarchy who used femininity to pursue her interests. Elizabeth Bennett (Austen, 1813) is another character of sound mind and independent taste. Bennett did not undergo conventional education for women at the time, in fact, neither did her sisters. The above illustrations show the characters in feministic approach chosen by Austen. None of them were conventional enough to compliment a man. On a similar note, Simone de Beauvoir talks about the cultural identification of women as "negative object" or "other" to man as a dominating subject who is assumed to represent humanity in general (Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 1949).

### **Women Writers**

Women during late Eighteen hundred and Early Nineteen hundred had to wait few decades before a drastic change in societal ideas about women took place. Mary Wollstonecraft, a pioneer of feminism in English writing, refused to accept that women were less capable of reason than men. In her work, *Vindication of Rights of Women*, chapter IV: Observations on the State of Degradation to Which Woman Is Reduced by Various Causes, author Wollstonecraft wrote about the objectification and neglect of women's true nature (Wollstonecraft, 1792). Wollstonecraft also expands on patriarchal denial of women not having proper judgement due to lack of reason as the male counterpart suffice them to mere presence of physical beauty and neglect having a correct opinion. If looked upon closely, Jane Austen's Emma is a twenty-one-year-old woman constantly being criticised by a man sixteen years older than her for deducing events incorrectly. Emma's deduction and actions, be it right or wrong unfolded the events accordingly and brought things to light. When we read between the lines, we can see a sensible man denying an opinion altogether. Wollstonecraft and Austen share solidarity on the terms that a woman was denied of independent judgement. Prominent female authors like Charlotte Bronte, Emily Bronte, George Meredith, and Elizabeth Gaskell shared a similar harmony. The decision of Jane Eyre to seclude herself from Rochester after his betrayal and her eventual return were purely her decision based on her thinking, feeling, valuing, and perceiving oneself and outer world (Bronte, 1847). The decision of Catherine intending to marry Edgar instead of Heathcliff pertains to feministic issues addressed from a woman's point of view about social respect and marital fulfilments unconceived by a man (Bronte E. , 1847).

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In conclusion, unlike the female characters of most novels in the canon at that time - Austen's were dimensional. Austen unveiled some explicit social taboos and conventions restricted upon women with the chosen modes – irony and ambivalence making it difficult to determine Austen's true intentions. Marriage remained a climatic culmination than closing of book reminding readers of the priorities put upon women. The slow shift in Emma Woodhouse and Harriet Smith's lives mark a beginning towards the domestic duties of wifehood. The ironic ending puts the patriarchal expectations and objectification of women into limelight and asks the readers the depth the portrayals can go to reveal a characters' true intentions.

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