



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol.2.S.1.,2015

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

WOMEN ISSUES IN JANE AUSTEN AND GEORGE ELIOT NOVELS

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ABSTRACT

The paper focuses on analysis of issues based on women characters in the novels of Jane Austen and George Eliot. In the first part the status of women in Victorian society and the impact of social, political system on the writing is briefly given. The main part of the paper relates to peculiarities of female characters, female relationship, social class, marriage, inner conflict that gone through weakness to wisdom, oppression and rebellion of women in society that are widely reflected in both novelists' novels,. It also traces that both novelists mainly deals with the changes in portrayal and attitudes of women characters in their novels according to the degree they went against existing social norms, perceptions about women and morals. Thus evidences that Jane Austen and George Eliot are not only prolific writers but also Feminist writers. They used their works of fictions as tool to voice their concern about the women role and gender conflict in society. As literate women, both novelists created female figures in order to prove that women are also endowed with wisdom and they are capable of being reasonable and rational. Lastly it brings out that both novelist bravely challenge the society and support women in term of marriage, education, occupation and devotes to writing career from the perspective of women by an attempt to reflect their position by a share thematic focus on their drawback, decision and stance against the harsh system of society.

Article Info:

Article Received:10/04/2015

Revised on: 15/04/2015

Accepted on: 19/04/2015

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Victorian middle-class women had a difficult task in their life: they were supposed to conform to the ideal imposed on them by generations of their ancestors. They were expected to be domestic, unworldly, innocent creatures, even helpless in matters outside the domestic sphere. On top of all those necessary qualities, Victorian women should have been also "accomplished, demure and pious" (Peterson 677-678). George Eliot was not an exception in this matter: the question of the social status of women and of the manner in which they were generally looked at represented a significant topic in her writings Jane Austen, however, focuses basically on a portrayal of the middle-class and upper-middle-class way of life – the topic she

knew most about. She closely depicts everyday life of members of rural middle-class society, its hardships and gaieties; describes a strict system of social and moral rules dominating people's lives in that period, a women's position in that system, female life expectations; shows efforts of some trying to break established boundaries in order to improve their social status; adverts to social dangers that might ruin especially women's lives forever. Thus their novels are set apart from other novels of the Victorian age which dealt with more conventional women and did not specifically treat women's status in society as an important issue.

Nevertheless Jane Austen and George Eliot were the prolific women writers as well as the Feminist writers who earned a place in the History of English Literature. They used their work or fiction as the tool to voice their concern about the women role and gender conflict in society. As an English novelist, Jane Austen works on romantic fiction and set among the landed gentry. Her realism and biting social commentary has gained her historical importance among the scholars and critics. She portrayed women in dominant role in her novels as a result of her personal independent and rejection of marriage in her life. Though her plot, fundamentally comic highlights the dependence of women on marriage to secure social standing and economic security. Indeed, she was an early feminist who tried to hide it by the used of satire and irony.

"It is truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of good fortune must he is in want of a wife". This bold statement made in *Pride and Prejudice* that a men "must be in need" of a women, clearly state a feminist view.

Austen's portrayal of character is as accurate, amusing, and enlightening. Even as her works delight, they also instruct. They too travel the path of emotional and moral growth. While Austen's novels are not explicably Christian, her characters live by and seek to change into people guided by Christian standards of truth, charity, and self-control.

George Eliot was born, as Mary Anne Evan, in 1819 in Warwickshire. During that period, it was difficult to obtain a position of female writer and that is why she decides to begin her career under the pen name George Eliot. Eliot's works dwell on the topic about women in the rural areas whose right are repressed and too powerless to the position assert their own. Eliot's characters are realistic because she writes human nature perfectly. Eliot's work is obviously based on the Christian tradition. Eliot addresses the concerns women have in education and in being considered property.

Relationship between the female characters is one of the main topics analysed by the novelist Jane Austen and George Eliot. The female characters compete and cooperate in maintaining human relationship. One possibility that frequently occurs is the female characters compete for male attention or marriage or to conform to gender norm as the reputation of one family member reflect back upon the whole family. However, in the early novels of Jane Austen, the possibility of exclusive female friendship is not destroyed by marriage. The distinction can be seen in novel *Sense and Sensibility* which presents female friendship in most positive form while in *Mansfield Park* in its most negative way. Marianne of *Sense and Sensibility* learns controls through her sister Elinor's guide in deed and words. They have a strong friendship at the beginning but almost diluted at the end by their marriage. The female relationship is allowed to escape and emphasises on the growth and development towards endogamy of the partner within it. While in *Mansfield Park*, the two women Fanny Price and Mary Crawford are presumed friends but are proved enemies. The two women struggle for the same men and consequently struggle between the two set of qualities, they embodies and finally destroyed their relationship.

Likewise in *Northanger Abbey*, the heroines of sensibility, Catherine Morland takes as her friend and guides artful young women Isabella Thrope. But she finds that Isabella is a false guide and moves from friendship to an adult affectionate marriage of female friendship. Again in novel *Persuasion*, Anne Eliot and Louisa Musgrove are opposed in qualities but not complementary. Though supportive loving relationship does exist between them, they end up competing with and suffering because of romantic heterosexual relationship as such in *Pride and prejudice*. Nevertheless, the plot of *Sense and Sensibility* and *Mansfield Park* suggests that Austen was using her double heroines with awareness of their implication. And that it is important to note that there is no such thing as universal sisterhood from the study of female relationship in Literature.

George Eliot's novels too, the supportive and loving relationship proves itself to be truly rare as such between Lucy and Maggie in the *Mill on the Floss*. Maggie continual effort to resist the drive towards competition kept her and Lucy together even when Lucy is overcome by emotion and could not give up Stephen's love for Maggie and Maggie did for her. Besides supportive and loving relationship, George Eliot portrays a pattern that relationship between women works to subvert the conventional structural imperative. Dinah Morris in *Adam Bede*, gives full support to Hetty to find forgiveness after having abandoned her new born baby. In *Middlemarch* too, Eliot project a different kind of female relationship within Dorothea and Celia's relationship as structuring the larger moral and philosophical issues.

Furthermore, both novelists dealt with the subject of marriage as the only desirable end for women in the Victorian age. However dealing with the same theme, they inherited different concept regarding marriage. Jane Austen inherited the form of traditional marriage plot which upholds the cultural values associated with an ideal marriage in 18<sup>th</sup> cent. And to advance the marriage plot she used her own social critique, both idealistic and cynical approaches, of marriage. Such as in *Pride and Prejudice*, the failure of Charlotte Lucas and Lydia Bennet bolsters the ideal marriage of Elizabeth but the two foils serve as cynical warning about social realities. On the other hand, George Eliot transcended the staid Victorian convention and anticipated the revision of social attitude towards marriage that would carry England into the Modern age. The sexual overtones of modern marriage in which sexuality, shifting gender roles and dismissal of social class are the applicable aspect, lead English fiction into new area of experience. George Eliot, perhaps, exploits a new variety of romance for realist purposes. In her novels *Daniel Deronda*, *Romola*, *Middlemarch*, *Felix Holt*; *Dorothea*, *Rosamond*, *Eustacia* and *Tess* all fail in their marriage and suffer the consequence of their choice afterwards. Dorothea suffers from her romantic of Casaubon, Rosamond's and Eustacia's illusion are not actualized. Tess is abandoned by her husband due to the sexual double standard of male dominated society. And that marriage result in disillusionment because the female characters either have illusion about their partner or build wrong assumption regarding the role of husband and wife. Thus in all the three novels *Felix Holt*, *Romola* and the *Mill on the Floss*, there is a new fangled approach towards the theme of marriage. Another significance difference in the treatment of marriage is that Austen's novels end with a happy marriage while Eliot focuses on the relationship after marriage such as in *Daniel Deronda*.

Nonetheless, the struggle of Female characters who often gone through from weakness to wisdom in their lives are vividly brought to light by both novelists. As a realist, Jane Austen imbibed both good and bad virtues. The style of representation is not necessarily biting or cynical or satiric, but there is criticism of idealized virtue. She praises the female characters that are sensible under the influence of morality. In *Northanger Abbey*, Catherine waits for her future father in law's blessing on her match as good and prospers. In *Mansfield Park*, Elinor obeys her tyrannical father and does not marry the man she is strongly attached too until she gained the consent of her father. Then in *Dashwood sisters*, Austen provides an example of why it is shame women dependent on man for the support. And Elizabeth blinded by folly and by what she wished, shows that how easy it is for quick women to rely on cleverness instead on good judgement. George Eliot, on the other hand, integrates her characters within society which functions according to certain rules and regulations. She believes in humanity and secular understanding of morality in which man has a potential for moral growth and responsibility. There are several instances in George Eliot's novels where both female and male characters dedicate their time in helping others. In *Romola*, the female protagonist changes her mind and return home to help the needy even though she has been betrayed by her husband. In the *Mill on the Floss*, Maggie struggles for some personal identity other than the strictly feminine one. However, by the end, Maggie has apparently found fulfilment in passive submission in Male superiority. Similarly in *Middle March*, Dorothea quest for some greater meaning in life than the cloistered marriage of gentlewomen in an idealized marriage with Will Ladislaw with reference to her goodness like perfection. Then with *Rosamond* and *Gwendolen*, Eliot probes the usual stereotype of the evil women to show that there are victim of repressive society. But *Gwendolen* does change and remove from one role of the bitch and place immediately in another as 'good women'.

Last but not the least; the 19<sup>th</sup> century fictions create a chance to see the prevailing condition of women in society through the portrayal of female characters. Both novelists represent the oppression of women in their novels such as their circumstances in male dominated society, their expectation from marital life, their disillusionment and their revolt. As such in *Mill on the Floss*, Maggie oppressed in education and gender where in Patriarchal society women were considered as object and possession which does not have values or right to be respected. They put men in priority and women asides. Thus in the *Mill on the Floss*, *Middlemarch*, *Daniel Deronda*, she brilliantly analyses the effect of male supremacy which turns into blind worship of the Victorian vision of women as the "Angle of the House".

Jane Austen, as a woman living in nineteenth century England, was subjected to and consequently rebelled against the unfair restriction of a Patriarchal Colonial society. During the time of Austen, women were treated as 'Second Class Citizen'. Only working class women were allowed to hold jobs and women in general were not allowed to own property and thus deprived of wealth and power. Without property, women were entirely dependent of man. So Austen condemned the oppression of women in *Pride and Prejudice* and the subjugation of women between the occupation of governess and slave trade in the novel *Emma*. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Mrs Bennet's desire for her daughter to marry well since Longbourn is entailed to Mr Collins, is evident of women dependence on men. Elizabeth Bennet as strong will and dependent reacted the views of her mother as Austen rebelled against the prevailing system. *Mansfield Park* and *Persuasion* also refers to British Colonialism. Thus Austen's heroines conveys her opinion that women should resist oppression and injustice and strive for happiness of humanity which involves the principle of justice, freedom and the dignity of human being. On the other hand, George Eliot's novels *Adam Bede*, *Silas Marner*, *Felix Holt* reveal the traditional images of the feminine characters and explore the brilliance of their initial feminist perspective in introducing the women characters. The novel *Middlemarch* ends with strong feminist plea for women right where Dorothea encounter frustration in her search for new identity. The marriage of Dorothea to an old man seems to have mirrored the psychological need of female's dependent for strong male figure.

Summing up, the novelists Jane Austen and George Eliot were inspired by the condition of their society and used their work as tool of criticism on social and moral problem faced by people especially by women. Thus both novelists mainly focus on the depiction of women in society by an attempt to reflect their position by a share thematic focus on their drawback, decision and stance against the harsh system of society.

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