



Rethinking female education in Jane Austen: Domestic ideology and feminist critique

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Abstract

This paper explores the representation of female education in the novels of Jane Austen—Sense and Sensibility, Pride and Prejudice, Mansfield Park, Emma, Northanger Abbey, and Persuasion. Situated within the socio-cultural framework of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century England, women's education was largely confined to "accomplishments" designed to prepare them for marriage rather than intellectual independence. Austen reflects this framework while subtly critiquing its limitations. Through her female characters, she reveals tensions between societal expectations and intellectual growth. The paper argues that Austen anticipates feminist concerns regarding women's autonomy and identity.

Keywords: Female education, domestic ideology, feminist criticism, women's agency

Introduction

A comparison between contemporary and eighteenth-century women's education reveals significant transformation, although structural expectations continue to persist. While modern women have access to formal education and professional opportunities, domestic responsibilities still shape their social roles. Austen's fiction critically engages with this imbalance by exposing how education confined to domestic preparation restricts women's intellectual growth. Rather than overt rejection, she employs subtle critique through characterization, demonstrating how limited education reinforces patriarchal dependence (Showalter 34).

Literature Review

Feminist scholarship has consistently examined Austen's treatment of female education. Mary Wollstonecraft criticizes domestic education for producing dependency rather than rational independence (Wollstonecraft 13). Similarly, Elaine Showalter highlights how restricted education created intellectual inequality between men and women (Showalter 34). Nancy Armstrong argues that women's education was designed to align with male expectations within marriage (Armstrong 59). In contrast, Claudia L. Johnson emphasizes the importance of intellectual and moral development for women (Johnson 163).

Methodology

This study adopts qualitative textual analysis of Austen's six major novels using a feminist critical framework. It focuses on representation, character development, and socio-cultural constraints shaping women's education.

Analysis and Discussion

18th Century Social Framework and Female Education

In Austen's period, educational opportunities for women were informal and largely restricted to domestic spaces. Institutional education remained inaccessible, reinforcing gender inequality. From a feministic perspective, Austen, creates an awareness of the consequences of educating women exclusively for a life of domesticity. Her work

reveals that a biased education system renders women powerless and without any means to protect themselves in a male-favouring world. The environment of a patriarchal society in the 19th century limits women's education and orchestrates women's lives around societal image and authority figures. (Hyta 7). Austen implicitly recommends to reform the then education system prescribed for women, which in turn will help them find out their own identity and contribute to their empowerment. However, Armstrong suggests that Austen is not critical of Emma's failure to observe "the strictures of female education . . . her failure to read", in fact, she believes Austen considers Emma's lack of diligence in this issue as "a virtue, a refusal to be written by culture" (Desire and Domestic Fiction 149). Austen's works have been interpreted in many ways. One way of interpreting Austen, and which has been focused in this work, is that she lays great stress on women's education all her novels. A closer examination of Austen's depiction of the educational system of her time, makes it evident that modern women have inherited a particularly compromised educational heritage. It may be understood the effects that such a legacy has had, as well as to what extent things have changed from Austen days until our own. She highlights the late eighteenth century practice of educating women to lead a life of domesticity. Moreover, even today the traces of such practice can be seen in our society. No doubt, women are no more encouraged to develop their domestic skills in order to attract a husband (as they were in Austen's days), there are still a section of people who would like to believe that house work is their priority.

Pre-determined Social Roles

It can be observed that difference in pre-defined social roles was the reason behind unequal educational opportunities for boys and girls. In Austen's days, there was no centrally-organised system of state-supported education. The children of the "genteel" social levels that Jane Austen writes about were being educated at home by their parents, particularly when young (as the Morland children are in Northanger Abbey, or by live-in governesses (such as Miss Taylor in Emma) or tutors; or by going off to a private boarding school. Some local "Grammar" schools did exist, teaching

the educational basics (including Greek and Latin) to higher-class or upwardly mobile boys but did not admit girls. Hence, women were deprived of education because of their sex, not because of their class. They were denied proper academic education and so could never attend universities like Oxford and Cambridge. Elaine Showalter writes, "for the middle-class Victorian girl, the departure of a brother for school was a painful awakening to her inferior status", she further adds, "The classical education was the intellectual dividing line between men and women" (34). Indeed, as compared to the boys, very few girls of Austen's days studied the classical languages like Greek and Latin.

Androcentric Education System

In those days, academic education was never considered essential for women. Instead, "female education" meant imparting religious and practical training for their domestic role. Claudia Johnson in "A 'Sweet Face as White as Death': Jane Austen and the Politics of Female Sensibility", states, "Hannah More's *Coelebs in search of a wife* (1808) is a thinly dramatised conduct book recommending proper behavior to young girls on the grounds that this alone will make them desirable to prospective husbands" (163). The conventional belief considered "marriage" as the ultimate goal of a woman's life, so women were accordingly groomed to attract suitors. Nancy Armstrong argues that, these men assumed in their writing that "an education ideally made a woman desire to be what a prosperous man desires . . . [and that] her desirability hinged upon an education in frugal domestic practices" (59). Claudia Johnson further argues, "Because religious and moral duties do not vary from man to woman, women ought to receive the education in books and manners that will promote their development as Christians and befit their status as rational creatures and strong, autonomous individuals" (163).

The consequences of training women purely for domestic role and the notion of "female education" are in fact portrayed in an ironic way in Austen's works. By portraying a wide variety of marriages in her novels, Austen exposes the tyranny of societal image and authority figures, both of which limit women's education and perpetuate women's interiority. There are many women characters present in her novels whose minds have not been improved by their education. Austen criticises Lady Middleton in *Sense and Sensibility*, whose only resources are her children and her home - - "Lady Middleton piqued herself upon the elegance of her table, and of all her domestic arrangements" (30) and "Lady Middleton seemed to be roused to enjoyment only by the entrance of her four noisy children" (33). It appears her conventional education neither enhanced her mind nor taught her social skills but prepared her for a domestic life only. Austen is very much critical of such type of faulty female education of her times. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, Mary Wollstonecraft, severely criticises the shortcomings of the domestic education of women of the late eighteenth century:

I may be accused of arrogance: still I must declare firmly what I believe that all the writers who have written on the subject of female education and manners from Rousseau to Dr. Gregory, have contributed to render women more artificial, weak characters than they would have otherwise been; and "consequently more useless members of society. (13)

Grooming desirable, accomplished women

In addition to, training women for a life of domesticity, for women of the "genteel" classes in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, non-domestic education meant "acquisition of "accomplishments" such as the ability to draw, sing, play music, or speak modern languages like French and Italian. The purpose of attaining such accomplishments was often only to attract a husband. Nancy Armstrong writes, the aim of such a "curriculum" for girls was to produce marriageable daughters & making them desirable to men (19-20). That is why, very often it was seen that girls neglected these skills soon after marriage as Lady Middleton in *Sense and Sensibility*, "had celebrated her marriage by giving up music, although by her mother's account she had played extremely well, and by her own was very fond of it" (33), while Mrs. Elton in *Emma* fears that her music skills will deteriorate as have those of several married women she knows (249) but in *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth Bennet displays her relatively careless attitude towards her "accomplishments" of playing the piano, and not practicing it diligently. The practice of educating girls to be "accomplished" in order to secure a prosperous husband makes them "commodities" with marketable qualities, and therefore contributes to the theme of commerce between the sexes, that is so prominent in Jane Austen's time and gets reflected in her tales of courtship and marriage.

Eighteenth century conduct books played an important part in shaping up women's role in society. It was a non-aristocratic kind of writing that was both polite and particularly suitable for a female readership. This kind of pre-occupation with husband-hunting is not found in the women of today. Contemporary studies show that marriage does not ensure meaningful life for a woman. Yet many women seem to be obsessed with men and especially male attention. Austen considers patriarchal society responsible for this commodification of women which renders them into mere objects of male gaze.

Intellectual Loneliness

Austen points to the intellectual loneliness of married women by having Mrs. Elton suggest that even if a woman has ever so many resources, "it is not possible for her to be always shut up at home" (321). In *Mansfield Park*, Mrs. Grant is pitied for the monotonous duties that make up a married woman's life. Another aspect of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century education which Austen seems concerned about is the view held by most women of the time that they need education until they "come out", which was usually up to the age of seventeen. In *Mansfield Park*, the Bertram sisters feel there is a great deal for them to learn, but only up to their seventeenth birthday (17). Their lack of interest in acquiring knowledge is partly their mother's doing. She pays their education "not the smallest attention" (18). In *Northanger Abbey*, similar attack is made on the issue of girls' studying upto the age of seventeen, "Catherine's mind is about as ignorant and unformed as the female mind at seventeen usually is" (10). Poor education leads to ignorance and grammatical mistakes in women of the middle class. In *Northanger Abbey*, Henry Tilney comments on women's usual style of letter writings "a general deficiency of subject, a total inattention to stops and a very frequent ignorance of grammar" (20).

The emphasis on accomplishments—music, drawing, and polite conversation—served social rather than intellectual purposes. As Armstrong notes, such education was structured around desirability rather than independence (59). Austen critiques this system through contrasting characters. While Lady Middleton reflects the superficial outcomes of domestic education, Elizabeth Bennet represents intellectual independence and critical thinking. Furthermore, Austen exposes how such education commodifies women within the marriage market. Through irony and narrative strategy, she advocates for self-awareness and intellectual growth as essential components of education

Female Identity redefined

In Austen's novels there are subtle references to what could be interpreted as her encouraging women to discover their own identities, against the prescription imposed on them by patriarchal society. The dialogue between Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy frequently reveals Austen's interpretation of controversial, feminine ideals (Hyta 8) Barry Roth has rightly assessed Austen's objective in the review of Barbaraj Horwitz's *Jane Austen and the Question of Women's Education* as she writes, "she [Austen], identifies self-knowledge 'as education's primary end'(112)". That is why feminist hold rigid socially constructed gender roles responsible for women's inability to know themselves or others. Feminist scholars of twenty-first century give great importance to knowing oneself and realising that one is constituted out of different discourses, over time and space. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen emphasises the informal education girls receive at home as she makes Lady Catherine react with utter disbelief to the fact that the Bennet sisters had no governess (160). No doubt, Austen constantly seems to imply that being a woman means being deprived of a decent education, The privileged access to writing enjoyed by men had further consequences. In *Northanger Abbey*, Austen, it seems implies to the absence of a women's literary legacy by making reference to male poets only, including pope, Gray, Thompson and Shakespeare (8).

Findings

The study reveals that:

- Female education was confined to domestic and social training
- Women lacked access to formal institutions
- Education reinforced patriarchal norms
- Austen critiques commodification of women
- Her protagonists embody intellectual independence

Conclusion

Austen's novels critically reassess female education within a restrictive social framework. By portraying both conformity and resistance, she exposes the limitations of domestic ideology. Her work anticipates later feminist thought by emphasizing intellectual autonomy and self-awareness. Despite progress, the persistence of gendered expectations makes her critique relevant even today..

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