



PROJECTION OF FEMINIST ELEMENTS IN THE FICTIONAL WORLD OF JANE AUSTEN AND GEORGE ELIOT: A NOTE

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Abstract:

This article is nothing but a critical evaluation for renowned writers like Jane Austen and George Eliot and the Feminist elements highlighted in their works with their feminine and defiant tone of expression, they left their indelible imprint on the annals of English fiction. In the light of feminist critical theory, it can be proved that both the writers explored the unexplored sense of agony and complex solitude of women character. This article also throws light on the characters of both the writers, who have developed their self – identity with an optimistic prospect.

The term 'Feminism' is defined by the Webster's Dictionary as the principle which states that women should have political rights equal to those of men and the movement to win such rights for women and feminists were affected by contemporary scientific ideas about women, by the social conventions governing women's behaviour, by moralistic and religious advice to women and the ways in which women were imagined in fiction Simone de Beauvoir remarks:

"The situation of women is that she – a free and autonomous being like all creatures – nevertheless finds her living in a world where men compel her to assume the status of the other" (The Second Sex)

All feminist ideas bring home the point that women are at a disadvantage in comparison with men and this advantage is neither the natural nor the inevitable result of biological difference but something that can be challenged and changed. Ever since antiquity, there have been women fighting to free their half of the total population of the world from male oppression. Feminism is neither a fad nor a logical extension of the civil rights movement. The inequities against which the feminists protest – legal, economic and social restrictions on the basic rights of women – have existed throughout history and in all ages. Feminism is generally thought of as a phenomenon of the 19th and 20th centuries paving the way for giving rise to women's movement for democratic change. The women like Anne Hutchinson were "feminist in action" rather than theorists. Instead of elaborating their ideas in writing, they used them to modify or organize social reforms in which women might be free of male power and authority over them. The feminism of the 19th and the early 20th centuries focused on the acquisition of a few basic political rights and liberty for women such as the rights of married woman to own property and enter into contracts, the right of defendants to have women on juries and the crucial right to vote. A campaign lasting a century ensued and culminated in the winning of the right to vote in England in 1918 and in America in 1920.

Broadly speaking, the contemporary feminist movement worked for female equality as the early 19th century had done. Most feminists believe that the pernicious effect of socialization makes women suppress the greater part of their human potential feminism, as a philosophy of life, seeks to discover and change the more subtle and deep seated causes of women's oppression. The feminist literary criticism has developed as a component of the women's movement and its impact has brought about a revolution in

literary studies. This new approach has profoundly altered several critical assumptions. It offers a new perspective on literature and emphasizes the need for a search of new paradigms. Elaine Showalter draws attention to this critical revolution in the following words:

“While literary criticism and its philosophical branch, literary theory, have always been zealously guarded bastions of male intellectual endeavour, the success of feminist criticism has opened a space for the authority of the woman’s writing to the reappraisal of whole body of texts that make up our literary heritage” (P 3).

Feminists were affected by contemporary scientific ideas about women, by the social conventions governing women’s behaviour, by moralistic and religious advice to woman and by the ways in which woman were imagined in fiction.

The rise of the woman novelist in the late eighteenth century England was a slow phenomenon, for the women writers made male authors their models in the beginning and tried to imitate them. The woman writers like Mrs. Manley (1663 – 1724), Mrs. Hayward (1693 – 1756), Miss. Fielding (1710 – 68) and Frances Sheridan (1724 – 66) were handicapped to some extent because they chose the romantic type of fiction. A little later, the contribution of women writers like Hannah More (1745 -1833), Fanny Burney (1782 – 1840) and Susan Ferrier (1782 – 1854) were found to be significant. They all represent the feminine methods of approaching the social life of the time. Jane Austen is the first major woman novelist in English. Woman novelists in the late eighteenth century especially Maria Edge Worth and Miss Fanny Burney brought into English fiction female tenderness and the feminine view point. Though they portrayed man’s world under the prevailing influence of their male mentors, they focused their attention on woman and her problems. While presenting a vivid account of the manners of the time, they suggested domestic life as new field for sister – novelists. Jane Austen continued with this point of view and she too dwelt at length on woman’s life and her problems.

Jane Austen largely concentrates on female characters as hers is a women’s world. Her heroines are not self-conscious feminists, yet they are all exemplary of the first claim of Enlightenment feminism: that women share the same moral nature as men, ought to share the same moral status and exercise the same responsibility for their own conduct. Jane Austen’s adherence to the central convictions of Enlightenment feminism becomes more marked and more forceful and the scope of her comedy is enlarged, not by taking in a wider social spectrum, but by widening and deepening the range of allusive irony. Indeed, Jane Austen’s novels can be read as the writer’s search for a national and amiable woman, Indeed, in **Sense and Sensibility** her endeavour is to give sense to sensibility in the character-study of Marianne Dashwood. In Elizabeth Bennet, she concentrates upon a sincere, straight forward and intelligent woman. Here Jane Austen is near her goal. In **Northanger Abbey**, Catherine Moral and moves towards this ideal in the later half of the novel. In *Fanny Price*, the national view develops slowly, yet steadily. In *Emma*, the movement from a ‘vain spirit’ to ‘a serious spirit’ is a progress towards the same aim. **Persuasion** is novel of somewhat different nature. Yet, Anne Elliot, too, displays the outlook of a rational young woman, growing wise after very much experience.

One finds in heroines like Emma some elements of the “New Woman”. The notion of woman as an equal to man is not altogether alien to Jane Austen’s heroines Elizabeth defends herself and speaks about her worth capability to Lady Cathorine de Bourgh. The confidence of the new woman is discernible in her most spirited refutation of charges

leveled against her. She goes so far as to say: He is a gentleman, I am a gentle men's daughter, so far we equal" (P 356). Jane Austen portrays woman realistically. She is often interested in the type of the girl who does not try to substitute a false, romantic fictionalized view of life for actual experience perhaps the abilities of women are neither sound nor acute, neither vigorous nor keen, perhaps they may want observation, discernment judgement, fire, genius and wit" (NA 112). Her opinion of woman is favourable. Those who start with malice towards woman charge them with inconstancy in love. This allegation is refuted beyond doubt Rather, it is established that constancy is women's forte. Jane Austen is aware of the fact that all critics, despite their best endeavour, start with some bias towards their own sex. Still, the impartial view her heroines seek to hold is of woman's constancy. Anne Elliot observes to captain Harville:

"All the privilege I claim for my own sex it is not a very enviable one, you need not covet it, is that of loving longest, when existence or when hope is gone" (P 236).

Women do not easily forget their love. In Jane Austen's no woman deceives any man, though there are men, like Willoughby, Wickham and Mr. Elliot, who play with the feeling and lives of some women. To refute the charge of women's inferiority, Jane Austen eventually emphasized the feminine attainments as her strength by a charming display of good manners she sided the cause of woman's emancipation. She was confident of the resourcefulness of women and stressed it. She, therefore, neither favoured the idea of women as man's equal not the old and general notion of female inferiority women had her own important identity. A woman should not "give the lie to her feelings". Woman was a good creature, capable of many things. Home was her proper and favorite field. She was an important companion and fellow of man, with great competence to make him the "happiest creature" in the world.

George Eliot was the pen name used by the English novelist Mary Ann Evans, one of the most important writers of European fiction. Generally speaking, Eliot's novels explore moral and philosophical issues with a realistic approach to human character and development of plot. **Middlemarch** (1871) is frequently studied by feminist critics for its careful consideration of a woman's place in a male-dominated world, even though critics disagree over whether this novel and Eliot's other works, display proto - feminist ideas reinforce patriarchal systems.

Born on November 22, 1819 at Arbury Farm, Warwickshire, England as the third child of Robert Evans, George Eliot was obviously intelligent and a voracious reader. She is said to have had little formal education. She was freely allowed access to the library of Arbury Hall which greatly aided her self - education and breath of learning. In the words of Christopher Stray, "George Eliot's novels draw heavily on Greek literature" and her themes are often influenced by Greek tragedy. The other important early influence in her life was 'religion'. At 40, George Eliot published the book namely **Scenes of Clerical Life** and her first novel **Adam Bede**. Her next writing venture was the novel Adam Bede which was a popular and critical success, making everyone curious to find out who the mysterious George Eliot was. The book **Adam Bede** is a tragic love story in which the model for the title character is Eliot's father, Robert Evans, a land agent with a strong character and whose traits she transferred to some of her characters like Adam Bede and Galeb Garth in Middlemarch. **Adam Bede** was an instant success, making her a leading writer. A year after Adam Bede, she wrote **The Mill on the Floss**. Two years later, **Silas Marner** was published. It is the well-known story of a weaver of Raveloc, a miser saved from his lonely and selfish life by the love of a young girl, Eppie. Then she wrote the political novel **Felix Holt, the Radical** in 1866 and **The Spanish Gypsy** in

1868. She became an unequivocal success and she went on to write her most acclaimed novel **Middlemarch**, between 1871 and 1872, followed by Daniel Deronda in 1876.

Eliot's critical acclaim came rather earlier with the publication of *Adam Bede*. During her lifetime, the writer's work generally met with popular and critical success. Virginia Woolf was influential in reviving interest in Eliot's works as early as 1925, addressing Eliot's unique treatment of the nature of femininity and F.R. Leavis's essays in the 1940's effectively reaffirmed the significance of Eliot's achievement. The onset of the feminist movement sparked another reevaluation of Eliot's work though critics remained sharply divided about the novelist's treatment of women's issues. Some critics claimed Eliot as a proto - feminist whose complex thinking about the place of a woman in an oppressive society was instrumental in setting the stage for the women's literary liberation that would eventually follow. She died in London on December 22, 1880, having gained the extreme respect and admiration from her peers and fellow novelists. Her reputation as one of the greatest English novelists continues to this day.

Eliot's key focus is on relationships between women and men, men and women. These may be the relations between lovers, between wives and husbands, fathers and daughters, brothers and sisters, mothers and sons. She was neither a true feminist theorist nor activist. But she persistently worked at the central dilemmas of feminism during her time. She probed current assumptions about 'women's nature' as well as scrutinizing the arguments of her friends in the women's movement. She saw men and women as locked together by their needs and by their common misunderstanding. Eliot has been a knot of controversy for feminist critics. But the scale and scope of her achievement is undeniable in terms of the intellectual depth of connected life, the emotional power of humdrum experience, the range of exploratory discourses. What is debated is the relation of that achievement to our needs as women and her powers as a woman one key problem has been the obduracy which she encloses her heroines within the confines of ordinary possibility, confines from which the author, by means of her writing, escaped. Related to this is the frequency with which renunciation is discovered as a good virtue particularly in her early writing. Francoise Basch writes that renunciation for George Eliot, is the essence of virtue and it is the chief moral reality implied by her whole outlook (P 97). One of her women admirers, after reading her poem, 'The Spanist Gypsy' in 1869, wrote to her: "Must noble women always fail? Is there no sumptuous flower of happiness for us? (Haight 463). The first wave of recent feminist literary theory gave short shrift to George Eliot. Kate Millet had only this to say:

'Living in sin', George Eliot lived the revolution as well perhaps, but she did not write of it. She is stuck with the Ruskinian service ethic and the pervasive Victorian fantasy of the good woman, who goes down into Samaria and rescues the fallen man - nurse, guide, mother, adjunct of the race. Dorothea's predicament in *Middlemarch* is an eloquent plea that a fine mind be allowed an occupation; but it goes no further than petition. She marries Will Ladislaw and can expect no more of life than the discovery of a good companion whom she can serve as secretary. (Millett 139)

Eliot might have been interpreted as a woman writer who had successfully fought patriarchal Victorian rules that would have denied her happiness. Such a portrait would have made her a feminist heroine. Eliot's novels offered heroines who, according to Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, viewed themselves "not as Milton but only as one of Milton's dutiful daughters" (P 451). The characters were trapped in the same bonds of "ideal" feminine behavior as their twentieth century readers. Eliot's philosophy did not seek to change the limited opportunities open to women but rather to 'understand' women's reality in *Middlemarch* society; to read the novel as a sociological text makes it

helpful in reconstructing the history of western women”, another important goal of the feminist movement (Cornillon 359)

By rejecting the demand that authorial intention must uphold the social and cultural concept of womanhood, Eliot offers a new interpretation of the ideal woman writer. She suggests a corrective in which art provides not dogmatically correct role models but the capacity to understand differences: “the only effect I ardently long to produce by my writings, is that those who read them should be better able to imagine and to feel the pains and the joys of those who differ from themselves in everything but the broad fact of being struggling erring human creatures” (Letters 111). In achieving this, Eliot sought to construct a role in which her identity as a woman, as a writer and as a ‘struggling erring human’ became an integral part of her ability to examine “the formation of gender characteristics by community, by expectations, and by ideological pressures” (Flint 163). By providing both a critical view of the social construction of women and a chance for her readers to associate emotionally with her characters, George Eliot offers the opportunity to reflect deeply on how women view each other and themselves.

Thus, Jane Austen represents a ‘feminization of English Novel’ writing as a woman and on themes of interest to women and George Eliot has proved herself to be an excellent novelist imparting seriousness, gravity, solemnity and loftiness to novel writing and exhibiting rare insight in the portrayal of female characters.

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