

Ecofeminism in the Writings of Jane Austen

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Abstract

Generally, read as a story of courtship, manners, property and social morality, Jane Austen novels nonetheless have a certain but significant ecological awareness. In this paper, titled, *Ecofeminism in the Writings of Jane Austen*, we will look at how the fictional world of Jane Austen is connected to the lives of women and to land, nature, domestic space, and ownership. Ecofeminism asserts that oppression of women and exploitation of nature are usually caused by the same patriarchal systems. This relationship is followed through treatment of estates, landscapes, gardens, houses, and rural environments all of which determine female identity and social possibility. *Pride and Prejudice*, *Sense and Sensibility*, *Mansfield Park*, *Emma*, among others, demonstrate that nature is not simply a decorative subject but a moral and social space within which women negotiate freedom, restraint, desire, and dignity. The paper looks at the way Austen introduces the theme of women as being highly influenced by issues of property, inheritance, enclosure, class privilege and the confinement beyond four walls. Her heroines also traverse gardens, parks, drawing rooms and country estates that are both beautiful and controlled. The walk taken by Elizabeth Bennet through countryside, the sensitivity of Fanny Price to the moral ambiance of Mansfield, and the emotional responsiveness of Marianne Dashwood to natural landscapes, all indicate that nature is a silent companion to female experience. Simultaneously, Austen reveals the similarity of land and women as being prized in systems of ownership, marriage and exchange. Austen challenges a culture whereby the safety of women would be pegged on property they do not have much control over. This way, her fiction foreshadows ecofeminist issues by demonstrating that the health of human relations, gender justice, and ethical relations with place are interdependent. The paper arrives at the conclusion that the works of Austen provide a literary basis at the early years of literature to understand the connection between feminine subjectivity and ecological consciousness.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, Jane Austen, women and nature, patriarchy, property, landscape

1.1.1 Introduction: Reading Jane Austen through Ecofeminism

Readers usually find literature associated with manners, marriage, class, morality, and domestic life in Jane Austen's fiction. Her novels are commonly situated in the social milieu of drawing rooms, country houses, balls, visits, proposals and family negotiations. Austen, at first glance, may not seem like an ecological writer since she does not directly write about the destruction of the environment, industrial pollution, or the modern ecological crisis. A more critical reading

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of her novels reveal that nature, land, property, gardens, estates, cottages, walks and countryside are never simply a subject of decoration. They manipulate women lives, decisions, feelings and identities silently. The fictional world created by Austen is structured in such a way that it is based on the relationship between women and space: who owns the house, who inherits the estate, who gets shoved off land, who is free to walk around, and who is confined within the domestic boundary. The new reading of Austen can be done through ecofeminism since it relates the subjugation of women to the subjugation of nature. According to ecofeminist intellectuals, patriarchal cultures tend to perceive women and nature as passive, useful, beautiful, and controllable. Carolyn Merchant notes that the modern worldview tended to transform nature into a living presence that can be mastered, manipulated and used as a source of human power and profitability (Merchant 164). This concept gains prominence in the novels of Austen, where both land and women are put into their places of possession, heritage, marriage, and social exchange. Land is considered to be valued based on ownership, income, status prestige, and male inheritance and women are valued based on beauty, manners, family status, and matrimonial alliance. Property is not only an economic issue in the world of Austen; it is also a gendered issue. The future of women will be repeatedly determined by the relationship to houses and estates that they do not entirely possess.

In *Pride and Prejudice*, the Bennet daughters are unable to inherit Longbourn, as this is entailed to a male descendant. In *Sense and Sensibility*, the Dashwood women have to abandon Norland when Mr. Dashwood dies. These scenarios reveal the fact that the insecurity of women lies in a social order according to which land transits through the male authority. Austen thus exposes, in a silent irony, how women turn to be dependent of marriage since property laws do not allow them to own property and have independent security. According to Marilyn Butler, the novels of Austen are preoccupied with the issue of moral judgment in social relations, rather than with romantic fulfilment (Butler 3). This is the moral order which enables Austen to reveal the injustice behind the polite society. Another way through which Austen heroines find themselves is by moving in natural and semi-natural environments. The walks taken by Elizabeth Bennet, the emotional connection that Marianne Dashwood suffers with, the psychic sensitivity that Fanny Price has to connect with the moral environment of Mansfield, and the renewal that Anne Elliot experiences close to the sea all indicate that landscape has a psychological and ethical significance. Nature is the place where women experience, think, feel pain, fight, and develop. According to Val Plumwood, the Western culture has frequently developed some of the most destructive dualisms like man/woman, reason/nature, culture/nature, and master/slave relationship (Plumwood 43). Such divisions are subtly challenged in the fiction offered by Austen through the process of showing that emotional and moral intelligence of women often comes to light through their relationship with place, movement, and environment.

This paper therefore contends that an early ecofeminist sensibility can be found in the novels of Jane Austen. Though not an ecofeminist in the modern theoretical sense, in her fiction, Austen foresees the ecofeminist concerns by connecting the lives of women with land, domestic space, inheritance, and moral ecology. As in her novels, gender justice is inseparable because of the issues of property, place, and ethical living. Using the most mundane settings in walking, visiting, marrying, inheriting and dwelling, Austen reveals the underlying structures that govern the lives of women and the world surrounding them.

1.2. Theoretical Framework: Ecofeminism and Patriarchal Control

Ecofeminism offers a valuable theoretical framework of interpreting Jane Austen since it unites two critical areas of inquiry: the oppression of women and the domination of nature. At the heart of ecofeminism is the argument that the patterns of dominance over women and nature shown by patriarchal societies are often parallel. Women are often perceived as emotional, bodily, domestic, fertile, and nurturing, whereas nature is also thought of as a passive, fertile, beautiful, and usable thing. Conversely, reason, ownership, law, culture and authority are traditionally associated with men. This division does not just explain the social roles; it establishes a hierarchy where women and nature are at the bottom with men and culture at the top. This hierarchy enables patriarchal power to justify the control over the bodies of women as well as their labour force, land, property and natural resources. It is in this sense that ecofeminism is not simply about forests, rivers, animals, or environmental degradation. It is also concerning the cultural logic that teaches society to have, discipline, and exploit whatever is identified as being marked as feminine or natural. The dualistic thinking in the West is strongly criticized by Val Plumwood as it divides the world into unequal oppositions such as man-woman, reason-nature, culture-nature, and master-slave (Plumwood 43).

These binaries prove helpful in studying Austen since in her novels, we can find a world where men have legal, financial and social power and women must bargain their survival within narrow domestic and economic spheres. Despite being smart, morally sound, and emotionally sensitive, the lives of the women in Austen novels remain at the mercy of inheritance laws, marriage markets, family expectations, and property arrangements. An ecofeminist argument as put forward by Carolyn Merchant also proves handy in this case. She states that nature was historically turned into an object, which could be controlled and exploited (Merchant 164). This concept aids the reader to understand the estate culture in the novels written by Austen. The country estate is not a mere beautiful scene, but it is a power structure. Ownership, inheritance, class privilege and social authority are represented by such estates like Longbourn, Norland, Mansfield Park, Rosings and Pemberley. They are the landscapes that are influenced by human desire, taste, wealth, and control. Meanwhile, women in novels of Austen are frequently addressed as the members of this social economy. Their matrimonies are associated with property, family progression, economic stability and social decency. In this way, land and women are situated in the analogous systems of value and exchange. This relation becomes more evident when one thinks how Austen depicts the deprivation of property by women. In *Pride and Prejudice*, the sisters Bennet need to get married since the estate of Longbourn is passed on to them. In *Sense and Sensibility*, the Dashwood women are thrown out of Norland due to the male inheritance taking precedence over the female security.

In *Mansfield Park*, Fanny Price is residing within a strong estate yet she is socially inferior and is in a marginal position. The examples demonstrate that women are not merely characters who move through beautiful rural settings; they are subjects and their freedom is affected by their access to land, house, income, and movement. Using ecofeminism, the critic can understand that gender oppression in Austen is also a problem of space and environment. Both Vandana Shiva and Maria Mies believe that women and nature are often reduced to a means of production, profit and control by both patriarchal and capitalist systems (Mies and Shiva 5).

Even though Austen wrote when modern industrial capitalism had not yet taken the later form, moral pitfalls of a society that values human worth through money, property, inheritance, and social rank, are already present in her novels. Women are supposed to get a good husband, act right and uphold the symbolic order of family and class. Nature, too, is commonly organized, enhanced, developed, and exhibited as an indication of class taste. The fact that language in Austen is of particular because it implies that land will have to be redesigned based on fashionable human desire. This can be seen in *Mansfield Park*, where the landscape of Sotherton is talked about as the one to be redesigned to gain social status.

1.3. Property, Inheritance, and the Possession of Women and Land

Property takes a centre stage in Jane Austen fictional world. Her novels might seem to be constructed around love, courtship, family, manners, and marriage, but under such social issues, there is another framework of ownership. The lives of the characters in Austen novel are determined by land, houses, estates, income and inheritance, particularly to women. This relationship between women and property becomes all the more important in the ecofeminist approach. Ecofeminism is the examination of how the patriarchal culture tends to render both women and nature as properties of possession and control. Land is bequeathed, administered, obeyed, and improved and displayed in Austen novels, women are expected to marry, adjust, obey, and secure social continuity through domestic roles. As such, the state of women and the state of land are intimately related within the moral world of Austen. The question of property is best outlined in *Pride and Prejudice* with respect to the entailment of Longbourn.

Bennet family resides on the estate and the five daughters are not able to inherit the land since the property is legally bound to a male heir. This legal structure generates great insecurity to the women of the family. The numerous times Mrs. Bennet is shown to be anxious about her daughters getting married is often portrayed in a humorous way but the cause of her anxiety is serious. And in case Mr. Bennet dies, his wife and daughters can be deprived of a home and social status. Therefore, marriage is not only the act of making love but also the survival tactic. The future of the Bennet daughters lies in a property system, which does not accommodate them due to gender reasons. This domestic scenario is a way of revealing the injustice of a society where the security of women is dictated by the inheritance of males. Mr. Collins is the linking of male entitlement and property. He will be the heir of Longbourn, but has no emotional or moral right to the home of the Bennet women. His offer to Elizabeth is not founded on true love but on social convenience, economic arrangement, and patriarchal self-importance. He presumes that Elizabeth ought to accept him since marrying him would ensure that Longbourn remains a part of the family and that Elizabeth will get security. The denial of Elizabeth is thus highly significant. Not only is it a personal rejection of the unsuitable man; but it is also a moral rejection of the notion that a woman must give her self-respect to property. In Elizabeth, Austen indicates that female honour cannot be quantified solely in terms of land, income, or societal privilege.

The comparison between Longbourn, Rosings, and Pemberley further elaborates the way of how Austen addresses the issue of property. Longbourn is a symbol of insecurity since the women who reside in Longbourn are unable to inherit it. Rosings is the symbol of domination since Lady Catherine resorts to wealth and rank in order to dominate others. Pemberley, though,

is offered as a more balanced estate. When Elizabeth goes to Pemberley, she is not only surprised at its magnificence but also at its taste, balance and the beauty of nature. It appears that the estate is an indication of an improved moral character of Darcy. In the ecofeminist perspective, Pemberley is significant, as it implies a more ethical relationship between land, ownership, and human behaviour. When property is used as a weapon of pride, control and exclusion, Austen does not reject property; instead, she questions the abuse of property as a means of pride, control and exclusion. The same issue is evident in *Sense and Sensibility*. When Mr. Dashwood dies, the Dashwood ladies are denied the opportunity to stay on Norland as the estate is passed to John Dashwood. The fact that they are forced to leave demonstrates the bitter truth of female subordination. Their home is Norland and this is not their legal home. The tender attachment of women to place is powerless in the presence of the legal power of the male inheritance. It is this state of affairs that is central to an ecofeminist reading in that it presents women as being dispossessed of land in the same way that nature is often transferred, divided, possessed, and controlled under the patriarchal ownership.

The women of the Dashwood family relocating to Barton Cottage becomes some kind of a social and emotional exile. Barton represents peace and shelter, which, however, is also their diminished material and social status. This argument is enhanced by the emotional connection to nature, which Marianne Dashwood has. Her attachment to the trees, hills, and known landscapes of Norland is not merely a romantic feeling, but it is a demonstration of how much the identities of women are place-based. Upon her departure out of Norland, she is not, in fact, losing only a house; she is losing an emotional setting. This loss indicates the situation of women in society whereby relationship with land is very intimate, yet very insecure. They can take care of domestic and natural areas, yet they seldom have control over them. Austen is meticulous to unveil this contradiction. Women make emotional meaning in homes and landscapes, which can be displaced by patriarchal inheritance without regard to women attachment to that place. In the novel *Mansfield Park*, the issue of property and female dependency are introduced through Fanny Price. Fanny is introduced out of her poor family into the rich household of Sir Thomas Bertram. *Mansfield Park* provides her material comfort, education, and social refinement but it does not offer her equality. She resides within the estate yet is emotionally and socially alienated. Her status shows how living in a place and belonging to it are different. Fanny possesses neither property, nor power, nor powerful social voice. Nevertheless, she turns into the ethical centre of the novel.

This opposition is significant as Austen demonstrates that moral value is not related to property. The landowners and wealthy people might have no ethical vision, and a powerless woman like Fanny might have a better understanding of the moral state of affairs in the household than the owners themselves (Gaard 38). The politics of land ownership is also evident in the Sotherton episode in *Mansfield Park*. The characters speak about how to make the estate better, how to change the grounds and how to shape nature in line with the current fashion. The land might seem innocuous but it exposes an air of domination. Nature is addressed as something that needs to be re-designed to be a status and pleasure item. This culture also attempts to make women better through training them to be good wives, beautiful, successful, and marriageable women. Fanny silently opposes this world. Her ethical stasis is a kind of opposition to a society that places greater emphasis on the superficial, material, and social displays (Johnson 21). It is

depicted in the novels of Austen time and again that women are put into systems of exchange. Marriage is similar to a social contract whereby affection, property, family status, and inheritance are combined. The marriage of Charlotte Lucas to Mr. Collins in *Pride and Prejudice* is a sore subject. Charlotte finds security more than romance as she is aware of the few choices that women have. Her choice cannot be treated very severely; it shows the economic reality of the life of women. Living in a society when women possess few independent access to property, marriage turns out to be one of the limited sources of stability. The irony of Austen enables the character to view the melancholy of such pragmatic decisions. Within the ecofeminist standpoint, the manner in which Austen deals with property depicts a bigger ethical issue. Patriarchal society tends to transform land into a symbol of dominance, status, and ownership, which is not the place of living, care, continuity and ethical responsibility (Tanner 32). Women must be respected as autonomous moral individuals, yet the society tends to perceive them as reliant and whose worth is pegged on marriage and family privilege. Austen unites these two areas of concern in a veritably subtle manner. She writes no open political protest, but her novels reveal the silent violence of social structures that deny women both security and inheritance.

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