

FEMINISTIC ELEMENTS IN THE NOVELS OF JANE AUSTEN AND GEORGE ELIOT: A COMPARATIVE STUDY

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Abstract

The common starting point of all feminist ideas is the belief that women are at a disadvantage in comparison with men and that this disadvantage is not the natural or inevitable result of biological difference but something that can be and should be challenged and changed. English Fiction in the eighteenth century, achieved among other things an enlargement of the scope of moral discourse allowing new topics to be considered in new ways, encouraging authors who would not have entered into such discourse otherwise and reaching an extended audience. Among the new topics, moral nature and status of women was one of the most important. Among the new readers women were numerous and influential, both as purchasers of books and subscribers to circulating libraries. It had been realised that 'woman was not an undeveloped man but diverse.' To their contemporaries, nineteenth century women writers were women first, artists later. A woman novelist, unless she disguised herself with a male pseudonym, had to expect critics to focus on her femininity and rank her with the other women writers of her day, no matter how diverse their subjects or styles. The nineteenth century which is considered as a relatively stable era was truly an age of change too.

Keywords: feminist, novelist, artists, moral, disguised.

Introduction

Exploring the role of women during the nineteenth century means considering the evolution of feminism, a loaded word that implies a variety of ideas and arouses conflicting reactions. Feminism suggests a practical determination to alter unjust laws, whether about divorce, property, or voting rights. But it also implies a philosophical questioning of traditional values and ideas, from women's intellectual and emotional capacities to male-female relationships to the ways women and men think, act and feel. A lot happened to women's roles and the women's movement during this period of ferment.

Equally, we should not fall into the trap of seeing earlier movements merely as Proto-feminism, something disposable and insignificant, allowing us to praise current theory and

practice in its post casual absolutism as if no feminist awareness has existed before twenty years from one's own privileged moment. Virginia Woolf says of Jane Austen that "of all great writers she is the most difficult to catch in the act of greatness." Wollstonecraft, Jane Austen 'inherited a common tradition' of feminist development. In the moral intelligence she imparts to her heroines, their individuality is stressed through the quality of their interaction with others. As well as remaining true to inner feelings and perceptions, they have the ability of acknowledging the legitimate claims of others. In fact the reader at the end of a Jane Austen novel is filled with contentment:

"The satisfaction we feel in reading Jane Austen stems from the heroines' right to find happiness of the kind of people they are- because of their integrity towards themselves and others.

George Eliot, on the other hand, has been a knot of controversy for feminist critics. The scale and size of her achievement is undeniable, the intellectual depth of connected life, the emotional power of humdrum experience, the range of exploratory discourses. What is debated is the reaction of that achievement to our needs as women and her power as a woman. Gillian Beer points out:

"One key problem has been the obduracy with which she encloses her heroines within the confines of ordinary possibility, confines from which the author had by means of her writing, escaped."

Related to this is the essence of virtue; and it is the chief moral reality implied by her whole outlook'. One of her women admirers, after reading her poem, 'The Spanish Gypsy' in 1869, wrote to her:

"Must noble women always fail? Is there no sumptuous flower of happiness for us? "

Even Elaine Showalter (1977), alert as she is to historical context, gives most of her attention to George Eliot's oppressiveness as a model for other nineteenth century women writers such as Mrs. Oliphant, and assesses, *The Mill on the Floss* as more acquiescent than the Brontes because it ends with the death of its heroine. Nina Averbach's recent '*Woman and the Demon*' (1982) in contrast, emphasizes the recalcitrant and the witch-like in Maggie, and her resistance to her society; In '*The Greening of Sister George*' (1980) Showalter has since wittily traced the process of reconciliation visible in writing on George Eliot, and argues the case for her specific value as sister as well as writer.

There are many who hear a woman's voice in Jane Austen's writing do not do so in George Eliot's works as the latter's writing emphasise universals while Jane Austen largely concentrates on female characters, as hers is a woman's world. Both, in Jane Austen's letters and novels, she describes more woman than men, her character often speaks confidently about women alone. General Tilney observes:

What say you, Eleanor? Speak your opinion, for ladies alone can tell the taste of ladies in regard to places as well as men. (NA.175).

In fact Jane Austen's heroines exhibit singlemindedness of character. This imparts to them a peculiar intensity and uniqueness. Their language is intelligible, their motives clear. They try to grapple with the present. The past is important for them inasmuch as it has a bearing on the present. Elizabeth believes in this philosophy and asks Mr. Darcy to follow it:

You must learn some of my philosophy. Think only of the past as its remembrance gives you pleasure. (PP 368-69).

In conformity with their creator, the heroines maintain decorum and decency in behaviour. The heroines are fallible, certainly not "pictures of perfection". However, they learn

from experience. Being consciously virtuous, they acquire considerable self-confidence and faith. They are not easily disheartened. It is only in extraordinary situations that even a naïve girl like Catherine Morland actuated by haunting illusions, feels terrified in Northanger Parsonage. She has faced boldly what a human being can face. Jane Austen's heroines, persistent as they are in their efforts to be epitomes of integrity, do not excuse lack or virtue or integrity in others. Jane Austen, in John Hardy's views, explores human relationship at such a depth which means her heroines at some stage seem more alone and isolated than many of her minor characters, while it has been claimed that the 'theme of isolation' in the novels gives expression to the:

'The essential loneliness of men and women.'

Nor is this dictated merely by the convention of a happy ending.

Rather it follows from those qualities of mind and heart which enable a process of mutual sharing to occur between two people. In this sense the heroines isolation admits of a genuine resolution—one that invigorates and is not just consoling.

More so, Jane Austen seems to turn this perception to her own advantage in that there exists a connection (not always easy to elaborate or explain) between the heroines being thrown to her own resources and the kind of quality of character that this experience refines or reveals. Whatever the means employed, what remains distinctive about her heroines in their active involvement in situation in which they find themselves. Though they might be isolated, they are never static or inert, for all are engaged in a continuous, ongoing activity of thinking and responding. Not only does this fact lift the moral seriousness of the novels above the prescriptions of the conduct books (whose vocabulary they partly inherit); it also represents their distinct advance on earlier English Fiction.

George Eliot on the other hand, persistently worked at the central dilemmas of feminism in her time without setting out to write Feminist novels. She probed current assumptions about women's nature as well as scrutinizing the arguments of her friends in the women's movement. 'Yet', as Gillian Beer opines:

"She was not according to our lights, either a feminist theorist or activist."

George Eliot saw men and women as locked together by their needs and hopes, and by their common misunderstanding. George Eliot's key topic is relations 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. Relationships between women and women, take their place in the novels, but the key bond is that between the sexes, with its immense power to yoke unlike people and to blind them in desire, or into flesh in generation. This contradiction-difference and connection-sustains the tension of her work. As Judith Wilt remarks,

"yokelessness" is one of the worst ills can befall a person in her fiction."

She values interdependence even above independence: and she gives it that high valuation because of (as well as in spite of) its difficulty. The threats and burdens of connection are given as much meaning as its joys. Indeed only rarely (as when Will and Dorothea at last kiss, letting slip all the hampering conditions which have kept them apart) is the rapture of connection shown.

What needed to be claimed by women when George Eliot began to write was not difference, which was taken for granted and used to circumscribe women but likeness: likeness of capacity of intellectual range of emotional force and endurance, above all, likeness of access before real difference could be discovered.

Let the whole field of reality be laid open to woman as well as to man, and then that which is peculiar to her mental modification instead of being, as it is now, a source of discord and repulsion between the sexes, will be found to be necessary complement to the truth and beauty of life.

So she wrote in 1854 in the typically optimistic formulation of her earliest journalism.

The following year saw George Eliot writing an essay on ‘Margaret Fuller and Mary Wollstonecraft’ in which she quoted Margaret Fuller, approving her demonstrations of the ‘folly of absolute definitions of woman’s nature and absolute demarcations of woman’s mission’, George Eliot quoted:

“Nature seems to delight in varying the arrangement, as if to show that she will be fettered by no rule; and we must admit the same varieties she admits.”

Sixteen years later, she opened ‘*Middlemarch*’ with an ironic glance at the false scientificism of absolute demarcations of women’s functions. John Stuart Mill in ‘*The Subjection Of Women*’ (1869) also saw the circularity of women’s capacities which were based on their current curtailed role in society. The likeness claimed is not identity, but rather the right to discovery and change:

“We want freedom and culture for woman, because subjection and ignorance have debased her and with her, man.”

The question of how far women must be identified with passivity beset George Eliot throughout her career as a writer and she persistently questions, while never entirely escaping, the strong connection society has made between women and passivity.

In her notebooks we find frequent extracts which imply doubts about the extent to which men and women are different in nature, rather than in their upbringing in culture:

The virtue of a man and of a woman is one and the same says Plutarch.

Reading Shakespeare’s sonnets, she noted that some of the sonnets are painfully abject. He adopts language which might be taken to describe the miserable slavery of oppressed wives:

For example,

I am to wait, though waiting so be hell,
Nor blame your pleasure be it ill or well.

Her courage was silent. It took the form of writing, of private action, not of public campaign. In writing she could tease out the meaning of action with a profound but unyielding compunction. The intransigence of this insight perhaps helped to account for her knowledge of remorse. In her life, she made extreme, irrevocable commitments without confiding in her friends before-hand or insisting that they sympathise afterwards. Her moral fascination with renunciation went alongside a passionate grasp of what was possible. What to give up and what persistently to claim was the key problem for her. She works at the problem at the level of plot and characterization and blanching out of the male narrator in her later works.

Following a perspective such as this, we are in a position to comprehend that Austen’s subject matter is the central subject matter of rational or enlightenment, feminism and that has viewpoint on the moral nature and status of women, female education, marriage, authority and the family and the representative of women in literature is remarkably similar to that shown on Mary Wollstonecraft in a *Vindication of the Rights Of Woman*.

The images portrayed of Wollstonecraft and Austen are at two different ends of the scale that it seems nothing but a figment of the imagination to consider them both as feminist moralist of the same school. Kirkham suggests that the varying contexts in which their work has been discussed has obliterated the significant manners in which the two thought alike and wiped off the common line of feminist concern and interest that goes back to Mary Astell at the very end of

the seventeenth century in which their ideas had their foundation. We see that Jane Austen was an anti-Romantic in an age which, so far as literature is concerned, we characterise as 'Romantic' and do not question why Austen follows Wollstonecraft in pointed hostility to the new impulse. We note that Sir Thomas Bertram is wrong about nearly everything while Fanny Price is right about nearly everything, yet why should we fail to connect Austen's affirmation of Fanny's rationality with her feminist purpose in her most ambitious and in Lionel Trilling called as "the most offensive novels". We see that Emma Woodhouse "has a moral life as a man has a moral life". So we should question accounts of Emma in which Mr. Knightley is held to be a wholly 'reliable' narrator and in which the heroine's progress towards self-knowledge is seen as entirely under his guardianship, rather than dependent upon her own evaluation of personal experience as she grows up.

We, also, observe that Anne Eliot is both more sensible and more sensitive than anyone else in *Persuasion* but fails to connect her superiority of intelligence with contemporary argument about the moral nature and capacity of the two genders. Now, if we miss Jane Austen's engagement with fiction and morals as a distinctively feminist engagement, it becomes an onerous task to give a coherent account of the development of her art. Therefore we have to see, Austen as a literary artist and innovator to her declared position as feminist moralist and critic of fictional tradition: to relate the sparkle of confident intelligence which cannot be ignored in her work, to the feminist insistence, in her day upon woman as 'rational creatures' and to their artistic competence in the new literary form, which was both a new art and a new form of moral discourse.

Jane Austen became a publishing novelist in 1811, but her novels are the culmination of a line of development in thought and fiction which goes back to the start of the eighteenth century and which deserves to be called 'feminist' since it was connected with establishing the moral equality of men and women and the proper status of individual woman as accountable beings.

Samuel Richardson's last novel had been widely and long held to be a failure as a work of literary imagination but it has held a high place in the interest and affections of women, including the two major novelists, Jane Austen and George Eliot, who one cannot suppose to be indifferent to its literary qualities. It is pretty clear that they were well aware of them, and yet, as late as 1800 as thereabouts. Jane Austen appears to have written, or revised, a satirical skit called 'Sir Charles Grandison', and George Eliot when she discovered the novel in 1847, said:

I had no idea that Richardson was worth so much ... the morality is perfect – there is nothing for the new lights to correct.³⁰

Later she wrote of *Grandison*:

I should be sorry to be the heathen that did not like that book. I do not like Harriet Byron much, she is too proper and insipid. Lendy G (Charlotte Grandison) is the egm, with her marmoset.

Questions as to why Austen and Eliot responded strongly to this novel and how far they agreed or disagreed in their attitude towards it come naturally to the mind. While trying to search for answers we get to know about the continuity of a female tradition of fiction, and on the curious estrangement of Austen from some of her successors in the mid nineteenth century.

Jane Austen was brought up on *Grandison* and first came to it as a novel which her mother enjoyed. Growing up as she did in an age of revolution, when feminism became a subject of political controversy she understood quiet clearly that *Grandison* was a crucial novel in the evolution of changing ideas about the right basis of relationships between the sexes. The evidence of Austen's own writings suggests a highly critical attitude for *Grandison* and some

antipathy to Richardson in general. In the first she says she is to have a some new caps made, one of which will be 'white satin and lace, and a little white flower perking out of the left ear, like Harriet Byron's feather'. This is a clear reference to the improper costume worn by Miss Byron at the masquerade from which she was abducted, only narrowly escaping ruin by Sir Hargrave Pollexfen. The second makes fun of Harriet Byron's excessive gratitude to Sir Charles's and his sister for having rescued her from villain as quoted in Letters of Jane Austen.

There can be doubt that Austen and Eliot agreed in their dislike of Harriet Byron and in their enjoyment of the irreverence of the Good man's sister but, whereas George Eliot thought 'the morality...perfect', Jane Austen took it to be very defective.

Austen had thought hard and long about Grandison, whereas Eliot had not, but I think their differences on the morality of the novel reflect fundamental difference of attitude towards benevolent patriarchy.

Austen's feminism had immunized her thoroughly against Romanticism and she had little time for those who are too good or great to make equal marriages. George Eliot, on the other hand was a part of the Romantic particularly for Great Men and could find no better life for her heroines than to adopt the role of assistant to truly good and great ones. Austen's heroines do not worship or adore their husbands though they respect and love them. They are not, especially in the later novels, allowed to get married at all until the heroes have provided convincing evidence of appreciating their qualities of mind, and of accepting their powers of rational judgment, as well as their hearts. As Austen's sympathetically defective patriarch Mr. Bennet, says, his daughter's husband must be her 'partner in life' for she will never be happy in an 'unequal marriage'. He means one where her husband lacks her superiority of head and heart, not that the unequal fortunes of Mr. Darcy and Miss Bennet will cause trouble.

George Eliot encapsulates most closely on the emotional artistry of Jane Austen, in the representation of remorse with its endless replay of the past. Its obsessional search for fresh reading, a reading which allows issue out of fixed scenes. George Eliot's response to other women writing fiction in the 1850's shows her challenging assumptions through revision, opening up sealed contradictions and pressing them apart throughout her career she manifested a desire to reconcile events and people, a desire outwitted by an equally obdurate sense of how far things hold apart. She refuses the idea of the 'blameless victim' and writes a apropos Antigone:

"That we shall never be able to attain a great right without also doing a wrong"

The big difference between self-characterization as we have it in Jane Austen and as we have it in a later novelist like George Eliot is that 'constraint' for Jane Austen is the condition of life – accepted, uncomplained of. While George Eliot always endeavours to surprise us with the exceptional qualities of her characters. Her self-projections have thus a true grace of 'irresponsibility'. They are at once a humorous indulgence and a spiritual exercise. What is subtle and distinctive about the projections of George Eliot is her claim to almost scientific objectivity. From imaginations of the self they have been converted into portraits which conceal their origins in the claim to a generalized social significance. They represent the self analysis of their creator turned outward and developed into a portent, an exemplary type; and this can only occur because their creator's vision of society is as personal as original as she is herself. George Eliot cannot be said to belong to a society: if she did she would not be the great writer she is. Jane Austen, however, lived with her characters in a fashion analogous to the way in which she lived with real neighbours; only with the compulsion of that actuality transmuted into the freedom of creation. It is because of this that she can imply without compunction or apology her lack of understanding of what does not concern her daily existence. By writing about the lives of the kind of people

who were 'comprehensible, interesting, and dear' to her, Jane Austen on a smaller scale, is not showing us something but living it for us, and with us. The world of Jane Austen seems complete to us because she has the confidence of insiders. The intellectual that George Eliot is – she is outside life. She is interested in everything that life has to offer to their contemplation – an omnivorous interest is laid upon her as a sacred duty.

Each of George Eliot's character has a deep feminine passion for goodness, which makes the place where she stands in aspiration and agony the heart of the book – still and cloistered like a place of worship, but that she no longer knows to whom to pray. In learning they seek their goal; in the ordinary tasks of womanhood; in the wider service of their kind. They do not find what they seek and we do not wonder. The ancient consciousness of woman, charged with suffering and sensibility and for so many ages dumb, seems in them to have brimmed and overflowed and uttered a demand for something that is perhaps incompatible with the facts of human existence. George Eliot had far too much intelligence to tamper with those facts. Save for the supreme courage of their endeavour, the struggle ends, for her heroines, in tragedy, or in a compromise that is even more melancholy. But their story is the incomplete version of the story that is George Eliot herself. For her too, the burden and the complexity of womanhood were not enough; she had to reach beyond the sanctuary and pluck for herself the strange fruits of art and knowledge. Clasp them as few women have ever clasped them, she would not renounce her own inheritance the difference of view, the difference of standard – nor accept an inappropriate reward. And herein lies her 'feminism'.

Jane Austen, too, proclaimed no overt feminism in her novels but she knew a woman's worth and can be called as one of the forerunners of the feminists. If her novels do not serve up angry arguments it is because they were evidently meant to entertain, not to offend; they are not in any superficial sense didactic or moralising or polemical. They are, up to a point, models of decorum. They undermine many cosy social assumptions all the more devastatingly for that: mercenary marriages, gross and petty snobbery, the treatment of less privileged women – the treatment of women altogether.

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