



**THE NINETEENTH CENTURY LITERATURE AND FEMINIST MOTIVES IN JANE
AUSTEN'S NOVELS**

ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore feminist viewpoints in Jane Austen's works in general. As a famous 19th Century novelist, Jane Austen tried to show the realities of women in her time. The common theme in all Austen's works includes the marriages of young women and the general social class structure of England in the 19th Century. Jane Austen was a published female novelist who wrote under her own name which can be seen as an important feminist quality. She gifted six novels to readers about women centred in the thoughts, desires and behaviours of them. Besides, new innovations in the 19th Century literature have also been mentioned in this study.

Keywords: Jane Austen, 19th Century Literature, Feminism

**ONDOKUZUNCU YÜZYIL EDEBİYATI VE JANE AUSTEN'İN ROMANLARINDAKİ
FEMİNİST MOTİFLER**

ÖZET

Bu çalışma, genel anlamda Jane Austen'in eserlerindeki feminist bakış açısını ortaya çıkarmayı amaçlamaktadır. Ondokuzuncu yüzyılın ünlü romancısı Jane Austen kendi çağının kadınlarının gerçeklerini göstermeye çalışmıştır. Austen'in bütün eserlerindeki ortak tema ondokuzuncu yüzyıl İngilteresi'nin genel sosyal sınıf yapısı ve genç kadınların evlilikleri ile ilgilidir. Jane Austen kendi adı altında yazmış olan kadın romancıdır ve bu özelliği ile önemli bir feminist özellik ortaya koyar. Yazar, okuyuculara kadınların düşüncelerini, taleplerini ve davranışlarını anlatan altı roman bırakmıştır. Bu çalışmada ayrıca ondokuzuncu yüzyıl edebiyat dünyasında meydana gelen yeniliklerden de bahsedilmiştir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Jane Austen, 19.Yüzyıl Edebiyatı, Feminizm



1. INTRODUCTION (GİRİŞ)

The 19th Century has brought new trends to literature and is the most important period in many countries as well as England's literary history. Eagleton (1996:16) claims that the modern sense of the word *literature* only really gets under way in the nineteenth century. The general features of literary works in the 19th century were concerned with class distinction, industry, democracy, art and culture.

The 19th Century opens with Romanticism, a movement that spread throughout Europe in reaction to 18th-century rationalism, and this century developed itself with a design to react against the dramatic changes on people. The French Revolution in 1798 was a basis for the romantics. Urgan (1989:169) mentions that Rousseau is considered the father of Romanticism.

According to romantics, the most important feature of a work is to express the feelings. According to Moran (1991:91), from now on, a work is no more a mirror but a window which is open through the soul of the artist. It was, in fact, only with what we now call the *Romantic period* that our own definitions of literature began to develop.

Romanticism is a sweeping but indispensable modern term applied to the profound shift in Western attitudes to art and human creativity that dominated much of European culture in the first half of the 19th century, and that has shaped most subsequent developments in literature, even those reacting against it. In its most coherent early form, as it emerged in the 1790s in Germany and Britain, and in the 1820s in France and elsewhere, it is known as the Romantic Movement or Romantic Revival. Its chief emphasis was upon freedom of individual self-expression: sincerity, spontaneity, and originality became the new standards in literature, replacing the decorous imitation of classical models favoured by 18th-century neoclassicism.

Rejecting the ordered rationality of the Enlightenment as mechanical, impersonal, and artificial, the Romantics turned to the emotional directness of personal experience and to the boundlessness of individual imagination and aspiration. Increasingly independent of the declining system of aristocratic patronage, they saw themselves as free spirits expressing their own imaginative truths; several found admirers ready to hero-worship the artist as a genius or prophet. 'The restrained balance valued in 18th-century culture was abandoned in favour of emotional intensity, often taken to extremes of raptures, nostalgia (for childhood or the past), horror, melancholy, or sentimentality, almost all showed a new interest in the irrational realms of dream and delirium or of folk superstition and legend. The creative imagination occupied the centre of Romantic views of art, which replaced the 'mechanical' rules of conventional form with an 'organic' principle of natural growth and free development', (Baldick, 1991).

The literary work in Romanticism itself comes to be seen as a mysterious organic unity, in contrast to the fragmented individualism of the capitalist marketplace: it is 'spontaneous' rather than rationally calculated, creative rather than mechanical. The word 'poetry', then, no longer refers simply to a technical mode of writing. For Eagleton (1996:17-19), poetry has deep social, political and philosophical implications, and at the sound of it the ruling class might quite literally reach for its gun. Literature has become a whole alternative ideology, and the 'imagination' itself, as with Blake and Shelley, becomes a political force. Its task is to transform society in the name of those energies and values which art embodies. Most of the major Romantic poets were themselves political activists, perceiving continuity rather than conflict between their literary and



social commitments. Eagleton adds that for Romanticism, indeed, the symbol becomes the panacea for all problems.

The romantic trend can also be traced within the confines of a national literature. Early English Romanticism was perhaps more lyrical in its first appearances, particularly with Wordsworth and Coleridge, but also Shelley and Keats, than any other form of European Romanticism. 'These early Romantics also expressed their feelings about the new poetry in a spontaneous lyric mode and their ideas about imagination, genius, and creativity with a lyric thrust' (Esterhammer, 2002:115).

In France, Romanticism started with Victor Hugo (Urgan, 1989:170). Tolerance and Liberty was very important for Hugo. His first example was *Hernani*. According to Hugo art should no longer be the exclusive possession and privilege of the social elite, but belong to the people: Hugo conceived his theatre as a theatre for the people (Fischer, 2001:219).

The American Edgar Allan Poe lived in the age of Romanticism. One of the most important Romantic ideas was to escape from reality. Poems and stories could take people out of real life and into a dream world where they felt and saw and heard things that never were and never will be. Poe generally wrote horror stories because people wanted to read them. The readers saw the cold reality of his everyday life.

French arts had been hampered by the Napoleonic Wars, which took place between 1804 and 1815, but subsequently developed rapidly. Modernism is Self-Reassurance, and is an extreme consciousness of time that helps to determine, by contrast, the secular values of Enlightenment modernity. The reason and humanism of the Enlightenment are characterized among other things by a sense of the temporality of existence that is promising rather than overwhelming. The modern world is distinguished from the old by the fact that it opens itself to the future; the epochal new beginning is rendered constant with each moment that gives birth to the new. Schleifer (2000:17-18) mentions that Hegel identifies the beginning of the modern, a glorious sunrise, with the break that the Enlightenment and the French Revolution signified for the more thoughtful spectators at the close of the eighteenth and the start of the nineteenth century.

On February 21, 1848, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels published the Communist Manifesto. Karl Marx was one of the intellectual giants of the 19th Century. While it is true that even without him we would still be arguing about capitalism and socialism, class struggle and revolution, it cannot be denied that in his work he established in large part the framework within which the discussion has been carried on.

Meanwhile, there was a huge literary output during the 19th century. Some of the most famous writers included the Russians Leo Tolstoy, Anton Chekov and Fyodor Dostoevsky; the English Charles Dickens, John Keats, and Jane Austen; the Irish Oscar Wilde; the Americans Edgar Allan Poe and Mark Twain; and the French Victor Hugo, Honoré de Balzac, Jules Verne and Charles Baudelaire.

Tolstoy is a significant Russian writer of the 19th century who was a naturalist. Orwin (1993:208) declares that despite the naturalism of Tolstoy's later works, including *Anna Karenina*, in comparison with *War and Peace*, he moved in the 1870s toward a greater subjectivism that anticipated the open subjectivism and symbolism of the Silver Age in Russian literature. In tandem with this development, the importance of the individual actually increases in his art. At the same time, however, he placed careful limits on subjectivism at the point where it seemed likely to affect the possibility of morality.



Anton Chekhov is a Russian playwright and the master of modern short story. He portrayed often life in the Russian small towns, where tragic events occur in a minor key, as a part of everyday texture of life. His characters are passive by-standees in regard to their lives, filled with the feeling of hopelessness and the fruitlessness of all efforts. Chekhov's first book of stories (1886) was a success, and gradually he became a full-time writer who made social critics.

In England, a famous writer of the 19th century is Charles Dickens. He is unlearned and he wrote of low life and was a romantic. Dickens is concerned with the problems of crime and poverty, (Burgess, 1984: 183-185). Another important writer of the 19th century in England is Jane Austen. According to Burgess (1984:174-175), Austen is the first important woman novelist who shows the little world of the ordinary families. Therefore, we can say that she makes a presentation of human situations. Austen can be described as a realistic, moral and social critic. We may say that by using somewhat grotesque situations and temperamentally conflicting characters, Austen paints a full picture of the landed gentry and expects her readers to draw certain moral conclusions.

Austen's heroines are independent women who share ideals in a male-dominated society. In her novels she expresses the feminist feelings of her time. Therefore, Austen makes connections with choice in marriage and the logical female thoughts. Austen's heroines are unique women who try to stand up for themselves in a society which is an ideal of feminism.

2. RESEARCH SIGNIFICANCE (ÇALIŞMANIN ÖNEMİ)

Jane Austen is an important cornerstone of the 19th Century English literature, and in this study, it is aimed to explore the feminist motives in her novels. It is also purposed to present that Jane Austen was a feminist during the production of her works, although the feminist movement started mainly in the second half of the 20th Century.

3. JANE AUSTEN, HER TIME AND STYLE (JANE AUSTEN'İN ZAMANI VE STİLİ)

Jane Austen lived between 1775 and 1817, at a time when the political and the economic importance of the country gentry made it felt throughout society. Hence, she focused on the life, manners, and values of this social segment. The landed country gentry provided her with various social types and a social context with middle class manners and mores. 'However, the social life in Jane Austen's England was not uniform and peaceful. While the privileged gentry and the nobility prospered economically and owned large lands, and the under-privileged lower classes, which mainly consisted of peasants and the jobless, were suffering from serious economic problems' (Copeland 1993:68).

The discrepancy between the under-privileged, the weaks and the privileged caused political instability in the country. For instance: "..... the industrialists had been actively involved in a revolution of their own way", (Butler 1990:76). Also with the repercussions of the French Revolution, an increasing awareness of the need for reform was felt. In this respect, Wilks (1984:10) has pointed out that, 'Rebellion was in the air of England. Many were to champion the cause of the French Revolution while America found its sympathisers in the London of George III. Like France and America, England was ripe for rebellion, for in the time of Jane Austen it was a land of high contrasts and gross inequality in living standards and conditions,



between the nobility and gentry on the one hand and the common people on the other'.

In this rebellious atmosphere, Austen mostly dealt in her novels with the individuals and the societies in which they lived. The landed country gentry and especially the women characters constituted her main material for fiction. One may say that her fiction was mainly concerned with a depiction of women as liberal and self - confident characters in a social context with strict moral and social codes of behaviour. Therefore, her fictions to a large extent, focus on women characters rather than on the whole range of social types. This may be regarded as a limitation of her material. Yet, her insight into the status of women in her age and her concern with gender relations overcomes this limitation.

In her fiction, Jane Austen uses irony and ridicule to describe the social manners and behaviour of her characters, and her novels turn into a kind of comedy of manners. Austen can be described as a realistic, moral and social critic. We may say that by using somewhat grotesque situations and temperamentally conflicting characters, Austen paints a full picture of the landed gentry and expects her readers to draw certain moral conclusions. Her characters are fresh and lively. They reveal themselves, not only through the crises of life, but also through trivial everyday events such as walks, carriage rides, social evenings, morning calls, little unexpected visits and shopping. The height of excitement was a ball or a picnic. **She has given** the readers a variety of characters whose personalities are revealed through their context and dialogues.

Since Jane Austen herself came from a middle class family, she wrote for and about her own class. She deals with relationships in that small social group and the relationships between particular individuals in that group. Marriages were between people who lived in such a society, and they provide the happy endings of her novels. Most of the Jane Austen studies consist of the changing moral values, conflicting characters, gender relations, and self-knowledge like one can easily find in Jane Austen's outstanding novels such as *Sense and Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudice*, and *Emma*. All these issues come under the general topics of the individual and society in Jane Austen. In Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* the readers can look through a close study of the two conflicting temperaments represented by the two main female characters named as Marianne and Elinor; in them Austen portrays two feminine types who are ruled by reason and emotion respectively. 'Prides' and 'prejudices', in her *Pride and Prejudice*, are some other Universal, classical subjects of Austen in which Jane Austen's depiction of the interrelationship between love, money and marriage is analysed. Thus, the relationship between the individual and society is emphasized. Jane Austen's another outstanding novel *Emma*, is mainly concerned with difference, in class and moral values and the attainment of self - knowledge themes.

In all of Jane Austen's novels money is a recurrent and common theme. For most of her heroines, money is a basic criterion for choosing a husband as in *Pride and Prejudice*, written in 1813. Marriage was the most important concern of the period both for men and for women. Not only young men, but also young women wanted to marry a suitable person when the time came. Austen's introductory remarks in *Pride and Prejudice* stress the contemporary importance given to marriage:

It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife. However little known the feelings or



views of such a man may be on his first entering a neighbourhood, this truth is so well fixed in the minds of the surrounding families, that he is considered as the rightful property of some one or other of their daughters (Austen, 1987:51).

This statement shows that for the families of the age the financial aspect of marriage was a priority for them. For a woman it was important to find a wealthy husband as it was the only way for financial security. Hence, for a young man prepared to marry wealth was as important as being handsome and morally perfect. Therefore the gender relations in terms of love and marriage were conditioned and motivated by reference to wealth.

Emma (1815) is the story of the rich, beautiful daughter of a country gentleman. Her father has willingly let her have her own way after the death of her mother when she was a child. The Woodhouses are at the top of the social group in their very limited neighbourhood which is Highbury. Emma Woodhouse, "handsome, clever, and rich" (1996:5), is given free rein as mistress of the house by her hypochondriac father. Although Emma has a high opinion of herself as an intelligent and experienced person, her experience is in fact extremely restricted.

At the very beginning of the novel Emma is feeling all alone because her governess has just married Mr. Weston, who is a local gentleman. However, Emma soon makes friends with Harriet Smith who is a young woman from the local boarding school. She persuades her to refuse the marriage proposal of Robert Martin, a respectable farmer. Soon Emma decides on a match between Harriet and the local clergyman, Mr. Elton. But Mr. Elton's attention turns to Emma herself but not to Harriet. When Emma refuses him, he goes to Bath, and then he returns with a dominant woman as his wife. In Austen's novel, Emma, the readers observe the female heroine, Emma usually as a matchmaker. Jane Austen as a female author very well dealt with the women issues and throughout the novel Emma turns into a real lady from a matchmaking girl with her real, bitter life lectures, that is to say life experiences.

4. JANE AUSTEN AND FEMINISM (JANE AUSTEN VE FEMINİZM)

Although Feminism gained popularity in the second half of the 20th Century, it is easy to say that the famous 19th Century woman novelist Jane Austen was also a feminist. Joannou (1995:128) states that in 1978 the Marxist-Feminist Literature Collective adopted Mary Wollstonecraft and Jane Austen as figures epitomising the feminist and feminine impulses in women's writing. Joannou additionally mentions that the Marxist-Feminist Literature Collective exemplified how these two women writers in the past had opted to concentrate their energies on access to the public sphere of life or else.

By general definition, feminism is a philosophy in which women and their contributions are valued. It is based on social, political and economic equality for women. Feminists can be anyone in the population, men, women, girls or boys. Feminism can also be described as a movement or a revolution that includes women and men who wish the world to be equal without boundaries. These boundaries or blockades are better known as discrimination and biases against gender, sexual orientation, age, marital status and economic status.

Everyone views the world with his or her own sense of gender and equality. Feminists view the world as being unequal. They wish to see the gender gap and the idea that men are superior to women decreased



or even abolished. DeLamotte (1990:p.ix) states that Feminism has been one of the most important forces in shaping our modern-day society.

Jane Austen, who is a cornerstone of the 19th Century English literature, is clearly a critique of assumptions about both gender and social class. Her beliefs and behaviours are based on feminism (belief in the social, political, and economic equality of the sexes). (Joannou, 1995:93) states that feminism is evoked, as by Charlotte Bronte in *Jane Eyre*, primarily to induce our identification with the heroine in her suffering.

Austen explores the depth at which women may act in society and finds her own boundaries in the 19th Century's England. Thus, the notions of feminism often follow the subjects of class distinctions and boundaries. At the beginning of the 19th century, little opportunity existed for women, and because of this, many of them felt uncomfortable when attempting to enter many parts of society. The absence of advanced educational opportunities for women and their alienation from almost all fields of work gave them little option in life.

Austen's novels were written around the time of the early women's rights movement when women were starting to think about equal rights. She is an important step in the evolution of the feminist movement. Austen was basically saying that women are equal to men in every way. Austen's novels show that some Victorian women were becoming independently minded.

According to Hohne (1994:155), Feminists more often see dialogue as a form of oppression, a war in which the party with the weakest and least unified voice always loses. Feminism has been a prominent and controversial topic in writings.

An important theme, parallel to feminism, in Austen's novels is the efforts of the heroines to assert their own identity within a male-dominated society. Through her novel, Austen refutes Victorian stereotypes about women, articulating what was for her time a radical feminist philosophy.

Austen criticizes the women in her novels who lack the features of logic thought. The novelist also criticizes uneducated women which is a landmark for feminists. In *Sense and Sensibility*, for example, the character Lucy Steele is described as 'ignorant and illiterate' (Sense and Sensibility: 118). In this novel Lucy is such a character that the readers dislike since she lacks the education to make logic decisions.

In *Pride and Prejudice* Mary Bennet is criticized by Austen. She seems more studious than her other sisters. Mary in this novel believes herself superior to her sisters because of her reading hobby, but this hobby has given her a false pride. Although Mary reads a lot she received inadequate education to make logic decisions. As a feminist novelist, Austen gives the message that all women should get formal education.

Elinor Dashwood, Elizabeth Bennet and Anne Elliot are ideal women characters who can contribute to the society as a whole. In *Persuasion*, Anne Elliot learns to make her own choice which is an ideal of feminism. Through Elizabeth Bennet, for example, Austen shows the struggle of a woman's capacity for intelligence and identifying herself. In Jane Austen's viewpoint the independence of her heroines is a basic element for the advance of women within society.

5. CONCLUSION (SONUÇ)

The 19th Century brought several innovations to literature and left plenty of classics after it to readers. Jane Austen was and still is an admired novelist of this heritage. In the studies of Jane



Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Emma* and her other works; it has been demonstrated that the characters face many social and moral limitations and restrictions.

Austen's female protagonists have conflicts with the established norms of their society and, therefore, struggle to accommodate their search for freedom together with their submission to the pressure of the milieu. They have to fight with the social and moral norms, and undergo serious tests and experiences in order to be strong morally, socially, and in terms of gender.

Austen's novels are all about young women who find true love after some experiences. Her novels end with the heroine's marriage. Austen's choice to write novels about women in the 19th Century is a basic element of the feminist thought which emerged in the 20th Century. Her heroines are individuals who are independent to think and who defend their own choices. The novelist's characters are strong, independent and intelligent which feminism requires for women.

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