

# A Study of Feminist Point of View in Jane Austen's Novels



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## Abstract

Point of view is the angle from which we consider things, which shows us the opinion or feelings of the individuals involved in a particular situation. Every individual has his/her angle of looking at things based on his previous experiences of life. In literature, point of view is the mode of narration that an author employs to let the readers "hear" and "see" what takes place in a story. Though there are numerous possible arrangements, there are three main narrative situations through which the story is told, where the author is omniscient, the third person narrative and the first person narration. It is not essential that the narrative in a novel should carry the narrator's point of view. There may be a single point of view or multiple points of view. The viewpoint may shift from one character to another, to which E.M. Forster calls bouncing. Novelist as an omniscient narrator may project his/her point of view through his protagonist. When we analyse Jane Austen's novels, we find that Jane Austen as an omniscient narrator narrates not only the story but also the situations, motives, actions and views of her characters. And she authoritatively describes every situation from women's point of view. In almost all of her novels women dominate and there is no scene without a woman. If we go deep and analyse Jane Austen's novels, we find that all of her novels are written from the feminist point of view. Feminism is a relatively new concept and the word feminist was not in use during Austen's era, there are plenty of evidences that she was aware of and unhappy about disparities in rights and opportunities between men and women. While the word feminist was not in use during Austen's era, there are plenty of evidences that she was aware of and unhappy about disparities in rights and opportunities between men and women. She used writing fiction as a tool to emphasize women point of view.

**Keywords:** Feminist, Point of View, Omniscient narrator, Perspective, Marriage, Love.

## Introduction

Point of view signifies the way a story is told and the perspective or perspectives established by an author through whom the reader is presented with the characters, actions, setting, and events which constitute the narrative in a work of fiction. The question of point of view has always been a relevant and genuine concern of the novelist. Novelists have devised many different ways to present a story, and many works employ several ways within the single narrative. Though there are numerous possible arrangements, there are three main narrative situations through which the story is told, where the author is omniscient, the third person narrative and the first person narration. It is not essential that the narrative in a novel should carry the narrator's point of view. There may be a single point of view or multiple points of view. The viewpoint may shift from one character to another, to which E.M. Forster calls bouncing. Novelist as an omniscient narrator may project his/her point of view through his protagonist. It may be a single consistent point of view or varying point of view.

Different critics have used different terms for point of view. Jzevetan Todorov in 1966 called it "Aspect". Gerard Genette (1980) discussed it as Distance and Perspective under the category of Mood. George Blin used the term 'Restriction of field' for point of view. Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Wavan has used the term "Focus of Narration" for point of view. Now a day a single consistent point of view is less prevalent. The shifting point of view is more prevalent. E.M. Forster calls it a "Bouncing" and he uses this method in Howards End. J.A. Cuddon defines point of view in these words.

The position of a narrator in relation to his story; thus the outlook from which the events are related. There are many variations and combinations but three basic ones may be distinguished. Firstly the omniscient – the author moves from character to character, place to place, and episode to episode with complete freedom, giving himself access to his characters' thoughts and feelings whenever he chooses and providing information whenever he wishes. This is probably the commonest point of view and one which has been established for a very long time. Chaucer used the method very successfully in *Troilus and Criseyde* (c. 1335); Fielding employed it in *Tom Jones* (1746); Huxley in *Brave New World* (1932); Gabriel Fielding in *The Birthday King* (1962). Such a point of view does not require the author to stay outside his narrative. He may interpolate his own commentaries. Secondly, the third-person-the author chooses a character and the story is related in terms of that character in such a way that the field of vision is confined to him or her alone. A good example of this is *Stretcher* in Henry James's *The Ambassadors* (1903). Thirdly, first person narrative- here the story is told in the first person by one of his characters. Classic examples are Dickens's *David Copperfield* (1849-50) and Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916). This method has become increasingly popular and has been used by many authors during this century. A recent instance is Graham Greene's *Travels with My Aunt* (1969). Various combinations of these methods have been attempted by many authors; in some cases deliberately; in some, apparently, haphazardly. For example: Dickens shifts his view point continually in *Bleak House* (1852-3). So does Tolstoy in *War and Peace* (1865-72). Likewise Gide in *Les Faux-Monnayeurs* (1926). In many cases the narrator is a minor character within the story. Examples of this method are to be found in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847), Conrad's *Victory* (1915) and Somerset Maugham's *The Razor's Edge* (1944).<sup>1</sup>

The point of view means the views of a particular person from which a story is seen or told. Three principal viewpoints are employed commonly are –

#### **The Omniscient Point of View**

The narrator on the story-teller knows everything that needs to be known about the agents

and events; that he is entirely free to move as he will in time and place, and shifts from character to character, reporting (or concealing) what he chooses of their speech and actions; and also that he has "privileged" access to a character's thoughts and feelings and motives, as well as to his overt speech and actions.

Within this mode, the intrusive narrator is one who not only reports but freely comments on his characters, evaluating their actions and motives and expressing his views about human life in general; ordinarily, all the omniscient narrator's reports and judgements are to be taken as authoritative. This is the fashion in which many of the greatest novelists have written, including Fielding, Jane Austen, Dickens, Thackeray, Hardy, Dostoevsky and Tolstoy. In Fielding's *Tom Jones* and Tolstoy's *War and Peace* the intrusive narrator goes so far as to interpolate essays suggested by the subject matter of the novels. Alternatively, the Omniscient narrator may choose to be unintrusive, or impersonal: he describes, reports, or "shows" the action in dramatic scenes, without introducing his own comments or judgements. Extreme examples of the unintrusive narrator, who gives up even the privilege to access to inner feelings and motives, are to be found in a number of Hemingway's short stories; for examples, *The Killer* and *A Clean, Well-Lighted Place*.

#### **Third-Person Point of View**

A single character is used by the author as a central observer or participant in the action utilizing this device, the writer may, in the third person narrative, limit the knowledge available to the reader, as in Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, in which Stephen Dedalus' consciousness is all the reader knows.

#### **First-Person Point of View**

In a first person narrative, the narrator speaks as "I", and is himself a character in the story. He may be the central character, as in Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, or a minor figure who either observes or participates in the action, as in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, which Marlow does both. This device, the farthest removed from the omniscient point of view, significantly reduces the reader's sense of the author's presence in the work.

#### **Review of Literature**

The history of the feminist movement is divided into three "waves". Each wave dealt with different aspects of feminist issues. The first wave of nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, promoted women's right to vote. The second wave campaigned for legal and social equality for women in the 1960s. The third wave is a continuation of, and a reaction to, the perceived failures of second-wave feminism, which began in the 1990s. *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) by Mary Wollstonecraft, is one of the earliest works of feminist philosophy. *A Room of One's Own* (1929) by Virginia Woolf, talks about the respective space for women in literary tradition dominated by men. Victoria Kincaid (February 28, 2017) in *Was Jane Austen a Feminist?* Comments that While the word feminist was not in use during Austen's era, there is plenty of evidence that she was

aware of and unhappy about disparities in rights and opportunities between men and women. Austen's life itself may be the best argument for Austen as a feminist.

#### **Objectives of the Study**

1. To find out the feminist point of view in Jane Austen's Novels.
2. To find out whether the heroines of Austen fight for equality.
3. To find out whether all the protagonists have similar views on same problems or not?

#### **Analysis of Feminist Point of View**

When we analyse Jane Austen's novels, we find that Jane Austen as an omniscient narrator narrates not only the story but also the situations, motives, actions and views of her characters. And she authoritatively describes every situation from women's point of view. In almost all of her novels women dominate and there is no scene without a woman. If we go deep and analyse Jane Austen's novels, we find that all of her novels are written from the feminist point of view. Modern feminists who are trying to fight for women's emancipation and for women's equality can take a leaf from Jane Austen's novels. Jane Freeman's point of view about feminism is:

..... all feminists call for changes in the social, economic, political or cultural order, to reduce and eventually overcome this discrimination against women.<sup>2</sup>

Defining feminism as an organised women's movement to change their place in society, Olive Banks grants the title of feminists to "Any groups that have tried to change the position of women, or the ideas about women ..." <sup>3</sup>. Jane Austen's views are very much similar to modern feminists writers like Jane Freedman and Olive Banks. She tries to present feminist point of view of her own through her heroines. The present research paper tries to focus on such female view points with which Jane Austen has written her novels. Thus it would be apt to begin with her first and perhaps the best novels *Pride and Prejudice*.

Elizabeth Bennet is the main character of this novel. She always acts, not upon emotions but with intellect. She is a perfect psychologist, a worldly-wise, practical and coal-minded lady. She maintains perfect equilibrium in her speech and actions. Her elder sister Jane is more handsome than her, yet she is static or wooden because she is very docile, indifferent and reserve. On the contrary, Elizabeth attracts all of us towards her by virtue of her witty conversation and worldly wisdom. Her viewpoints dominate in the whole of the novel but sometimes other female characters also present their points of view. Like Jane Bennet presents her views about Mr. Bingley after dancing with him. She presents her our liking in a man. She likes sensible, good humoured and lively man.

He is just what a man ought to be" said she, "sensible, good humoured, lively; and I never saw such happy manners!- so much ease, with such perfect good breeding!"<sup>4</sup>

On the other hand, she does not like Mr. Darcy and finds him a disagreeable man. She considers that if Mr. Darcy likes any woman, it is her misfortune. It is so because she does not find those qualities in him which may attract a lady to fall in love with him.

..... he is such a disagreeable man that it would be quite a misfortune to be liked by him.<sup>(19)</sup>

Elizabeth Bennet knows the real feelings of her sister Jane for Mr. Bingley that she loves him. But she also knows that Jane is shy enough to express her love to Mr. Bingley. She says:

But if a woman is partial to a man, and does not endeavour to conceal it, he must find it out.<sup>(22)</sup>

Her above remark shows her views about her society in which woman in love always waits proposal from man and does not propose herself. Though she tries to express her feelings by her behaviour or body language, but it is the duty of man to find out her feelings. So she feels that if Jane tries to conceal her feelings Mr. Bingley must find it out.

She refuses Mr. Collins proposal for marriage because she finds in him a proven fool. She expresses her views again when Mr. Collins is not ready to believe her refusal because he believes that it is usual with young ladies to reject their suitor at the first instance while they secretly mean to accept it. She replies:

Your hope is rather an extraordinary one after my declaration. I do assure you that I am not one of those young ladies (if such young ladies there are) who are daring as to risk their happiness on the chance of being asked a second time.<sup>(90)</sup>

Her thinking is clearly feminist why should she risk her happiness for being asked a second time? It is possible that there may be no second chance. So Elizabeth believes in making the right use of her first favourable opportunity. Marriage for money is an important part of Jane Austen's society. Lydia's elopement with Wickham compels her to think about the reasons. Lydia has youth, health and good humour but not money. Elizabeth gets two reasons for their elopement. Firstly, Lydia's defective education, secondly Wickham's charm to captivate a woman. She again expresses her views about this situation:

But she is very young; she has never been taught to think on serious subjects; and for the last half year, nay, for a twelve month, she has been given up to nothing but amusement and vanity. She has been allowed to dispose of her time in the most idle and frivolous manner, and to adopt any opinions that came in her way. Since the -shire were first quartered in Meryton, nothing but love, flirtation, and officers, have been in her head. She has been doing everything in her power by thinking and talking on the subject, to give greater- what shall I all it susceptibility to her

feelings; which are naturally lively enough. And we all know that Wickham has every charm of person and address that can captivate a woman.<sup>(230)</sup>

Elizabeth tows the line of her creator who believes that marriage should be based on love .We should not make such relations which become burden in future. Lady Catherine de Bourgh reminds Elizabeth of her family, connections or fortune and also says that she should not quit that sphere in which she has been brought up. Elizabeth very assertively replies and talks about their equality:

In marrying your nephew, I should not consider myself as quitting that sphere. He is a gentlemen; I am gentleman's daughter; so for we are equal.<sup>(287)</sup>

Lady Catherine talks about the social status but Elizabeth thinks that good character is important rather than money. In the novel it is the viewpoint of Jane Austen that prevails. And Elizabeth and others tows the line of their creator. Elizabeth says to Mr. Darcy:

You must learn some of my philosophy. Think only of the past as its remembrance gives you pleasure.<sup>(297)</sup>

Elizabeth's viewpoint is very philosophic that to live a peaceful life we must forget our painful past. Her father asks her if she is marrying Darcy for money, fine clothes and fine carriages. She assures her father that Mr. Darcy is really the object of her choice and not the money, power or status. It is expected that she would live happily thereafter.

Elinor and Marianne are the twin heroines of Sense and Sensibility. Elinor is always a person of sense and Marianne always a person of sensibility. From the beginning to the middle Jane Austen as an Omniscient narrator presents double points of view, one is Elinor's and other is that of Marianne's. While talking to one another they present their points of view about different characters and situations. For example, Marianne's mother considers Edward Ferrars, a suitable match for Elinor. Mrs. Dashwood must have seen some traits in Edward suitable for Elinor but Marianne's views are different. She does not find those qualities in him which she would like to see in her ultimate man or which most of the women desire in their husbands. She explains:

Edwards is very amiable, and I love him tenderly. But yet, he is not the kind of young man-there is something wanting, his figure is not striking-it has none of that grace which I should expect in the man who could seriously attach my sister His eyes want all that spirit, that fire, which at once announce virtue and intelligence. And besides all this, I am afraid, mama, he has no real taste.<sup>5</sup>

Again there are double viewpoints of Elinor and Marianne's on marriage concerning Colonel Brandon. Frequent change of viewpoints can be seen here. Mrs. Jennings suspects that Colonel Brandon loves Marianne and finds no fault in such a relation. Mrs. Dashwood cannot think of a man five years

younger than herself, so exceedingly ancient, as a suitable match for the youthful fancy of her daughter. Marianne says that he is certainly younger than Mrs. Jennings but he is old enough to be her father and ridicules such a match. She says :when a man to be safe from such wit, if age and infirmity will not protect him?<sup>(25)</sup>

Elinor does not seem agreed with Marianne's views. She says his age may appear much greater but he is able to use his limbs. Elinor thinks about the security and comfort for a woman of seven and twenty and finds no short comings in marrying her to Colonel Brandon. But Marianne's feels that a woman of seven and twenty can never feel or inspire again and if her home be uncomfortable and shall fortune, she might bring herself to the offices of a nurse, for the sake of the provision and security of a wife. She considers such kind of relationship a pact or a marriage of convenience because at this age there will be hardly any warmth and affection between husband and wife. And wife has to do the duty of a nurse to serve her husband.

Marianne's views about the propriety of conduct are different from Elinor. Marianne goes to Allenham and spends a considerable time with Willoughby there. Her own pleasure is important for her than to think of propriety or impropriety. And she is not least shameful of impertinent remarks. But Elinor feels that :

..... the pleasantness of an employment does not always evince its propriety.<sup>(25)</sup>

Her openness and impropriety leads her to adverse results. Willoughby leaves Barton and Marianne and goes to London. Mrs Dashwood thinks that Mrs. Smith may suspect his concern and regard for Marianne and eagerly invented a business to dismiss Wiloughby. Elinor suspects their engagement. Jane Austen presents Elinor or Marianne's views about wealth and grandeur. While talking to Edward, Marianne says that wealth and grandeur has nothing to do with happiness. But Elinor's feels that wealth has much to do with happiness. But Marianne emphasises that :

.... money can only give happiness where there is nothing else to give it. Beyond a competence it can afford no real satisfaction, as for as mere self is concerned.<sup>(60)</sup>

Then they both agree on one point that money gives only materialistic happiness i.e. the things can be bought. Money cannot provide comfort with happiness. And Marianne considers two thousands a year is a moderate income for a family.

Marianne when used ill by Willoughby feels very dejected. It is unbelievable for her that he can do so. Elinor asks her if she was engaged to him. But Marianne does not consider any ceremony important for her. Though she is not engaged to Willoughby by any social ceremony, it is her feelings which make her realize so. 'I felt myself,' to be so solemnly engaged to him as if the strictest legal convenient had bound us to each other.<sup>(124)</sup> The whole novel moves mainly with double points of view and concludes happily with a

message. Elinor and Marianne get married and lead a happy life.

Emma is the only heroine who truly merits for the honorary title of the novel. Emma is an officious and self-confident girl but she is faulty. Emma's faults do actually form the whole theme of the story. Emma's chief failing, lies in her crude juvenile confidence of being able to manage the intimate personal affairs of those she loves. Her exertions are never for her own advantage. The novel runs from double points of view. It is the viewpoint of the omniscient authoress, which prevails here as in her other novels. But she projects the two points of view through Emma and John Knightly. If one is a distorted one, the other is a clear one. The reader is made to see both through omniscient authoress and his interest in Emma does not lessen or wane because he realizes the limitations of self-conceited heroine, Emma.

Emma prefers the company of women, more particularly of women whom she can master and direct, the fact is that this preference is intrinsic to her whole dominating and uncommitting personality. Emma has misconception that she made the match between Miss. Taylor and Mr. Weston. She finds the match making as the greatest amusement in the world.

It is the greatest amusement in the world! And after such success you know! Everybody said Mr. Weston, would never marry again. .... I planned the match from that hour; and when such success has blessed me in this instance, dear papa, you cannot think that I shall leave off match-making.<sup>6</sup>

She finds it a great business of her life to make matches. She wants to drive Mr. Martin out of Harriet's head and tries to make match between Harriet and Mr. Elton. She does so for she feels that "A woman is not to marry a man merely because she is asked, or because he is attached to her, and can write tolerable letter."<sup>(89)</sup> She wants to convince Harriet by her own feminist views that Harriet must have her own choice; she must not marry Mr. Martin only because he proposed her. Emma herself wants to marry for love with a very superior man of her choice. She says:

I have none of the usual inducements of women to marry. Were I fall in love, indeed, it would be a different thing? .... And, without love, I am sure I should be a fool to change such a situation as mine.<sup>7</sup>

Fanny Price in Mansfield Park is a silent observer in the half of the novel. She speaks less but whenever she speaks, gives important views. Miss Crawford is against of clergyman and finds fault in this profession. But Fanny's believes that every profession has its own importance. She says:

....., 'as for the son of an admiral to go into the navy, or the son of a general to be in the army, and nobody sees anything where their friends can serve them best, or suspects them to be less in earnest in it than they appear.'<sup>(136)</sup>

Fanny gets a marriage proposal from Henry Crawford but she has serious reasons to reject this proposal:

How could she have excited serious attachment in a man, who had seen so many, and been admired by so many, and flirted with so many, infinitely her superiors-who seemed so little open to serious impressions, even where pains had been taken to please him-who thought so slightly, so carelessly, so unfeelingly on all such points-who was everything to everybody, and seemed to find no one essential to him?<sup>(309)</sup>

Fanny is timid and passive but she knows her choice in a man. She has observed the behaviour of Henry how he had flirted with Maria and Julia at a time. A man, who is so careless about other's feelings and never serious about, cannot be her choice. No woman can feel secure with such type of man. Sir Thomas asks her the reason for her rejection. She says "I cannot like him, Sir, Well enough to marry him."<sup>(316)</sup> Like other heroines of Jane Austen she also thinks that liking and love is important for marriage. She thinks that Sir Thomas must feel her feelings that, "how wretched, and how unpardonable, how hopeless and how wicked it was, to marry without affection."<sup>(323)</sup>

Catherine Morland of Northanger Abbey is very simple and gothic infected heroine. From the beginning to the middle she is very attentive about her appearance and sometimes presents important thoughts about different things. Her friend Isabella Thorpe also shares her views with Catherine. They talk about their favourite complexion in a man. Both have different choices. Catherine's choice about man's complexion is: "Something between both, I think Brown not fair, and not very dark. But Isabella has different choice." She says: "Well, my taste is different. I prefer light eyes, and as to complexion ..... I like a sallow better the any other."<sup>8</sup>

If Men have different choices and views about women likewise women do. It can be said that Jane Austen has given feminist right to her heroines to choose the man of their choice.

Catherine likes Mr. Tilney who is a man of her choice and shares her feelings about the importance of marriage with him. She says:

People that marry can never part, but must go and keep house together. People that dance, only stand opposite each other in a long room for half an hour.<sup>(57)</sup>

According to Catherine marriage is an important social bond in which husband and wife never part. It is a mutual relationship based on love, so they like to go and keep house together. But people, who dance in a party, stand opposite to each other in a room for some time, and afterwards they part. It is so that there is no mutual relationship and love between them. They only dance for enjoyment and parting do not give pain to any of them. It proves

that marriage is an important social relationship in which spouses have to do certain duties.

Persuasion, a novel purely about love portrays the character of Anne Elliot as a lovelorn woman who presents herself to the thought that love should be restrained by parental and familial considerations. But in the end she is persuaded again, to believe that love should not be restrained by parental authority.

The most striking feature of Anne is her depth of thoughts and the character. Anne, in this regard, is an important over the other female protagonists of Austen. Anne goes deep into herself, she is fully aware of herself. She knows that she carries a highly sensitive heart within her, which comprehend it and to come to certain conclusion. Not only this, her sense of judgement is accurate Her sensitivity, accuracy of comprehension and her depth all make her stand apart from rest of the heroine of Austen. She is unlike Emma who poses her mind upon her. She is far away from the timidity of Fanny and different from them all. She speaks out when she wants to but never thrusts her opinion upon others:

There is hardly any personal defect which an agreeable manner might not gradually reconcile one to.<sup>9</sup>

She expresses her views about a woman who truly loves. Captain Hartville says that women easily forget their love. Anne aptly says:

'It would not be the nature of any woman who truly loved.'<sup>(236)</sup>

Like the other heroines of Jane Austen, Anne also believe that a woman who loves truly cannot cheat, betray or flirt with anybody. It is man's nature. She again says:

Man is more robust than woman, but he is not longer-lived, which exactly explains my view of the nature of their attachments. Nay, it would be too hard upon you, if it were otherwise. You have difficulties, and privations, and dangers enough to struggle with. You are always labouring and toiling, exposed to every risk and hardship. Your home, country, friends, all quitted. Neither time nor health, nor life, to be called your own. It would be too hard indeed' (with a faltering voice) if woman's feelings were to be added to all this'.<sup>(236-237)</sup>

Her opinions are really correct because true love has same importance for both for either men or women. Both never want to cheat anybody. But sometimes nature creates certain circumstances which make them to believe that they are cheated by their lovers. Women, who live in homes, have nothing to do but to think about their love, but men have many works to do and get little time to think about their love.

But it doesn't prove them cheater. Anne's belief that "true attachment and constancy were known only by woman,"<sup>(338)</sup> appear very prejudiced and faulty. There is no gender difference between true attachment and constancy.

Thus the major female character, Anne, like all the other heroines of Austen, is the eye of the novel. She is not a tragic figure who is misguided and mishandled by fate; she is capable enough to turn the tide according to her own will. She is a heroine who judges and judges rightly.

### Conclusion

Thus to conclude we find that all the protagonists of Jane Austen present their feminist point of view through their powerful speeches. Victoria Kincaid comments that "Elizabeth Bennet is too outspoken for a woman and refuses to bow to societal pressure to marry for the sake of money. Fanny Price sticks to her internal sense of right and wrong no matter what her "betters" say. *Sense and Sensibility* is a very eloquent examination of how women wrestle with questions of being ruled by head or heart. In all of her books, the heroines are struggling to find a place in the world where they can be true to themselves—without compromising their values and needs"<sup>10</sup>. All the heroines of Jane Austen have similar points of view about love and marriage. Points of view about their choice in physical appearance of their male partners may differ but all of them want intelligent and sensible life partner who can understand and care for them. All believe that marriage should be based on love. Money is an important thing but to marry only for money is a wrong which may spoil their future security and happiness'. So it can be said that women's point of view dominate in Jane Austen's novels.

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