

An Examination of Austen As A Discrete Feminist in *Persuasion*

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Abstract

Many feminists, including Virginia Woolf, consider Jane Austen as the 'Angel of the House'—a woman who conforms to the patriarchal values of her time. This paper aims to portray Jane Austen in a new light, as a distinct voice advocating for feminine liberation. Upon scrutinising Austen's 'Persuasion' more closely, this article uncovers numerous instances in which Austen endeavours to empower her female characters with agency. While Austen doesn't explicitly challenge patriarchal customs, she employs subtle references to challenge the prevalent gender roles in her society.

A woman writer in Austen's time would encounter numerous criticisms and social exclusion if she dared to challenge the patriarchal system. And Austen, a woman writer from a middle-class family with a lack of connections and money, could do nothing but write in a manner that conforms to social values. But being a woman and a writer with integrity, Austen chose to leave bits and pieces of the truth and bits and pieces of resistance between the leaves of her books. This article aims to highlight the significant modes of resistance after careful contemplation.

Keywords: Gender, female, discrete feminist.

In *Persuasion* Jane Austen navigates the intricate landscape of gender and social expectations in the Regency era, presenting a nuanced exploration of femininity and autonomy. While the narrative unfolds within a framework of

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romance, it also serves as a subtle commentary on the limitations of marriage as an institution and the complexities of female relationships. Austen embodies a discrete feminist perspective that challenges the status quo and advocates for the importance of individual choice. Her discourse in *Persuasion* reveals how Austen not only reflects her contemporary society but also contributes to the early discourse on women's rights and empowerment.

Unlike most feminists, who were direct in their approach to gender roles, Austen couldn't do the same because she was a female writer caught in a patriarchal literary tradition. Consequently, she discreetly conveyed all forms of resistance. In *Persuasion*, Austen empowers several female characters to question the prevailing gender roles in their society. Slavoj Žižek calls Jane Austen "the only counterpart to Hegel in literature" for her employment of dialectical progression as a tool to proclaim the truth about women (62). Through the character like Anne Elliot, Austen critiques the societal constraints imposed on women and highlights the struggles for personal agency and fulfillment.

For instance, when Mr. Charles is determined to spend his evening at the Musgroves and insists that Mary stay at home with their sick child, Mary asks Anne, "Yes, you see his papa can, and why shouldn't I?" (Austen 43), implying that it should be her sole responsibility to remain at home and care for their sick child. Why cannot she spend her evening as she wishes? This seems to be Austen's way of questioning gender roles in society, especially to the ones who hinder women's freedom to do as they please. Kathleen Tillitson in *The Novels of the Eighteen-Forties* observes:

A writer of the school of Miss Austen' is a much-abused phrase, applied now-a-days by critics who, it is charitable to suppose, have never read Miss Austen's works, to any female writer who composes dull stories without incident, full of level conversation, and concerned with characters of middle life. (144)

The article sets to explore the feminist voice that appears in all of the other female characters in *Persuasion*. Moreover, Austen characterises her protagonist in such a way that her words represent society's patriarchal voice. For instance, when Mary complains to Anne about Mr. Charles' lack of involvement in the nursing of their children, Anne replies with a gendered outlook on things: "Nursing does not belong to a man; it is not his province. A sick child is always the mother's property" (Austen 43).

The characters' only mode of resistance lies in the subtleties of their actions, which they do not openly articulate. Though the real reason beneath this way of presentation is unclear, this might be a deliberate attempt by the author to avoid negative criticism and be acknowledged as a writer among other male writers.

In addition, focusing on the protagonist often ignores the other characters' perspectives. Austen, being the literary genius that she is, has skilfully conveyed resistance in such a way that it will be visible—in the questions posed by other female characters—yet overpowered and disguised—by the patriarchal voice of the

protagonist, so as to avoid conflicts.

Because of this, people often misunderstand Austen as an author who writes to appease the patriarchal group, despite the fact that her novels, which are full of feminine spirit, reveal a different story. In her day and age, the author appears to have struck a unique balance, seeking to appeal to both the males and females in her society. She achieves this by skillfully expressing her feminist spirit in a manner that is inoffensive to both sexes.

Austen's era essentialized rationality as a male characteristic. Both science and literature followed patriarchal traditions, which posited the males at an advantage. Moreover, during times of adversity, people often viewed females as hysterical creatures, incapable of rational thought. Austen, through various female characters in 'Persuasion,' tries to bring out women's intellectual ability in contrast to male characters.

One such character is Lady Russell. Although much criticised for her role in persuading Anne to revoke her engagement with Captain Wentworth, Lady Russell still proved to be a very useful confidante in Anne's life. Lady Russell's ability to influence others with good sense and her strict integrity in providing solutions made her a highly suitable companion, with constant requests for her advice. It is owing to this quality that, when called to seek advice on Sir Walter's retrenchment, Lady Russell's judgement and rational approach are much sought after more than any of the male characters, including Mr. Shepherd's.

Mrs. Croft is another character who serves as a spokesperson for rationality. Mrs. Croft, in opposition to Captain Wentworth's claims that 'life on board' is uncomfortable and unbearable for women, draws upon her personal experience and says, "But I hate to hear you talking so, like a fine gentleman, and as if women were all fine ladies instead of rational creatures. None of us expect to be in smooth water all our days" (Austen 53-54).

Furthermore, the narrative portrays the protagonist, Anne Elliot, as the embodiment of rationality. During Louisa Musgrove's unfortunate accident in Lyme, Anne provides directions, while most of the male characters remain perplexed by the suddenness of the incident. Moreover, Mr. Charles anxiously calls out, "Anne, Anne, what is to be done next?" (Austen 86) breaks the stereotypes of Austen's age. This statement challenges the notion that men are superior to women in terms of rational thinking.

Captain Wentworth, in his justification for Anne's stay in Lyme to help Louisa Musgrove, states, "But if Anne will stay, no one so proper, so capable as Anne!" (Austen 89), highlighting the value of women in challenging circumstances. Thus, one can easily agree with Naomi Itokazu's observation that "Although seemingly tame, Austen is aligned with Mary Wollstonecraft as she defends for her female character's ability to be as intelligent and rational as their male counterparts" (Itokazu 17).

Another aspect that brings out Austen's feminine spirit in 'Persuasion' is the constant mind and perseverance of her female characters. Anne expresses her admiration for various female characters in the novel, each of whom appears to offer comfort, courage, and resolution during her most vulnerable moments.

Mrs. Smith, originally Miss Hamilton, is Anne Elliot's old schoolfellow who proves to be the strongest female character of all. Despite being a poor widow with rheumatic fever, Mrs. Smith's determination and perseverance helped her move to happier circumstances and find employment. This independent and strong attitude, even in the face of unimaginable hardships, instilled in Anne a newfound courage and confidence. Mrs. Smith declares "There is a great deal of difference between a woman's thinking of her own happiness and her being able to enjoy it" (Page 207). Mrs. Smith reflects on the limitations imposed on women, emphasizing the challenges they face in achieving true happiness.

Through the character of Mrs. Smith, Austen highlights the real struggles of women in a restrictive society. She illustrates the barriers that often prevent women from pursuing their desires. Mrs. Smith is a character who serves as a voice of wisdom. She is the one who provides Anne with insights into the realities faced by women, particularly those who have experienced loss or hardship. Despite her struggles, Mrs. Smith embodies resilience, suggesting that while circumstances may hinder happiness, the pursuit of it remains essential.

Moreover, Austen's novel *Persuasion* highlights the significance of sisterhood among the female characters, likely influenced by her own relationship with her sister, Cassandra Austen. Here, Austen seems to present two kinds of sisterhood that are contrasting in nature. As Jeannie Sargent Judge rightly observes, "Elizabeth's treatment of Anne violates a principle sacred to Austen: women, sisters in particular, should not only help one another to choose husbands judiciously, but they should also provide the counsel that society frequently withholds. Sisters should be confidantes, not competitors" (Judge 42).

However, in contrast to this, Austen introduces other female characters in her novel who seem to appreciate and admire each other, embracing sisterhood as a result. For instance, Mrs. Smith seems to think very highly of Mrs. Rook, a nurse by profession who had nursed her back to health. Furthermore, Mrs. Rook proved to be an invaluable acquaintance to Mrs. Smith, serving as the source of her empowerment by teaching her to knit. As a result, Mrs. Smith switched to knitting as a profession, crafting small thread cases, pincushions, and card racks for Mrs. Rook's wealthy clientele. This seems to be a classic example of sisterhood where women from all situations came together and showed enormous compassion towards one another at times of hardship.

Another classic example of sisterhood is the relationship between the Musgrove sisters, Louisa and Henrietta. When Henrietta hesitates to visit cousin Charles at Winthrop, Louisa guides her, offering comfort and reassurance during her moments of uncertainty. Moreover, as Judge rightly puts it, "although both Henrietta and

Louisa Musgrove find Wentworth a compelling figure, they soon work things out between them" (Judge 43), which once again emphasises Austen's sacred principle of sisters being confidantes rather than competitors.

Something that is very visible throughout the novel is the emancipation of the protagonist, Anne Elliot, who is very visible throughout the novel. In the initial part of the novel, Anne Elliot seems to be devoid of a voice of her own. Sir Walter and her sister Elizabeth seem to disregard her wishes and deny her the freedom to choose. For example, the novel's narrator puts it this way:

However, Anne often faced a situation that was completely at odds with her inclinations. She disliked Bath and didn't think it aligned with her preferences, despite Bath being her intended home (10).

Anne Elliot is rendered voiceless. Furthermore, Anne's lack of agency is quite visible with regard to her engagement with Captain Wentworth. As Anne reaches the age of twenty-seven, she gradually transforms into a woman with a logical mindset. Austen depicts numerous instances where Anne starts expressing her thoughts, leading to her social recognition as a valuable companion. This seems to be enough proof that the character's emancipation springs from her ability to voice out her opinions and exert her agency, which is a result of her rational thinking, and this said 'rational thinking' is a learning received from experience, not inherent to a particular sex.

Jane Austen's *Persuasion* presents a rich tapestry of female characters who navigate the constraints of their society with resilience and intelligence. Through Anne, Louisa, Lady Russell, and others, Austen critiques patriarchal norms while celebrating the strength of female relationships and the pursuit of personal agency. These characters illustrate that, despite societal limitations, women possess the capacity for empowerment and self-determination. Austen's nuanced portrayals reflect on the evolving roles of women and the enduring relevance of their struggles for autonomy and recognition. On the whole, the novel *Persuasion* can be viewed as a discrete expression of Austen's feminist views, the emancipation of women by embracing sisterhood, and the rightful exertion of their agency through rational thinking.

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