

## The Interplaying of Feminist Issues in the Adaptation of Jane Austen's Novels in America in the 1990s – 2000s

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**Abstract**—The present study argues that the film adaptations of Jane Austen's novels from 1995 to 2005 interplay the feminist issues that become the mainstream issues highlighted by the films. Five globally marketed theatre releases of the adaptations are reviewed to see how feminisms in Jane Austen's novels are translated into ideologies that reflect the social context of the productions. *Sense and Sensibility* (1995) highlight post-feminist issues but it shows a degree of ambivalence in its post-feminist mainstreaming since it put too much emphasis on the romantic plot. *Persuasion* (1995) highlights the issues of class mobility while emphasizing on the escape of domesticity as an act of emancipation. *Emma* (1996) interplays the characterizations of the heroine while at the same time eliminates class difference and purports for class permeability. *Mansfield Park* (1999) chooses to blend the feminist issues with abolitionist views and *Pride and Prejudice* (2005) promotes marked third wave feminism that seeks to undermine patriarchal aristocracy and male gaze.

**Keywords:** film adaptations, feminism, post-feminism, class, abolitionism.

### I. INTRODUCTION

When Jane Austen was writing her novels, England faced the early feminist consciousness, abolitionism, war with France and its post-revolution tension, along with the strained relationship with the newly independent America [26]. The reading of Jane Austen, however, shows diverging opinions on her involvement with those issues. Marilyn Butler is the proponent of the conservative reading of Jane Austen, while Claudia L. Johnson is the proponent of the progressive reading of Jane Austen. Butler argues that Austen turned her back on the social and political context of her time, and that she was an anti-Jacobin and reactionary feminist who rejects the feminism of Wollstonecraft [1]. On the other hand, Johnson insists that Austen loaded her novels with social criticism that is carefully hidden through "her strategies of subversive and indirection" [16]. In between Butler and Johnson are Kirkham, Knox-Shaw, Kaplan, Looser, and Mellor among others.

The reading of Jane Austen's novels in film industry, however, shows marked preference toward the highlighting of feminist issues and other social criticism in them. Starting with the booming of the 1995/1996 productions of film adaptations from Jane Austen's novels, all of the American-funded feature films adapted from Austen's novels have continue to focus on feminist issues that reflect the current reading of Jane Austen for the last two decades. There are

seven feature films produced for theatre release, but the present study only focuses on the interplaying of these feminist issues in five films that are produced in heritage tradition and globally marketed: *Sense and Sensibility* (1995), *Persuasion* (1995), *Emma* (1996), *Mansfield Park* (1999) and *Pride and Prejudice* (2005), further referred as *SS* (1995), *P* (1995), *E* (1996), *MP* (2006) and *PP* (2005) respectively.

### II. SENSE AND SENSIBILITY (1995) AND POSTFEMINISM

Ang Lee/Thompson's *Sense and Sensibility* was a commercial success that inspired the booming of the Jane Austen's film adaptation in 1995/1996. With 135 minutes showing time, it affords more space for developing its characters, especially Elinor Dashwood, Edward Ferrars, Colonel Brandon, and Margaret Dashwood.

Different from the mature Elinor of the novel, Thompson's Elinor has to undergo characters evolution. Elinor experiences 3 emotional breakdowns: when Edward-Lucy engagement is revealed and known to Marianne, when Marianne is in sickbed, and when Edward explains Lucy's marriage to his brother. Dickson sees that these emotional breakdowns weaken the novel's proto-feminism since Elinor's characters are made meeker and more emotional [11]. She seems to hold on the rationalist feminist reading of Jane Austen which believes that Jane Austen made her heroines as the portrayal of her idea of woman emancipation, as reflected in Austen's portrayal of Elinor as a mature, emotionally stable and very rational upon whom Marianne has to look when she has to correct her excess of sensibility [11]. On the other hand, Parill argues that Elinor's emotional breakdowns strengthen Elinor's character as a balanced human being who is not only rationally, but also emotionally capable [23]. Thus, she is more acceptable for female spectators of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Margaret Dashwood in this film plays an important role. This youngest of the three Dashwood sisters is a mere complement in the novel: her presence allows the elder sisters to leave Mrs. Dashwood at Barton Cottage while they are invited to London by Mrs. Jennings. In this adaptation, she becomes the safety valve for Thompson to express her feminist views since she cannot alter the characterization of the elder sisters amidst the stern watch of Jane Austen's fans. Thompson gives Margaret an outspoken outward boyish character through whom the protests against patriarchal arrangements of the society are expressed. She is shown climbing a tree house both in Norland and Barton, she uses

telescope, she reads maps and she inspires to be a pirate as her way out from “the law of the father”. She is the characters through whom the mainstreaming of feminist issues are argued, which highlight Elinor’s confinement in domesticity despite her (somehow weakened) use of reason [19].

While Jane Austen is famous with her underdeveloped male characters, the *SS* (1995) gives a considerable space for depicting Edward Ferrars and Colonel Brandon as a caring, nurturing, family men. During his Norland visit, Edward plays hide and seek with Margaret, he protects her interests, he teaches her to fence, and he lets her become his captain in her pirate ship. Brandon is no longer the monotonous albeit sensible and gentlemanlike man of the novel as he is now sexy, stout, handsome, and with his gun and pointer and his loneliness, he is a true Byronic hero in this adaptation – a portrayal that should be given to the dashing Willoughby.

These men are developed into heroes that post-feminists yearn for. As perceived by Nixon, these portrayals give a “more balanced development to both men” so they deserve the heroines [22]. However, Samuelian still notices that despite its inclination to develop its heroes and heroines into post-feminist ideals, this adaptation is still bound to “*compulsory heterosexuality*” by emphasizing on the romantic plot of Brandon-Marianne and Edward-Elinor in what look like a very happy-ever-after marriage as an ending [28].

While becomes the ticket to box office, this heightened romantic plot, is seen as a drawback by Kaplan as she accuses this adaptation to “[harlequinize] Jane Austen heroines” by making the heroines in decidedly vulnerable position whose salvation lies in the handsome and financially loaded heroes [18]. Indeed, Jane Austen’s Brandon earns only £2,000 a year, is the minimum standard of gentility in eighteenth century according to Copeland [10]. Thus, Edward’s earning from Delaford living will be around £200-which will afford Edward’s life only as long as he remains unmarried. But the film omits this information. Further, Brandon is also described as a wealthy bachelor by Mrs. Jennings while the filmmakers give elegant outfits and carriage that mark Brandon a rich independent man.

This choice of plot puts the feminist mainstreaming undertaken by the filmmakers at jeopardy. When they purport to highlight the proto-feminism of the novel by adapting it to the post-feminism of the production setting, they reveal the heroines to be less rationally capable, which is against the proto-feminist vision. As a backup, this film puts the feminist voice to Margaret’s mouth since the elder sisters - especially the rational and mature Elinor- fails to be always rational and mature.

### III. *PERSUASION* (1995): WOMAN CONSCIOUSNESS AND CLASS PERMEABILITY

As noted by Drum, the professional class only emerges in Jane Austen’s novel in *Mansfield Park*, and becomes more and more respected in her later novels, *Emma* and *Persuasion* [13]. In *Persuasion*, the sailors emerge as more respectable than the crumbling aristocracy represented by the family of Sir Walter Elliott of Kellynch Hall. In the novel,

the emergence of the professional class into respectable position goes along with Anne Elliott’s evolution from a timid, self-denying, pass-the-bloom-27 seven maid close to spinsterhood to a confident and self-assured lady who stands for a friend in need than a family in insincerity while at once attracts two suitors.

Parill perceives Anne’s character evolution as the most difficult thing to stage in an adaptation if it intends to endorse the novel’s proto-feminist issue [23]. The same actress should play two almost opposing characters. This evolution will have to make the same Anne who looks plain and very submissive in the beginning of the film into a confident woman capable of giving commands and deciding her own future toward the end of the film. But the film cleverly turns this challenge into a highlighting of feminist issue. In the novel, Anne looks more beautiful because of the blush she gets after perceiving that a handsome man (Mr. William Elliott, the future heir to Sir Elliott’s baronetcy and Kellynch Hall) pays a special attention to her while Wentworth – her former fiancé shows a certain degree of jealousy despite his make-believe attachment to Louisa Musgrove. In this adaptation, the sea wind sweeps her hair and gives it volume, the sea air and the exercise adds blush to her face and she hardly pay attention to Mr. Elliott. Wentworth is struck by love again in the moment she holds control and gives commands over the terror of Louisa’s fall from the Cobb. This Wentworth - formerly penniless and rankles sailor but now wealthy and a captain - has been constantly shown paying attention to Anne despite his sour treatment to her. While he decides to hate her for breaking their engagement because of Lady Russell’s persuasion years before, he has always loved the caring and loving Anne.

Gottlieb observes that this character evolution is conveyed cinematographically through framing and the use of handheld camera [14]. According to Gottlieb, Anne is mostly framed off-centre in the beginning of the film when she was still the easily persuaded maiden. This is further supported by the use of handheld camera to convey Anne’s “shaky” confidence as the translation of “Austen’s rich commenting voice” into a “rich cinematic tradition” [14].

The film maintains Jane Austen’s criticism of class preservation as it highlights the inefficient and insincere life that Sir Walter Elliott and her eldest daughter – Elizabeth-lead, while effectively mocks the “aristocracy-craving” old-timer through the characterization of the hypochondriac Mary Musgrove – Sir Elliott’s youngest daughter who marries a respectable wealthy man of no aristocratic connection. Sir Elliott lives extravagantly to keep up with his notion of aristocracy, leading Kellynch Hall to bankruptcy. Elizabeth is often staged doing improper conducts like slouching in a sofa in the presence of a guest or talking with her mouth full. She is the arrogant aristocrat who cannot even show a proper conduct. Mary Musgrove is always wailing and eating at the same time, but the claimed headache or sore-throat never restrain her from attending parties even when her first-born is in sick-bed. In such narration, aristocracy is but anything but falling down, reflecting the early 19<sup>th</sup> century social condition.

Meanwhile, the professionals come into notice. The tenant of Kellynch Hall is the Crofts, the Admiral and his wife who is the sister of our Captain Wentworth. That the Crofts – the rough sailors in Sir Elliot’s phrase – should replace the Elliots from their own home is certainly a representation of the permeability of class differences against the preservation of it. By the end of the story, both the novel and the film unite Anne with Wentworth, much to Sir Elliot’s dismay, Elizabeth’s disappointment, and Lady Russell’s astonishment. Despite Sir Elliott’s and Elizabeth’s jealousy that Mr. William Elliott should intend to propose to Anne, Anne choosing Wentworth or Wentworth choosing Anne at all is a great surprise. It effectively reflects their shallow minds. Their refusal to endure characters evolution brings them no rewards but disappointment. The film, however, add a concluding scene that is not in the novel. While Anne-Wentworth compulsory heterosexual marriage may hark back to the highlighting of the feminist issue, this concluding scene talks otherwise. It stages a scene of Anne being happily married and away from home, at sea, with Wentworth. It is nevertheless a freedom from domesticity.

#### IV. *EMMA* (1996): THE HEIRESS AND CLASS DIFFERENCE

*E* (1996) was launched only a month after the modern adaptation of the same novel into the modernly set *Clueless* (1996). This adaptation seems to act as the correction for the portrayal of Cher/Emma character as a female who is completely dependent on male’s money. In the novel, Emma is an heiress of his father’s money. But as a heiress, she manages the estate and carries the social burden of a male heir.

When *Emma* is the most class-conscious novel of Jane Austen’s six novels, *E* (1996) underplays it by omitting the appearance of maids and servants while highlighting the permeability of class barriers. In the novel, the friendship between Emma and Harriet ends officially when Harriet marries Mr. Martin, a tenant to Mr. Knightley. With less to conceal, Jane Fairfax is more friend-able to Emma, hence their growing friendship. The adaptation, however, underplays this preservation of class difference by establishing the friendship between Emma Knightley, Jane Fairfax, and Harriet Martin. Emma does not only attend the Martin’s wedding, but also kisses Harriet as a symbol of their continuing friendship. While the films maintain same-class marriage of the novel, it inserts the criticism toward same-class-flocking through Emma-Harriet friendship. Dole sees this twist to be the adjustment the film has to make when it wants to be acceptable to the American audience who believes strongly in “the myth of classlessness” as she termed it [12].

From the feminist point of view, this film interplays power she has as the heiress to Hartfield. On one hand, she is played by the fragile looking Gwyneth Paltrow: thin, blonde and blue-eyed, with her distinctly carefully manicured eyebrows. This is a representative of a weak feminine trait in Hollywood mainstream. Comparison should be made with the 1996 ITV/A&E *Emma* which casts black-haired, stoutly build Kate Beckinsale. But our blond Emma from Miramax’s plays archery. She shoots and could kill a dog, as worried by

Knightley. As the heiress of Hartfield, she has control over Mr. Woodhouse and the whole Hartfield assets, and she holds an esteemed patronage over the poorer inhabitants of Highbury. Her archery skill is a representative of her power over her domestic and public spaces: she controls her physic as she controls her environment.

#### V. *MANSFIELD PARK* (1999): WOMEN/SLAVE SUBORDINATION

*MP* is centered on the life of a penniless relative (Fanny Price) who comes to live with a wealthy family (the Bertrams of Mansfield Park), where she should remain a subordinate to the baronet’s family. Quite different from Jane Austen’s other novels, this novel does mention slavery and East Indies plantation. This invites a postcolonial reading of Jane Austen, as conducted by Edward Said [27] and Claudia L. Johnson [16] among others. It further affects the reading of Patricia Rozema who makes the issue a subplot to Fanny-Edmund marriage plot in her 1999 adaptation.

In Rozema’s adaptation, slavery appears in the conversation at the dinner table, around the fire, the private conversation between Fanny and Edmund. It becomes the reason of Tom Bertram’s frustration and fatal illness. It is also the foundation of Fanny’s argument about equal rights and freedom. It reaches its climax in the montage that shows Tom’s sketches - in close up - of sexual and physical harassment of black women by white men; among them is a man who looks like Sir Thomas Bertram himself. Rozema admits that her adaptation is a political act, as revealed in an interview [21]. Her *MP* (1999) is *not* adapted from Jane Austen’s novel alone. It is a combination of Rozema’s reading on the novel, the author’s life, and the contemporary context of Jane Austen’s time. In Rozema’s opinion, abolitionism was a central issue during the writing of *Mansfield Park* and slavery is a key concept to understanding the subordination of Fanny Price in *Mansfield Park* [21].

Rozema’s reading invites heated hatred from Jane Austen’s fans (hence the failure to make box office) and fervent debates among Jane Austen scholars. Windschuttle, for example, insists that Rozema’s reading is anachronistic and it betrays the “*domestic quintessential* of Jane Austen’s novel [7]. Aragay, however, does not see this adaptation as betrayal. As adaptation scholar, Aragay sees the film as Rozema’s reading of Jane Austen, her *Mansfield Park*, and her early works, as stated in the credit title [7]. In line with Aragay, Parill pays a special attention to the similarity of Fanny’s subordination to the Bertram and the slaves’ to the imperialists. The scene of the caged bluebird, according Parrill, conveys the the whole idea of captivity in the film: Fanny’s captivity in poverty and in the corrupt Mansfield Park, every woman’s captivity under patriarchy, every girls’ captivity in compulsory marriage or pitiable spinsterhood, captivity of every person in Mansfield park in Sir Bertram’s “*tyranny of the father*” [24].

Troost and Greenfield observe that Rozema turns the shy Fanny Price into a vocal feminist and abolitionist, and an ironic writer, much the same with Jane Austen’s characters

[32]. Even Fanny is frequently shot writing or reading aloud Jane Austen's juvenilia as her own reading. Thus, this Fanny Price does not only represent the virtue that stands to the vanity of the Bertram's girls, but she represents the women of England in their abolitionist vision, and she represents the feminist voice of the late 21<sup>st</sup> Century [32]. Even when this film still maintains the compulsory heterosexual marriage between Fanny and Edmund, it does stage a lesbian-like scene between Fanny and Mary Crawford. It then concludes with a strong post-feminist tinge: Fanny becomes a published author and Edmund strongly supports her.

#### VI. *PRIDE AND PREJUDICE* (2005): THE MODERN WOMEN AND CLASS ISSUES

As the first theater release made again after the 1940 MGM's, this film satisfies the Janeites and the scholars alike. This film is much observed in terms of its smart use cinematography to highlight the characters of Elizabeth Bennet and Darcy, and the highlighting of the positive parent figures along with the interplaying of class issue.

Marriage in Jane Austen novel is never depicted as ideal [17]. But Seeber observes that Mr. and Mrs. Bennet in this adaptation are often staged as caring and warm parents who still shares their intimate moments in their bedroom [29]. Seeber argues that the claustrophobic set chosen by Wright conveys a warm family circle despite their limited income. Mr. Bennet is a caring and nurturing father who understands his daughters' feeling: he is even staged holding the crying Mary during Netherfield Ball. Further, McCarthy also argues that Mrs. Bennet in this 2005 adaptation - though still rather silly- is a silly but sympathetic mother, much better than the shallow Mrs. Bennet of the novel [20].

Meanwhile, Elizabeth Bennet of this adaptation is often perceived as an incarnation of a modern woman rather than a late 18<sup>th</sup> century's. Wells, for example, observes that Elizabeth's accomplishment as a young woman is not in line with the concept of accomplished woman of the 18<sup>th</sup> century: Elizabeth is way too outspoken and speak passionately in breath length. But Darcy loves Elizabeth for her arguments both in the novel and in this film, which may be seen as the proto-feminism purported by Jane Austen.

Further, this modern woman is in her sexual awakening. Troost [31] and Barcsay [8] agree that the naked statue scene in the Pemberley visit is the cinematic revelation of Elizabeth's sexual awakening. Grandi adds that the scene also translates Elizabeth's earlier prejudices into an awareness about herself and the people around her [15]. Using Mulvey's gaze theory, Rodriguez sees that this film places Elizabeth as the holder of the gaze as the translation of the observant Elizabeth of the novel [25]. A further analysis on the contrast between the framing of Darcy and Elizabeth reveals that Elizabeth is an active subject while Darcy is a passive object, thus a tamer fetish object for Elizabeth's and female spectators' pleasures [30].

This film also underplays class issues through the discrepancy between verbal and visual elements. In the novel, Elizabeth argues to Lady Catherine de Bourgh that the supposed engagement between Darcy and herself is a prudent one since "[Darcy] is a gentleman and [Elizabeth] is

a gentleman's daughter". The film omits this argument but stand for it cinematically. It chooses to underplay the class preservation promoted by Lady Catherine by choosing contrasting places as the Bennets', Bingleys', de Bourghs', and Darcy's homes. Longbourne House is a small farmhouse where the Bennets share their vibrant life with the living stocks. The males' side is the opposite: Bingley's Netherfield Park is big but stiff under Caroline Bingley's management, de Bourgh's Rosings Park is luxurious but depressing, and Darcy's Pemberley Park is elegant but lonesome. That the warm sharp-tongued penniless Elizabeth Bennet should be the girl who captivates Darcy's heart and promotes Jane's happiness mocks the patriarchal aristocracy and perseverance of class differences that violently evoked by the contrast of their respective homes.

Thus, this adaptation relies more on cinematographic elements to demonstrate the issues described verbally in the novel. This film, however, goes further to promote a more post-feminist vision by giving a supporting family, loving parents, and caring, nurturing, and egalitarian father that allows the education of Elizabeth as a modern accomplished woman.

#### VII. CONCLUSION

The reviews of the five films adapted from Jane Austen novels from 1995 to 2005 shows that they all highlight feminist issues as the reflection of the mainstream reading of Jane Austen in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century and early 21<sup>st</sup> century. However, they all interplays it with different issues: post-feminist male figures, class difference, slavery, and class mobility. These issues are used in turn to support the characterization of the heroes and heroines as third-wave feminists who deserves each other respectively as they are rationally matched. There is a tendency to make the heroines stronger in later adaptations. *SS* (1995) gives its heroines the weakest position. *P* (1995) highlights Anne's virtue over beauty and vanity and let her escape domesticity. *E* (1996) has Emma in fragile-looking package but she can control her physicality while she inherits most of the power she enjoys. *MP* (1999) makes its heroine a powerful woman as a published authoress and the *PP* (2005) portrays Elizabeth as the strongest feminist despite her being penniless and not so handsome.

Further studies need to be conducted concerning this development, especially related to the use of cinematographic elements as the media of the new texts. Such analysis will give more justice film adaptation as a distinct genre and to the feminist issues promoted by these films through its cinematographic aspects.

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