Ecofeminism in the works of Jane Austen

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Abstract—**In this research article we can find how Jane Austen's novels can be read through an ecofeminist lens, even though she wrote long before ecofeminism emerged as a formal field of thought. At first glance, Austen may appear mainly concerned with courtship, manners, and domestic society, yet a closer reading suggests that her fiction is deeply attentive to the relationship between women, land, property, and moral responsibility. In her novels, nature is never entirely separate from human life. Tensions of class, gender, and power is reflective through estates, gardens, walking paths, and rural settings. Subordination of women and the possession of land are closely connected in Austen's world of writing. The study examines selected novels such as Pride and Prejudice, Sense and Sensibility, Emma, and Mansfield Park to understand how ecological and feminine concerns intersect in subtle but important ways. It argues that Austen does not use landscape merely as decoration. Rather, physical spaces often reveal emotional truth, social inequality, and the ethics of care. Women in Austen's fiction frequently live within systems controlled by inheritance, patriarchy, and economic dependence, while land remains tied to status, authority, and masculine privilege. Yet Austen also imagines forms of perception shaped by attentiveness, humility, and emotional intelligence. Her heroines often respond to people and places with a sensitivity that contrasts with the pride, greed, or carelessness of others. By applying ecofeminist theory to Austen, this paper offers a fresh way of understanding her novels. It suggests that Austen quietly questions structures built on domination, whether over women, property, or the natural world. Her fiction does not present open rebellion, but it does reveal the moral cost of possession without care. Therefore, Austen may be seen not only as a novelist of society and marriage, but also as a writer whose work invites reflection on balance, responsibility, and the shared value of human and natural life.**

Index Terms—**Ecofeminism, Fiction, relationship, responsibility, courtship**

Ecofeminism may be understood as a way of reading literature that uncovers the quiet connection between the suffering of women and the silent exploitation of the natural world (Warren 12). Ecofeminism as a theory argues that there is certain interconnection or the comparison between women and nature under capitalist patriarchy. It connects the exploitation and domination of women with that of the environment. It further argues that there is a relationship between women and nature (Plumwood 41; Shiva 23). Ecofeminism believes that this connection is illustrated through the female values of reciprocity, nurturing and cooperation. These traits are visible in both women as well as in nature. There are certain parallels between women and nature. Women can be mothers who nurtures their child from birth, similarly nature nurtures the inhabitants of the ecosystem. There is so much sacrifices done by the nature and the female. There is a comparison build between nature, mother or female that is Ecofeminism (d'Eaubonne 63).

Jane Austen, born on 16 December 1775 in Steventon, Hampshire. She was a novelist of remarkable subtlety. She wrote about domestic life, manners, marriage, and social class in rural England. At first glance, her fiction appears confined to drawing rooms and courtship conversations. Yet beneath this polished surface lies a sharp awareness of economic insecurity, especially for women. Austen was not a political activist in the modern sense, but she was a keen observer of the structures that shaped women's lives (Warren 18). In novels such as Pride and Prejudice, Sense and Sensibility, and Mansfield Park, land is never merely decorative. Estates determine power. Inheritance laws decide futures. Women who lack property must seek stability through marriage. The portrayal of this economic reality shows how females are linked with the land of the Men. The settings in the works of

Austen like gardens, fields, estates not only depict or symbolizes beauty but also command, authority, exclusion and control (Plumwood 52). The works of Austen, when read through an ecofeminist point of view shows the property structures that are tied with gendered hierarchies. This clearly reveals that the property, estates, lands, gardens and even women are placed under male dominance. Nature in Austen's novels often reflects emotional freedom, yet ownership of that nature remains restricted. Women may walk through gardens, admire landscapes, and feel connected to the countryside, but they do not possess it. Thus, Austen does not explicitly write about environmental destruction. Her fiction reveals a social world where land, inheritance, and female dependency are inseparable. Ecofeminism allows readers to see that beneath the elegance of her prose lies a quiet critique of a system that binds both women and nature within structures of ownership and control (Shiva 52).

An ecofeminist reading of Pride and Prejudice reveals that the question of land is never simply about wealth; it is about survival, dignity, and authority. The setting of Bennet estate Longbourn is legitimately involved to Mr. Collins, a distant male relative. This single legal fact shapes the emotional climate of the entire novel. As Mrs. Bennet anxiously reminds her husband, "I do think it is the hardest thing in the world, that your estate should be entailed away from your own children." The bitterness in this statement is not merely comic exaggeration. This line has a deeper meaning that describes the structure that resist the daughters the right to inherit the very home in which they are brought up. The land is stable, but the women upon it are not (Austen 61). Charlotte Luca's pragmatic decision to marry Mr. Collin at this point is now understandable. The entailment creates quiet but constant insecurity. Marriage is not only a romantic or social arrangement; it is an economic necessity in a system where women are excluded from property ownership. The land belongs to men, and therefore security belongs to men. Women must enter that structure through marriage, not through inheritance. From an ecofeminist perspective, the same legal system that binds land within male lineage also binds women's futures to male control (warren 31). By contrast, Pemberley presents a very different model of ownership of land. When Elizabeth Bennet first arrives, she notices that the house stands "on rising ground," and then she noticed the stream flowing in front has been enlarged "without any artificial appearance." This detail highlights a beauty that feels natural and unforced. The landscape has been shaped with care, but not in a way that overwhelms or dominates it. It reflects that everything there looks balanced and symmetrical rather than flashy or controlled (Austen 67).

Elizabeth is struck by the absence of excessive decoration or rigid order. The estate seems thoughtfully maintained, suggesting responsibility instead of prideful display. It reflects a sense of stewardship rather than exploitation. As she walks through the grounds, her opinion of Darcy begins to soften. Something reveals about his character as a way he was maintaining his land. Everyone used to know him as kind Landlord. Through Pemberley, Austen links true masculinity not to power or ownership alone, but to integrity, restraint, and a respectful care for what one possesses. Even at Pemberley, however, the system remains firmly patriarchal. Elizabeth's future security there depends on marriage. She may live in the house and shape its domestic life, but the legal power over the estate belongs to her husband. From an ecofeminist perspective, this is a striking contradiction. The novel encourages the thoughtful land management, yet it never questions the structure about the property that stays in the hands of the male. Women can admire beauty, nurture harmony, and influence the moral tone of a home, but formal authority over land is seldom their own.

A similar pattern appears in Sense and Sensibility. The novel begins with loss and displacement. when Mr. Dashwood died, Norland Park passes to his son from his first marriage. It left the widow and the daughters on chivalry. The legal arrangements are calmly narrated by the narrator, but its consequences are severe. The Dashwood women must leave their home and accept reduced circumstances at Barton Cottage. The movement from estate to cottage is not just geographical; it is symbolic of shrinking power and security. Land determines identity. The women's social standing diminishes without it (Austen 58). Another layer to this ecofeminist reading is the intense bonding of Mr. Dashwood in this work. She resists artificial restraint, but admires the wildness of the countryside. She finds a sensitive expression in

landscapes like hills, trees, rain, and open air. After Willoughby betrays her, she does not suffer indoors or in a protected space. Instead, she roams outside in the rain, becomes seriously ill, and nearly dies. Once the nature mirrored her happiness and joy but now this nature becomes the place where she feels exposed, sensitive and fragile. This shows that women are just like nature. They are romanticized, admired for beauty but not protected within social structures (Shiva 67). Marriana's sufferings and struggles show powerful emotions. It is the society that connects femineity to the natural world in economic concerns. The patriarchal social structure does not know how to value, love, respect women and nature.

In both novels, Austen presents the landscape as more than scenery. Estates symbolize power, continuity, and social standing. For Austen's women, an estate wasn't just a backdrop for a ballroom, it was a life raft. These houses provided financial security and identity yet they were essentially tenants in their own history. Women like the Bennet's or the Dashwood's spent their lives shaping the gardens and the domestic pulse of these homes, only to realize that their legal claim to the soil was non-existent. The moment a father or a husband died, the "stability" of the home vanished. The forced removal of the Dashwood sisters from Norland Park isn't just a sad plot point; it's a cold, hard look at how a woman's entire world could be packed into a trunk because a male heir no matter how distant or indifferent, held the deed. Property is cultivated, possessed, and handed down through male lines, while women are expected to adjust, marry wisely, and find safety within those boundaries. By keeping her feet firmly on the ground, Austen makes the systemic inequality feel personal. It's not a political manifesto; it's the lived experience of watching life decided by people who value the "estate" more than the people living on it.

In the work Mansfield Park, the question of the land feels complicated and heavier more than the other novels of Austen. Mansfield is not simply a beautiful country estate sustained by English agriculture; it is supported by a plantation in Antigua. Austen does not describe the plantation in detail, and yet its presence matters. The wealth that keeps Mansfield comfortable and respectable comes from somewhere far away. That quiet fact creates a moral shadow over the estate. The polished drawing rooms and carefully tended grounds are connected to distant labour and colonial power, even if the novel does not openly dwell on it (Shiva 88; Plumwood 91). Fanny Price grows up within this setting as someone who belongs to and still feel alienated at the same time. Even though she lives at Mansfield, but she owns nothing in this place. Everyone constantly reminded her of her lower position, dependent on the generosity of her relatives. Even the large house, the arranged gardens, the sense of stability, all of it contrasts sharply with her uncertainty. Land, in this novel, stands for stability and rank. Fanny has neither. She must rely on character rather than property. The moral tone of the household shifts when sir Thomas leaves for Antigua. Without his authority, disorder slowly enters Mansfield. When Sir Thomas leaves Mansfield Park, the house doesn't just lose its master; it loses its moral compass. In his absence, the social fabric starts to fray the private theatricals, the unchecked flirtations, and the general air of indulgence aren't just "kids being kids." Austen is drawing a direct, almost architectural link between the management of an estate and the management of one's soul. In the Regency worldview, land wasn't just dirt and trees; it was a physical manifestation of character. If the grounds are neglected or the "master" is away, the conduct of the inhabitants mirrors that vacuum. It's a heavy-handed suggestion that authority and morality are inextricably tied to property, yet that authority is a club where only men are allowed membership.

At the centre of this hurricane is Fanny Price, a woman who is morally superior to almost everyone around her but legally invisible. She is the one who sees the cracks in the foundation before anyone else, yet she holds no title to the bricks. Her life at Mansfield is a masterclass in the "liminal space" women occupied: she is essential to the home's emotional climate but has zero claim to its future. Fanny's uncertainty is just a smaller, domestic reflection of a global system where protection is a privilege granted by the powerful, never a right owned by the vulnerable. Ultimately, the novel leaves us with a lingering chill rather than a dramatic ending. Austen isn't calling for a revolution, but she is forcing us to look at the ledgers. She maps out a world where a woman's entire existence, her safety, her reputation, her very home, is a pawn in a game of estate management played by men. It's a silent,

devastating critique of a society that values the "stability of the land" far more than the agency of the people living on it. By the time the plot ends, we're left realizing that for women like Fanny, the walls of a beautiful estate can feel like the bars of a golden cage.

In most of Austen's works, the heroine is a guest in her own life, waiting for a marriage proposal to grant her a permanent address. But in Emma, the geography of power is flipped. Emma Woodhouse doesn't just live at Hartfield; she is Hartfield. Her financial security grants her a "masculine" level of agency, a rare, landed independence that allows her to treat her community like a chessboard. From an ecofeminist perspective, Emma is an anomaly: she is a woman who has successfully bypassed the "enclosure" of dependency because she holds the keys to the estate. However, this independence is a double-edged sword. The land which Emma inherited from her father is entirely derivative.

If Hartfield represents the privilege of the land, Dunwell Abbey represents its soul. Mr. Knightley is perhaps Austen's most complete "steward-hero." Unlike the flashy "improvers" of the era who ripped up ancient oaks to follow the latest landscaping trends, Knightley treats his estate with a rugged, unpretentious respect. He is interested in the health of the orchards and the welfare of the Abbey Mill Farm tenants. This creates a vital ecofeminist dialogue: Knightley's relationship with the land is a blueprint for his relationship with Emma. He doesn't seek to "tame" her or "fence her in" for his own glory; instead, he challenges her to be a better version of herself. Their eventual union isn't just a romantic trope it is a merger of two estates that balances Emma's spirited influence with Knightley's grounded ethics. In Highbury, nature is never "wild"; it is a "large, well-managed garden," a metaphor for a society that functions best when the powerful view themselves as caretakers rather than conquerors.

Emma Woodhouse walks around Highbury like she owns the place and technically, she does. She has the large fortune, the "handsome" house, and the social clout that comes with being the mistress of Hartfield. But Austen is too smart to let that confidence go unchallenged. Throughout the book, she litters the story with quiet, uncomfortable reminders that for a woman in the 1800s, this kind of power is as fragile as glass. The most haunting reminder is the Bates family. They are the "what-if" that hangs over every tea party and ballroom.

Emma's ability to be "Emma" is entirely contingent on the dirt beneath her feet. Without Hartfield, she would be Miss Bates. This realization brings a deeper, more sombre layer to the ecofeminist reading: a woman's "nature" and her "voice" are only allowed to flourish if she has the economic sunlight to grow. Austen suggests that until the laws of the land change, a woman's brilliance is often just a byproduct of her zip code. In Persuasion, Jane Austen doesn't just change the scenery; she shatters the pedestal of the landed gentry. The Elliot family's forced exodus from Kellynch Hall is far more than a line item in a ledger, it is a symbolic rot. Sir Walter Elliot treats his estate as a mirror for his own vanity, a static monument to a status he did nothing to earn. By losing the estate, Anne actually gains her life back. The soil of Kellynch offered her stability, sure, but it was the stability of a grave. The sea, with all its salt and movement, offers her a future. Austen is quietly suggesting that the old ways of tying a person's worth to a fixed piece of land are dying, and for women like Anne, that death is the only way to truly start living. It's a powerful reminder that sometimes, the things we are most afraid of losing status, property, "the way things have always been", are the very things holding us back from being happy (Austen 63)

While the estate is defined by "enclosure", fences, inheritance laws, and rigid social hierarchies the coast of Lyme Regis is a landscape of constant, restless motion. The naval officers don't inherit their worth from a deed; they forge it in the salt and the wind. From an ecofeminist perspective, Anne's journey is a radical departure from the "mastery" of land. She stops being a passive piece of property and moves toward the unpredictable, honest nature of the ocean. Her happiness isn't anchored to a manor house, but to a partnership built on mutual respect and emotional grit. Across Austen's canon, nature is never just a pretty backdrop, it's a moral x-ray. Estates like Pemberley or Don well Abbey are physical manifestations of the men who rule them. In this world, nature is rarely "wild"; it is pruned, fenced, and surveyed, mirroring the lives of the women who inhabit it. Men inherit the

earth; women inherit the dependency that comes with being a "temporary guest" on it. This is the heart of the ecofeminist struggle: the same patriarchal impulse to "tame" and domesticate the natural world is used to restrict the agency of women. In such a system, marriage ceases to be a romantic whim and becomes a survival strategy, the only way to secure a roof in a world where the land belongs only to sons.

Austen doesn't need a soapbox to dismantle the status quo; she uses a magnifying glass instead. By focusing on the "small" anxieties of a woman losing her home or a sisterhood sidelined by a distant male cousin, she exposes how predatory property laws actually feel. Her protest isn't loud, but it's devastatingly persistent, proving that the most radical subversion often happens in the quietest rooms of the house. She makes us feel the coldness of a system where a woman's entire future can be uprooted because of a distant male cousin's birthright.

However, she offers a glimpse of a different path through her "steward-heroes." Men like Darcy and Knightley aren't tyrants of their domain; they are caretakers. They treat their land, and the people who live upon it, with a sense of duty rather than a desire for domination. Austen proposes a beautiful, grounded parallel here: the health of a society is measured by how it treats its most vulnerable members and the land that sustains them. In the end, her ideal isn't the conquest of nature or women, but a shared stewardship where both are allowed to breathe, grow, and flourish.

Jane Austen's novels are far more than just "domestic fiction"; they are a meticulous account of a society that treated both women and the earth as commodities. By focusing on her plots on the anxiety of inheritance and the constant threat of being "unhoused," she reveals a world where a woman's dignity was essentially a tenant of a male-owned estate. Whether it is the Dashwood's' forced exile from Norland or Fanny Price's observant silence at Mansfield Park, Austen shows us that the fences built around English land were the same structures that hemmed in female agency. When her heroines find happiness, it is rarely just about a wedding; it is about going through a predatory system to find a rare space where they, and the land they inhabit, can finally breathe. Austen's novels remain timeless because they whisper a hauntingly modern truth: the ethics of how we treat our world are inseparable from the ethics of how we treat the marginalized voices within it.

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