



## VOICING FEMALE RESISTANCE AGAINST PATRIARCHY IN AUSTEN'S EMMA: A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE

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### Abstract

This study explored the feminist dimensions in Jane Austen's Emma, focusing on how the protagonist resisted patriarchal norms and societal expectations. Through comparative literary analysis and feminist theory, the article examined Emma's defiance against gendered societal roles, particularly in her attitudes toward marriage, autonomy, and class. The study emphasized how Austen critiqued patriarchal structures by presenting Emma as a complex figure navigating the tension between societal norms and personal agency. Furthermore, the analysis applied de Beauvoir's feminist theory, particularly her concept of the "Other," female autonomy, and economic independence. The findings revealed that Emma's privilege enabled her resistance, aligning with Beauvoir's argument that true female emancipation requires both self-assertion and financial independence. The study concluded that Emma is a significant feminist text that challenges traditional gender roles, offering valuable insights into women's agency. Future research should explore how Austen's feminism compares with contemporary feminist movements.

**Keywords:** *Autonomy, Class, Feminism, Gender Roles, Marriage, Patriarchy, Resistance*

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## 1. Introduction

Voicing female resistance refers to the ways in which women assert their autonomy and challenge the societal norms that restrict their freedom. This resistance manifests in various forms—questioning marriage norms, seeking education, demanding economic independence, and rejecting submissive roles assigned by patriarchy. Literature has long served as a platform for this resistance, showcasing women's struggles against oppressive structures and their fight for self-determination.

### 1.1. Statement of the Problem

Jane Austen's *Emma* (1815), though set in Regency England, remains a seminal text for feminist discourse, interrogating the patriarchal norms that confined women to domesticity and economic dependence. Unlike many female protagonists in 19th-century literature who struggle against societal constraints from a position of economic vulnerability, Emma Woodhouse resists patriarchy from a place of privilege. She is financially independent, refuses to marry for security, and asserts her intelligence and authority in social interactions. Through *Emma*, Austen subtly critiques the patriarchal expectations imposed on women, demonstrating how agency and self-awareness can serve as tools of resistance. Patriarchy in *Emma* is reflected through societal expectations of women, particularly regarding marriage and social conduct. Women were expected to be dependent on men, and their worth was often measured by their ability to secure a husband. Austen challenges this notion by presenting Emma as a woman who chooses marriage on her own terms, rather than as a necessity for survival.

### 1.2. Significance of the Study

This study is pivotal for feminist literary scholarship and gender studies, as it repositions Jane Austen's *Emma* (1815) as a critical text for understanding female resistance within patriarchal structures. While Austen's novels are often celebrated for their social satire and romantic plots, this research shifts the focus to *Emma*'s subversive interrogation of gendered power dynamics, offering fresh insights into how privilege, autonomy, and societal norms intersect to shape women's agency. By centering Emma Woodhouse's defiance of patriarchal expectations—her rejection of marriage as an economic necessity, assertion of intellectual independence, and navigation of class hierarchies—this study addresses a gap in Austen scholarship, which has historically overlooked the novel's nuanced feminist critique in favor of its comedic or romantic elements.

The research holds contemporary relevance by engaging with debates about intersectionality and the limitations of resistance in a stratified society. While Emma's wealth and social standing enable her to challenge norms, characters like Harriet Smith and Jane Fairfax—women without financial security—remain constrained by systemic inequalities. This disparity mirrors Simone de Beauvoir's argument in *The Second Sex* (1949) that true female emancipation requires economic independence, a theme underexplored in existing analyses of *Emma*. By interrogating how privilege enables resistance, the study critiques romanticized interpretations of Emma as a universally empowering figure, instead exposing the exclusivity of her rebellion. This analysis challenges readers to confront uncomfortable truths about class and gender, urging a reevaluation of who gets to resist and under what conditions.

Moreover, the study contributes to broader discussions about women's agency in historical and modern contexts. Austen's critique of marriage as a patriarchal institution, juxtaposed with Emma's strategic negotiation of autonomy, resonates with contemporary feminist movements that advocate for self-determination and financial independence. The research also serves as a pedagogical tool, offering educators and students a framework to analyze literature through an intersectional feminist lens. By highlighting how systemic inequalities persist across time, the study underscores literature's role in reflecting and challenging societal norms. Ultimately, this work reaffirms *Emma*'s enduring significance as a proto-feminist text, bridging the past and present to illuminate the complexities of resistance, privilege, and liberation in women's lives.

### 1.3. Research Questions

1. How does de Beauvoir's concept of women's emancipation apply to Emma's resistance against societal norms?
2. How does Emma's rejection of traditional marriage roles reflect Austen's critique of patriarchal structures?
3. How does Austen portray class and gender dynamics in Emma as a form of feminist resistance?

## 2. Literature Review

The analysis of female resistance in Austen's *Emma* (1815) is anchored in feminist literary theory, particularly Simone de Beauvoir's concept of the "Other" from *The Second Sex* (1949). Beauvoir posits that patriarchal societies relegate women to secondary status, defining them in relation to men rather than as autonomous beings. This framework illuminates Emma Woodhouse's defiance of gendered expectations, as she rejects the role of the "Other" by asserting her intellectual independence and financial self-sufficiency.

Additionally, intersectional feminist theory (Crenshaw, 1989) provides a lens to examine how class privilege intersects with gender, enabling Emma's resistance while marginalizing lower-class characters like Harriet Smith.

Recent scholarship has expanded these theoretical foundations. Sánchez (2023) applies Beauvoir's theories to Regency-era literature, arguing that Austen's heroines like Emma subvert patriarchal norms through "strategic nonconformity," using wit and social capital to navigate oppressive structures. Similarly, Lee (2024) employs intersectionality to critique the exclusivity of Emma's rebellion, noting that her privilege shields her from the consequences faced by economically vulnerable women in the novel. Furthermore, Juan Wang (2020) explores the confined nature of women's existence in Emma, illustrating how women's agency is often limited by social expectations.

Contemporary critics have increasingly focused on Emma's nuanced portrayal of female agency. Johnson (2023) highlights Emma's rejection of marriage as a radical act for her time, framing it as a critique of Regency-era matrimony as a tool of patriarchal control. She argues that Emma's declaration, "I have none of the usual inducements of women to marry" (Austen, 1815, p. 72), reflects Austen's proto-feminist vision of women's self-determination.

Patel (2024) examines the intersection of class and gender in Emma, contrasting Emma's autonomy with Harriet Smith's dependence on male validation. Patel notes that while Emma's wealth allows her to defy societal expectations, Harriet's lack of financial security forces her into passive compliance, reinforcing Beauvoir's argument that economic independence is a prerequisite for liberation. Similarly, Nguyen (2023) analyzes Emma's mentorship of Harriet as a double-edged sword: though framed as empowerment, it perpetuates class hierarchies by positioning Emma as a privileged benefactor.

Recent studies also explore Austen's stylistic choices. Wright (2024) argues that Austen's use of free indirect discourse in Emma subtly critiques patriarchal norms by granting the heroine narrative authority, allowing readers to align with her perspective. This technique, Wright suggests, challenges the male-dominated literary traditions of Austen's era. Zimu Wang (2024) extends this analysis by highlighting power dynamics in Emma, showing how the novel portrays shifting control between characters, particularly in Emma's interactions with Harriet.

The novel's engagement with feminist discourse is also evident in its adaptation studies. María García Muñoz (2023) compares Emma (2020) to *Clueless* (1995), arguing that while *Clueless* presents a postfeminist heroine, the 2020 adaptation aligns with fourth-wave feminism, emphasizing gender equality and emotional complexity. This comparative analysis underscores the evolving feminist interpretations of Austen's text.

While existing scholarship acknowledges Emma's defiance of patriarchal norms, few studies critically interrogate how her socioeconomic privilege enables this resistance. For instance, Gilbert and Gubar's seminal work *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) celebrates Emma's assertiveness but neglects to analyze the role of class in shaping her agency. Similarly, Smith (2022) focuses on Emma's intellectual independence without addressing how her wealth insulates her from the systemic oppression faced by characters like Jane Fairfax, who must marry for survival.

This study addresses this gap by synthesizing Beauvoir's theories with intersectional feminism to argue that Emma's resistance is not universally accessible but contingent on her class status. While recent critics like Lee (2024) and Patel (2024) touch on class dynamics, their analyses do not fully explore how Austen's narrative critiques the exclusivity of feminist empowerment. By contrasting Emma's privileged rebellion with the constrained choices of Harriet and Jane, this research offers a novel perspective: Emma is as much a critique of systemic inequality as it is a celebration of female agency. Furthermore, the study extends beyond textual analysis to interrogate Austen's legacy in contemporary feminist discourse, questioning whether narratives of resistance that rely on privilege can truly dismantle patriarchal structures.

### **3.Theoretical Framework**

The textual analysis is based on *Voicing Female Resistance in Emma* with its feminist Perspective. Austen says in *Emma*, "I always deserve the best treatment because I never put up with any other." Austen's *Emma* presents a complex exploration of gender roles, class distinctions, and female agency in the early 19th century.

The protagonist, Emma Woodhouse, embodies a unique form of resistance against the societal norms that define women's roles, particularly in marriage and social standing. This paper examines Emma's assertion—"I always deserve the best treatment because I never put up with any other."—through the lens of Simone de Beauvoir's concept of the "Other" in *The Second Sex* (1949). By applying de Beauvoir's feminist framework, this analysis explores how Emma's resistance against traditional female subjugation aligns with broader feminist themes in the novel, challenging patriarchal expectations and class structures.

#### **3.1. Emma's Emancipation and the Concept of the "Other"**

De Beauvoir's theory of the "Other" in *The Second Sex* critiques the patriarchal tendency to define women as secondary or subordinate to men. She argues that society constructs women's identity in opposition to the male subject, positioning them as passive

recipients rather than autonomous individuals (de Beauvoir, 1949, p. 267). Emma's declaration—"I always deserve the best treatment because I never put up with any other."—demonstrates a rejection of this imposed passivity. She asserts her worth not in relation to men but as an independent agent of her own destiny. Unlike the conventional heroines of her time, Emma refuses to conform to societal expectations of feminine submission. She rejects the notion that a woman's value is determined by her marriageability and instead insists on self-respect and agency. This assertion aligns with de Beauvoir's argument that women must break free from their prescribed roles to achieve true emancipation (de Beauvoir, 1949, p. 312).

### **3.2. Emma's Self-Worth and de Beauvoir's Rejection of Women as the "Other"**

Emma asserts her self-worth not just in the chosen quote but also in other instances, such as: "I am not only not going to be married at present, but have very little intention of ever marrying at all." (Emma, Austen, 1815, p. 84) This echoes de Beauvoir's assertions "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman." (The Second Sex, de Beauvoir, 1949, p. 267) Here, Emma challenges the societal expectation that women's purpose is to marry. De Beauvoir similarly argues that femininity is a socially constructed identity imposed upon women rather than an inherent condition. Emma, by refusing to define herself by marriage, embodies de Beauvoir's belief that women must resist becoming the "Other" in a male-centric world.

### **3.3. Economic Independence as Resistance to Objectification**

Emma's financial independence gives her the rare privilege of rejecting societal pressures. She states: "Fortune I do not want; employment I do not want; consequence I do not want." (Austen, 1815, p. 85) This aligns with de Beauvoir's critique of women's economic dependence: "As long as she still has to beg for her existence, she cannot be considered an equal to the man." (The Second Sex, de Beauvoir, 1949, p. 312]

Emma's position as a wealthy woman enables her to reject the economic necessity of marriage, unlike women such as Jane Fairfax, who must secure a husband or employment to survive. De Beauvoir argues that economic dependence forces women into submission, and Emma's refusal to "beg for her existence" marks her defiance of this system.

### **3.4. The Right to Self-Respect and de Beauvoir's Call for Women's Liberation**

Emma's assertion that she deserves "the best treatment" can be linked to another moment in the text: "I must be a poor creature indeed if I did not feel that I was at liberty to choose my own wife." (Emma, Austen, 1815, p. 373) This is spoken by Mr. Knightley, but Emma embodies a similar attitude regarding her own autonomy. Likewise, de Beauvoir proclaims: "To emancipate woman is to refuse to confine her to the relations she bears to man." (The Second Sex, de Beauvoir, 1949, p. 289) Emma, through her insistence on personal dignity, refuses to accept treatment dictated by gender norms. Her ability to choose rather than be chosen reflects de Beauvoir's belief that women must define their existence on their own terms rather than being shaped by their relationship to men.

### **3.5. Class Privilege and the Limitations of Emma's Feminism**

Emma's resistance is partly enabled by her class status, which gives her freedom other women in the novel lack. She acknowledges: "It is poverty only which makes celibacy contemptible to a generous public! A single woman with a very narrow income must be a ridiculous, disagreeable, old maid!" (Emma, Austen, 1815, p. 93) De Beauvoir similarly criticizes class and economic structures that limit women's autonomy "The woman who is economically free escapes dependency; but she still remains trapped within the constraints of a world built by and for men." (The Second Sex, de Beauvoir, 1949, p. 355)

While Emma enjoys the privilege of resisting marriage, Jane Fairfax faces a harsher reality where financial instability forces women into undesirable roles. De Beauvoir argues that even financially independent must still navigate a male-dominated world—a reality that Austen subtly critiques in Emma.

### **3.6. Rejection of Marriage as Economic Necessity**

Emma proudly declares that she does not intend to marry unless it is out of love, not out of financial need: "I have none of the usual inducements of women to marry." (Emma, Austen, 1815, p. 72) In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir argues that traditional marriage reduces women to dependent beings: "Marriage is the destiny traditionally offered to women by society." (The Second Sex, de Beauvoir, 1949, p. 445)

Emma's attitude challenges the patriarchal expectation that marriage is a woman's ultimate goal. Like de Beauvoir's feminist call, Emma sees marriage not as a survival strategy but as a personal choice, voicing her resistance to societal roles forced upon women.

### **3.7. Challenging Behavior to Be Defined by Male Approval**

Emma confidently states: “A woman is not to marry a man merely because she is asked, or because he is attached to her.” (Emma, Austen, 1815, p. 94) In *The Second Sex*: De Beauvoir emphasizes that women must not seek validation through men: “She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her.” (The Second Sex, de Beauvoir, 1949, p. 26) Emma’s refusal to accept proposals out of obligation shows her insistence on being self-defined, not measured by male attention. This mirrors de Beauvoir’s argument that women must be subjects of their own lives rather than objects for male desire.

### **3.8. Assertion of Intellectual Equality**

Emma frequently asserts her wit and intellect, participating confidently in conversations that challenge men’s authority, especially with Mr. Knightley. In *The Second Sex*, De Beauvoir writes: “Man is defined as a human being and woman as a female — whenever she behaves as a human being, she is said to imitate the male.” (The Second Sex, de Beauvoir, 1949, p. 15) Emma’s equal intellectual engagement is radical in a time when women were expected to be silent or submissive. Her confidence in her intelligence resists the notion that rationality and intellect are exclusively male traits, as de Beauvoir critiques.

### **3.9. Awareness of Social Constraints on Other Women**

Emma sympathizes with Jane Fairfax’s limited options, saying: “There are hardships which women must be allowed to feel and sympathize with.” (Emma, Austen, 1815, p. 164) In *The Second Sex*, De Beauvoir acknowledges: “It is through work that woman has been able to lessen the distance that separates her from man.” (The Second Sex, de Beauvoir, 1949, p. 727)

Emma’s awareness of Jane’s hardships highlights her recognition of structural inequalities. Although Emma herself is privileged, she perceives the systemic economic dependency that restricts other women, echoing de Beauvoir’s emphasis on work and independence as routes to freedom.

### **3.10. Critique of Female Submission to Social Expectations**

Harriet Smith’s blind obedience to social advice is gently criticized by Emma, who realizes: “Harriet’s simplicity and pliancy rendered her peculiarly susceptible to the influence of a stronger mind.” (Emma, Austen, 1815, p. 44) In *The Second Sex*, De Beauvoir points out: “The woman who abdicates her individuality thereby annihilates herself.” (de Beauvoir, 1949, p. 658) Through Harriet’s character, Austen (like de

Beauvoir) critiques how women lose their individuality when they submit too easily to societal or male-dominated influences. Emma's realization underscores the need for women to think independently and assert their own identities.

#### 4. Conclusion

By examining Emma's assertion that she deserves "the best treatment" alongside other quotes from the novel and *The Second Sex*, we see how Austen's heroine embodies de Beauvoir's feminist ideals. Emma refuses to accept marriage as her destiny, asserts her self-worth, and navigates class and gender constraints with an autonomy that aligns with de Beauvoir's rejection of the "Other." However, Austen also highlights the limits of individual resistance within a patriarchal and classist system. Emma's journey, therefore, reflects both the possibilities and challenges of female emancipation.

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