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WOMEN’S VOICES IN JANE AUSTEN’S *PERSUASION*

In her last novel “Persuasion” Jane Austen speaks through the voice of Anne Elliot and discusses her feminist ideas rationally in the patriarchal English society. However, she speaks in such a voice that she keeps herself within the 18th century social boundaries.

The present paper is an attempt to study the importance of language through Austen’s feminist voice revealing Anne’s gradual maturity from a passive state to an active one when she speaks out loud declaring her feelings through language and knowing that she can become “somebody” only if she gets a voice. Our study aims to show that through Anne’s personage Jane Austen expresses her sympathy with the 18th century feminist movement against the narrow male understanding of female personality.

Key words: *Jane Austen, “Persuasion”, patriarchal English society, feminism, women’s voices, language discourse*

Jane Austen whom Virginia Wolf has called "the most perfect artist among women," was "one of the most consistent satirists in the whole of literature" /Mairs, 1998: 13/ who tried to satirize the patriarchal English society through her writings. She defended the rights of the feminists struggling against patriarchy and canon, a social system in which the father or eldest male is the head of the household; criticizing the unjust social system, that enforces gender roles and evokes male dominance in social or cultural life, J. Austen brings out the oppressive nature of the 18th century patriarchal English society.

Austen’s Feminist Voice and Ladylike Manner

It is a known fact that human beings have had different types of struggles throughout history. However, struggles between men and women don’t have a long history. They started with the beginning of feminist movements. According to Fairclough, “social struggle occurs between groupings of various sorts – women and men, black and white, young and old, dominating and dominated: groupings in social institutions, and so on” /Fairclough, 1996: 35/.

In Austen’s time, the social struggle was especially dominant between men and women. Men represented power and inheritance, whereas women embodied weakness and poverty. Realizing the fact that the society was a man’s world, and everything was for men, J. Austen started writing and participating in literature defending her feminist ideas and revealing them through the woman-personages in her books. In her last completed novel *Persuasion*, published in 1817, Austen created her heroine, Anne Elliot as a medium to make her feminist voice heard.

Studying Austen's biography it can be realized that the story of Anne Elliot's life reveals some of her own life experiences. Jane's first love, at twenty, was Tom Lefroy – a law student from Ireland, the nephew of her dear friend Anne's husband /Smith, 2007: 156/. Neither of them had any money, and his family was against their marriage. Tom's family kept them apart and saw him safely married to a wealthier woman, though in advanced age he confessed that he had loved Jane Austen." /Mairs, 1998: 14/.

Thus, J. Austen's story of life and her falling in love with a penniless young man stirred her imagination and gave birth to her determination to make her heroine Anne whom she also sent through the same experience. However, Anne's life story was not exactly the same, J. Austen wanted it to have a better ending. Instead of making the captain marry a wealthy woman like Tom Lefroy did, she makes Anne luckier by giving her a **voice** and Anne gets back Captain Wentworth through the power of her **language**.

In *Persuasion* the heroine, Anne Elliot, rejects her lover, Fredrick Wentworth, upon the request of Lady Resells, who represents the figure of Anne's mother. At that time, Wentworth seemed to be an inadequate match. As in most of Austen's novels, in *Persuasion* too, the patriarchic society of the 18th century is outlined, and along with presenting her personal life experiences, J. Austen also reveals her feminist ideas through the characters that she creates.

Feminism, which is a range of political movements, ideologies, and social movements that share the common goal of defining and establishing equal political, economic, personal, and social rights for women, seeks to achieve equal opportunities for women in education and employment /Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia/. Jane Austen tries to be exactly that feminist. She is classified as a member of Enlightenment Feminists and believes that being rational and educated is the only way for women to become equal to men. Thus, in her novel, J. Austen sheds light on women's education, authority of men, as well as women's struggle for equality with men through education. However, she presents this struggle in a refined manner, as a "daughter of a gentleman," as Virginia Woolf calls her. Thus, behaving in a ladylike manner, she reveals her feminist ideas through her protagonist, Anne Elliot.

A major feminist critic, Margaret Kirkham defines Austen's position in the 18th century feminist movement as one who "sought intellectual and moral equality with men through educational and social reforms." Austen presents her feminism through novel-writing, the latter being a feminist act, reflecting domestic life in a manner "heedful of experience" and undermining patriarchal authority and double-standard morality /Keener, 1986: 297/. Thus, writing novels to present domestic life in a patriarchal society where women try to seek moral equality, J. Austen, the feminist, gives language to her heroine Anne Elliot to seek and get what she wants.

Anne Elliot, at eighteen becomes persuaded to break her engagement with the naval officer, Captain Wentworth, who is penniless. She believes the engagement a

wrong thing – indiscreet, improper, hardly capable of success and not deserving it /Austen, 2005: 23/. At that time of her life, Anne has neither voice nor language. She is “nobody” in her own house, and **her word has no weight** /Austen, 2005: 4/. Thus, Anne’s response to her loss in relation to her lover is a passive one, like that of its creator.

Austen's earliest biographer, her brother Henry, in the biographical notice prefixed to the posthumous edition of *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion* mentions that Austen’s life “was not by any means a life of event” /Citron, 1985: 15/. Her real characteristics were “cheerfulness, sensibility, and benevolence,” and she was incapable of any unkind words. She was, in short, “faultless” and “as bright a genius and as sincere a Christian as God ever made.” /Citron, 1985: 15/. Along with these characteristics, Austen believed that the creation of Anne’s personage gave her a chance to bring it home to her readers that loss, which was a human burden to be borne, should be borne in **silent forbearance**. She believed, loss was an essential human condition and the humans were defined by their reactions and adaptations to their loss /Mooneyham, 1988: 147/.

Thus comes Anne’s silent reaction to her loss which Mooneyham thinks is hers alone, and she has no public forum for her grief /Mooneyham, 1988: 147/. She doesn’t mourn and read poetry. Although she “cherishes her poetic nostalgia” but “finds that this nostalgia has limitations” /Mooneyham, 1988: 154/. Anne Elliot is neither emotional nor sentimental or laughable. She knows her limitations even when it comes to love.

However, J. Austen’s feminism overpowers her “faultlessness” because although she makes Anne carry her burden silently, yet she changes her gradually from a passive character to an active one. With time, Anne realizes that her difficulties are difficulties of **language discourse** and that only **linguistic activity** can unite her back with the captain. She gets to know that she can become somebody, only when she finds a **voice** to express her inner self. She is nobody because her **language is disregarded**. According to Mooneyham, “the action in *Persuasion* begins with Anne as ‘nobody,’ one whose **word has no weight**” /Mooneyham, 1988: 160/. Thus, her journey from the status of “nobody” in her parental house to the status of “somebody” in the naval officer’s life is “**as much a journey through language as it is a journey through time**” /Mooneyham, 1988: 161/. However, soon Anne becomes aware of the gap between love, and **declaration** of love. It is only in Bath that Anne realizes that no change in the social structure where she lives can happen unless she speaks up her mind.

According to Fairclough, “discourse has effects upon social structures and contributes to the achievement of social change” /Fairclough, 1996: 37/, thus, discourse is what determines power. Anne and Wentworth learn that happiness cannot be regained until they seek it and that “in their restricted society, the only means of regaining happiness is through language.” The barrier between Anne and Wentworth is a linguistic one. Words keep them apart, and it is only words that can

keep them together” /Mooneyham, 1988: 146/. In the beginning of the story, Anne communicates through letters. She knows very well that honest speech is rare, and opportunities for such speech are also rare. If she dares to speak and make her voice listened to, she “must speak up, not brazenly, but quietly, effectively, and fluently” /Mooneyham, 1988: 164/.

Austen’s heroine is weak in the beginning of the story; yet, she struggles, defends herself, and gets what she wants. Anne Elliot, the novel’s protagonist, who represents the complex pattern of family relationships and the social class in England, reveals the power of patriarchy through different lines in the novel, such as: “Men have had every advantage of us in telling their own story;” “education has been theirs in so much higher a degree; the pen has been in their hands,” etc. Anne lives in a society where bureaucracy rules, and so she has to follow the orders of that society. In the hierarchical order of the society then, Anne is in the very bottom of the society rank and it is quite natural for her time that she does not attain her goal, since “bureaucracies are goal-oriented organizations designed according to rational principles in order to efficiently attain their goals. Offices are ranked in a hierarchical order.” They intend “to promote the efficient attainment of the organization's goals” /Enwall, 1996/. That is one of the reasons why comparing Austin to the male writers of her time, it can easily be seen that male writers have always been able to study their craft at universities, group themselves into movements, search out predecessors for guidance or patronage, collaborate or fight with their contemporaries, whereas women are barred from universities, isolated in their own homes, restricted in friendship.

Thus, it is not surprising at all that Jane Austen’s contemporaries – Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Southey were educated in Bristol and Cambridge and had university friends in common. Meanwhile J. Austen, almost exactly the same age and from a similar social milieu, stayed home, visited a brother's family now and then, wrote letters to sisters and nieces, and read books by woman-writers of her day /Mairs, 1998: 43-44/. However, her writings proved that she was not pleased with the situation and she burst to get her rights by raising her voice through her pen. Although she didn’t get university education, she never missed her chance to write and use her pen as a weapon to fight men.

Austen’s heroine gets her lover after undergoing a process of development. In the beginning, she suffers and suppresses her feelings, but after the plot reaches its climax, and Anne writes a letter to Wentworth, the resolution to a happy ending begins. The letter that symbolizes the **pen** and the woman’s **voice** is a source of power. Anne’s search for happiness and her struggle against fate, must lie in her “breaking through the barrier of silence or the equally deadly barrier of **common speech**, the “nothingness” of polite talk” /Mooneyham, 1988: 146/. Anne understands that she will not be able to get Captain Wentworth back as a lover again without gaining **language**.

According to Fairclough, “impingements of the economy and the state upon life have resulted in problems and crises of social identity for many people who have been experienced and dealt with individually, rather than through forms of social struggle /Fairclough, 1996: 198/. The crises of social identity in *Persuasion* is revealed when Austen gives Anne a poor young man and Anne rejects him. The young man becomes rich and doesn’t want Anne anymore. But Anne gets **language** and makes the refined captain propose to her again.

Anne’s economic situation in the beginning of the novel is so low indeed, that she is dependent on her father. She does not have an income or an inheritance to give her the social power. Without any support, she is oppressed by the opinions of people around her. Powerless and speechless in the beginning of the novel, Anne, however, comes to get a voice in the end. She learns to **speak** out but quietly, effectively, and fluently. She becomes mature, and gets **language** and **communication skills** expressing her feelings out loud and making her lover come back to her again.

Until the structural climax of the plot – Louisa’s fall at Lyme, Anne makes no attempt to change the status of their relationship, and the **linguistic barrier** between Anne and Wentworth remains unbroken. But after Lyme, things change. Anne becomes mature and turns from a passive character to an active one for she now knows that Wentworth loves her. But she is also aware of the reality that in her society, a direct declaration of love is impossible. Austen brings the lovers together and makes Wentworth discover Anne’s love to him. She makes Anne confess that she would be too happy to go to a play with the captain, rather than have a party at home, for she doesn’t take any pleasure in the sort of meeting. And although Austen gives Anne a voice to speak up and tell these words to Captain Wentworth, she also makes her tremble while doing this, to stress out her awareness of her social boundaries which she cannot overstep. However, the fact of Captain Wentworth’s submission to what Anne says does happen, it happens under the influence of her words, and this symbolizes Wentworth’s submission to Anne’s dominant linguistic role.

Thus, Anne’s **proficiency and linguistic power** enable her to communicate to her love, and it is only after getting **language** and **speaking up her voice**, that Anne finally gets what she wants. In other words, Anne’s **language discourse abilities** help her to convert to a completely different character.

The experiences and statements of Anne Elliot in *Persuasion* show that Jane Austen is sympathetic with the eighteenth-century feminist revolt against the narrow male understanding of female personality. Giving voice to Anne Elliot – the passive character who bore the burden of her loss silently, Austen proves that it is through rational conversion and language discourse abilities that women can attain equality with men in the patriarchal English society of the 18th century.

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Վ. ՉԱՓԱՐԵԱՆ – Կին կերպարների ծայրը Ջեյն Օստինի «Համոզմունք» վեպում. – Սույն հոդվածում քննության է առնվում լեզվի կարևորության խնդիրը Ջեյն Օստինի «Համոզմունք» վեպում: Էնն Էլլիոթի կերպարի աստիճանական զարգացման արդյունքում հերոսուհին կարողանում է բարձրաձայն հայտարարել իր ապրումներն ու զգացմունքները՝ գիտակցելով, որ ինքը կարող է ընկալվել որպես անհատականություն միայն այն դեպքում, երբ կարողանա բացահայտ խոսել իր անտեսված մտահոգությունների ու խնդիրների մասին: Ուսումնասիրության նպատակն է ցույց տալ, որ Էննի կերպարի միջոցով հեղինակն արտահայտում է իր համակրանքը 18-րդ դարի ֆեմինիստական շարժման նկատմամբ և քննադատում կանանց որպես անհատականություն ընկալելու տղամարդկանց դժկամությունը:

Բանալի բառեր. Ջեյն Օստին, «Համոզմունք», անգլիական նահապետական հասարակություն, ֆեմինիզմ, կին կերպարների ծայրը, լեզվական դիսկուրս

В. ЧАПАРЯН – *Голоса женских персонажей в романе Джейн Остин «Доводы рассудка»*. – В настоящей статье рассматривается проблема значимости языка, а именно важности «владения» им и использования для достижения своих целей в последнем романе Джейн Остин «Доводы рассудка». Через развитие образа главной героини романа Энн Эллиот автор передает ее чувства и переживания, осознавая, что она может быть воспринята как личность только в том случае, если сможет открыто заявлять о себе и прямо говорить о своих проблемах. Цель исследования через анализ образа Энн показать отношение автора к феминистическому движению конца 18-го – начала 19-го веков, которому Джейн Остин симпатизирует, в то же время критикуя нежелание мужчин воспринимать женщин как личность и индивидуальность.

Ключевые слова: Джейн Остин, роман «Доводы рассудка» (англ. “Persuasion”), английское патриархальное общество, феминизм, голоса женских персонажей, языковой дискурс