



Possessing Women, Possessing Land: Ecofeminist Critique Of Property In The Writings Of Jane Austen

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Abstract

The novels of Jane Austen have long been celebrated for their sharp social critique, but when read through the lens of ecofeminism they reveal a deeper commentary on the dual oppression of women and the exploitation of land. In Regency England, property laws such as entailment and primogeniture reduced both women and land to commodities, controlled and circulated within patriarchal structures. Austen exposes this dynamic by showing how her heroines are positioned within these systems of possession, and how their autonomy emerges in contrast to it. *Pride and Prejudice* illustrate the brutal logic of entailment that disinherits the Bennet sisters, while *Mansfield Park* links the domestic hierarchy of women's subordination to the colonial exploitation of plantation land abroad. In *Sense and Sensibility*, the dispossession of the Dashwood women underscores how survival depends on male-centred inheritance, and *Emma* provides a rare case of female control over land, complicated by the heroine's privileged position. Across these works, gardens, walks, and natural spaces become symbolic refuges for women, representing harmony, freedom, and balance against the rigid structures of ownership. Austen's heroines may not disrupt patriarchal property laws, but they resist and negotiate them in ways that echo ecofeminist ethics of care, interdependence, and relationality. By aligning women's voices with nature, Austen critiques not only the injustices of her age but also anticipates later debates about the cultural logic that treats both women and the environment as resources to be possessed. Reading Austen ecofeministically broadens our understanding of her relevance, revealing her as a writer who subtly yet powerfully questioned the flapped politics of gender and land.

Keywords: - Gender, Nature, Patriarchy, Property, Inheritance, Ecofeminism

Jane Austen's novels have often been read as comedies of manners, tales of courtship, and portraits of the English gentry. Yet beneath their polished style and social wit lies a deeper interrogation of the structures that governed women's lives in Regency England. Among these, the laws of property and inheritance stand out as particularly oppressive. The system of entailment and primogeniture ensured that estates passed down male lines, rendering women legally dependent, socially vulnerable, and often economically precarious. When viewed through the lens of ecofeminism, this economic and legal system exposes striking parallels between the subjugation of women and the exploitation of land. Ecofeminism, as both a critical

theory and a movement, argues that patriarchal cultures treat both women and nature as possessions to be controlled, silenced, and consumed. Austen's novels—though composed more than a century before the term “ecofeminism” was coined—offer a subtle yet incisive critique of this cultural logic.

The connection between women and land in Austen's fiction is not accidental but foundational. Her narratives are built around the ownership, inheritance, and transfer of estates—Longbourn in *Pride and Prejudice*, Mansfield Park in *Mansfield Park*, Norland in *Sense and Sensibility*, and Hartfield in *Emma*. These estates do not merely serve as settings; they are catalysts of conflict, shaping the destinies of her heroines. The very fact that women's futures are determined by property laws underscores their shared vulnerability with the land: both are subject to possession and exchange within a patriarchal order. As ecofeminist theorist Vandana Shiva observes, “Patriarchy and capitalism together perceive women and nature as passive objects, to be dominated and controlled” (Shiva 38). Austen dramatizes this domination through the disinheritance of daughters, the commodification of marriage, and the constant emphasis on wealth derived from land.

At the same time, Austen's heroines resist this reduction to property. They seek autonomy, however limited, by aligning themselves with values that ecofeminism celebrates: harmony, relationality, and care. Elizabeth Bennet's walks in the countryside, Fanny Price's sensitivity to natural spaces, and Anne Elliot's quiet resilience in *Persuasion* all suggest a counter-logic to the greed and domination embodied by patriarchal figures. These heroines do not wield overt political power, but through their relationships with nature and their ethical choices, they embody a different vision of life—one that parallels with ecofeminist critiques of domination. As Greta Gaard notes, “ecofeminist literary criticism uncovers the textual strategies that align women with nature not as a form of essentialism but as a critique of patriarchal hierarchies” (Gaard 12). In this light, Austen's seemingly domestic tales emerge as subtle ecofeminist interventions. The social conditions of Austen's time make this reading particularly compelling. Women in Regency England had limited legal rights and could not own property independently once have married. Their status was tied to men, just as land was tied to male inheritance. Property ownership was not only an economic matter but a symbol of identity, stability, and social belonging. To be dispossessed of land was to be dispossessed of power. The same logic applied to women: their social worth was measured by their marriage prospects, dowries, and family connections. This is why the fate of estates looms so heavily in Austen's plots. When Mr. Bennet's estate is entailed away from his daughters in *Pride and Prejudice*, it is not simply a financial inconvenience; it is an existential threat, reducing the women to precarious dependents. Such narrative choices reflect, in literary form, what ecofeminist theorists identify as the structural link between women's marginalization and the exploitation of the environment.

Yet Austen's novels are not mere laments. They are also deeply ironic, satirical, and resistant. By giving her heroines wit, intelligence, and moral clarity, she refuses to reduce them to passive victims. Elizabeth Bennet critiques Lady Catherine's authoritarian control of her estate and her social power, subtly mocking the logic of domination. Fanny Price's discomfort with the wilderness scenes at Mansfield Park reveals how natural spaces, when appropriated by patriarchal schemes, become sites of exploitation rather than freedom. In each case, Austen demonstrates that women and nature cannot be reduced indefinitely to property. Resistance may be quiet, but it is present. As Carolyn Merchant reminds us, “The recovery of women's voices in relation to the natural world destabilizes the very foundations of patriarchal power” (Merchant 127). Austen's heroines embody this recovery, suggesting a future in which care and relationality might replace domination and possession.

Reading Austen ecofeministically also broadens her significance for contemporary debates. In the twenty-first century, questions of gender equality and ecological sustainability remain urgent. The entanglement of women's rights with environmental justice continues to be visible in global struggles—from women farmers dispossessed by corporate land grabs to the exploitation of natural resources that disproportionately affects marginalized communities. Austen's novels, when read against this backdrop, no longer seem confined to the drawing rooms of Regency England. Instead, they serve as allegories of possession and dispossession, of domination and resistance. By showing how women's fates are bound to land and property, Austen anticipates ecofeminist critiques of capitalist patriarchy. This article argues that Austen's fiction offers a powerful critique of property as a patriarchal system that treats both women and land as

possessions. Based on ecofeminist theory, it will explore how Austen's novels expose the injustices of entailment, inheritance, and ownership while also gesturing toward alternative values rooted in harmony, care, and relationality. Through close readings of *Pride and Prejudice*, *Mansfield Park*, *Sense and Sensibility*, and *Emma*, it will demonstrate that Austen's heroines resist commodification and embody ecofeminist ethics. Ultimately, Austen emerges not only as a novelist of manners but also as a subtle critic of the cultural logic that links women's oppression to the exploitation of the natural world.

Ecofeminism emerged in the late twentieth century as both a theoretical framework and an activist movement that connects the oppression of women with the exploitation of nature. At its core, ecofeminism recognizes that the same structures of patriarchy and capitalism that silence women also commodify the environment, reducing both to passive resources. As Ynestra King once observed, ecofeminism is not simply about "adding women" to ecological debates; it is about recognizing that "the domination of women and the domination of nature are interconnected phenomena that must be addressed together" (qtd. in Warren 7). This interconnectedness is especially illuminating when applied to Jane Austen's fiction, which constantly situates women's lives within the structures of property, inheritance, and land ownership. In Austen's world, property was not merely a backdrop for social life; it was the very framework through which social identity and power were defined. Landownership signified stability, status, and authority. Estates were the lifeblood of the gentry, providing wealth, influence, and a sense of continuity across generations. Yet the system of primogeniture and entailment ensured that this wealth flowed through male lines, disinheriting women and making them dependent on advantageous marriages. Women were bound to land in symbolic ways: just as land could be bought, sold, and inherited, so too were women's futures treated as commodities to be exchanged in marriage markets. From this perspective, Austen's heroines are doubly dispossessed—of property and of autonomy.

Ecofeminism helps us to see how this dispossession is not only legal but also cultural. The logic that defines women and land as objects of possession is rooted in patriarchal hierarchies of value. Carolyn Merchant has argued that the rise of modern science and capitalism "legitimated the domination of both women and nature through the language of mastery, control, and ownership" (Merchant 5). In Austen's novels, this language is expressed not through explicit theories but through everyday realities: the entail that deprives the Bennet sisters of their inheritance, the colonial plantations that enrich Sir Thomas Bertram, and the subtle but constant reminder that a woman without property must marry well or face destitution.

At the same time, Austen dramatizes how property relations extend beyond economics into questions of morality and social order. Estates like Pemberley or Mansfield Park are not only sources of income but also representations of the values of their owners. A well-managed estate suggests harmony, responsibility, and balance, while mismanagement implies greed and moral decay. In this way, Austen indirectly critiques the patriarchal assumption that possession equates to virtue. An ecofeminist reading uncovers how women, excluded from formal ownership, are nonetheless central to reimagining what stewardship and care might mean. Elizabeth Bennet's appreciation of Pemberley's natural beauty, for example, contrasts with Lady Catherine de Bourgh's authoritarian control of Rosings Park, highlighting two competing visions of land: one relational and harmonious, the other domineering and hierarchical. It is also significant that Austen gives her heroines moments of freedom in nature that subtly resist patriarchal control. Walks in gardens, strolls in the countryside, and moments of solitude in natural spaces recur across her novels. These are not trivial details of setting; they are symbolic acts of resistance. Ecofeminism suggests that by aligning themselves with natural rhythms and landscapes, Austen's heroines articulate a different relationship to the world—one based not on possession but on coexistence. In doing so, they prefigure ecofeminist ethics of care and relationality, even if Austen herself could not have named them as such. By connecting women's exclusion from property to the patriarchal logic of possession, Austen's fiction reveals how deeply gender and ecology blend together. Her novels dramatize what ecofeminist critics have long argued: that the oppression of women cannot be separated from the exploitation of land, because both are rooted in the same systems of domination. This recognition makes Austen not only a keen observer of her society but also a writer whose work continues to speak to contemporary struggles for gender justice and ecological balance.

Among all of Jane Austen's works, *Pride and Prejudice* most vividly exposes how the laws of entailment dispossessed women of property and tied their survival to the uncertainties of marriage. The entire plot of the novel hinges on the fact that Mr. Bennet's estate at Longbourn is legally entailed away from his five daughters, who cannot inherit it after his death. Instead, the property is destined to go to the pompous clergyman Mr. Collins, a distant male cousin. This legal structure illustrates a deeply patriarchal logic: land and wealth must remain within male lines, while women are reduced to precarious dependents whose futures are subject to negotiation through marriage. This situation encapsulates what ecofeminism identifies as the double oppression of women and nature. Just as land is controlled, exchanged, and possessed within a patriarchal order, so too are women's lives. Elizabeth Bennet and her sisters, despite their intelligence, charm, and individuality, are regarded as burdens because they lack dowries and cannot inherit property. Their value in society is tied to their ability to marry advantageously, reflecting a commodification of women that parallels the commodification of land. As Susan Fraiman notes, "Austen's entailment plots dramatize the link between female subjugation and property structures, showing how women, like land, are subjected to circulation within patriarchal economies" (Fraiman 85). The plight of the Bennet sisters thus becomes emblematic of the broader ecofeminist critique of possession and dispossession.

The figure of Lady Catherine de Bourgh further sharpens Austen's critique. Lady Catherine is a woman of wealth and high status who exercises enormous control over her estate, Rosings Park. Yet, rather than embodying freedom from patriarchal norms, she becomes a caricature of authoritarian domination. Her estate is a reflection of her personality—lavish, hierarchical, and rigidly controlled. She embodies a form of ownership that aligns with patriarchal logic, using her power not to nurture or harmonize but to intimidate and dominate. In ecofeminist terms, Lady Catherine mirrors the very structures of domination that oppress both women and nature, showing that simply possessing land does not liberate women if they replicate the same logic of mastery. In contrast, Elizabeth Bennet's response to natural spaces reflects a different relationship to land and environment. One of the most memorable shifts in her perception occurs when she visits Pemberley, Mr. Darcy's estate. Elizabeth is struck not by ostentatious wealth but by the harmony of the grounds: "It was a large, handsome stone building, standing well on rising ground, and backed by a ridge of high woody hills; and in front, a stream of some natural importance was swelled into greater, but without any artificial appearance" (Austen 245). What she admires is not domination over nature but a respectful integration of human presence with natural beauty. Darcy's stewardship of Pemberley suggests an ethic of balance rather than exploitation, and Elizabeth's appreciation aligns her with a relational, ecofeminist perspective that values harmony over possession.

Elizabeth's own relationship to land is not about ownership but about movement and freedom. Her frequent walks in the countryside, often in defiance of social expectations, symbolize her independence of spirit. When she shocks Caroline Bingley by walking "three miles so early in the day" with "her petticoat six inches deep in mud" (Austen 31), Elizabeth's action embodies an ecofeminist resistance to patriarchal constraints. Nature becomes a space of liberation, an arena in which women can assert autonomy outside the structures of property and inheritance. Unlike Lady Catherine, whose estate embodies domination, Elizabeth finds empowerment in her embodied relationship with the natural world.

Thus, *Pride and Prejudice* stages two competing visions of land and gender. On the one hand, entailment and property laws reduce both women and land to possessions in a patriarchal economy. On the other, natural spaces provide heroines like Elizabeth with opportunities for freedom, reflection, and resistance. Austen's irony ensures that while the Bennet sisters must navigate the harsh realities of inheritance and marriage, their moral strength emerges from an alternative vision of life—one that resonates with ecofeminist ethics of care, relationality, and respect for nature. As Claudia L. Johnson argues, Austen's novels "expose the cultural logic of possession, even while they work within it, to reveal its instability and injustice" (Johnson 122). *Pride and Prejudice* therefore is not just a love story but a sharp critique of the patriarchal structures that commodify women and land alike.

Mansfield Park stands as one of Jane Austen's most complex novels because it links the domestic concerns of inheritance and marriage with the broader economic structures of empire and colonialism. The wealth of Sir Thomas Bertram, which sustains the grand estate of Mansfield Park, comes from his plantations in Antigua. Austen does not elaborate on the lives of the enslaved people who labour there, but the mere

mention of colonial holdings underscores how the domestic security of the English gentry was built upon the exploitation of distant lands and bodies. From an ecofeminist perspective, this connection is crucial: the same patriarchal system that marginalizes women within English estates also profits from the domination of colonized land and labour abroad. At the centre of this world is Fanny Price, the poor relation taken in by the Bertram family. Fanny is positioned as both insider and outsider. She lives within the estate but lacks power, wealth, and status. Her marginalization reflects the same structures that disinherit and silence women across Austen's fiction. She is constantly reminded of her dependence, treated more as an extension of her uncle's benevolence than as a person with autonomy. In many ways, Fanny embodies the position of land itself: present, vital, and sustaining, yet denied recognition and voice.

The symbolic use of natural spaces in *Mansfield Park* reveals Austen's critical eye. When the young characters visit the wilderness at Sotherton, their playful exploration quickly becomes a metaphor for transgression and social disorder. Maria Bertram and Henry Crawford's flirtation in the wilderness suggests how natural space, rather than offering freedom, becomes a stage for patriarchal desires and selfishness. Fanny, in contrast, views the natural world with sensitivity and caution. She becomes physically exhausted and morally unsettled by the impropriety she witnesses, highlighting her alignment with a more harmonious relationship to nature. In ecofeminist terms, Fanny's discomfort points to the dangers of treating land and women alike as spaces to be conquered and consumed.

What makes *Mansfield Park* particularly relevant to ecofeminism is its implicit critique of possession at multiple levels. The Bertram estate represents patriarchal ownership of women and land, but it is inseparable from the exploitation of colonial plantations abroad. The logic of mastery does not end at the English countryside; it extends across oceans, binding together the subordination of women with the domination of nature and colonized peoples. Austen's silence about the details of Antigua is not simply omission; it can be read as a subtle exposure of the uncomfortable truth that English domestic tranquillity rested on invisible violence elsewhere. Fanny's resistance is quiet but powerful. She refuses Henry Crawford's marriage proposal, even under intense pressure from her uncle, because she recognizes the emptiness of wealth without moral integrity. In doing so, she challenges the logic that women must surrender autonomy in exchange for security. She also critiques the way men treat land and women as possessions to be acquired. Her eventual marriage to Edmund, though still within the structures of patriarchal society, suggests a vision of partnership rooted in moral responsibility rather than conquest. The ecofeminist lens reveals Fanny's position as a metaphorical bridge. She embodies the silenced and marginalized, yet she is also the character who perceives most clearly the ethical implications of human actions on both people and environment. Her voice, often dismissed by the powerful figures around her, parallels with what ecofeminist critics identify as an ethic of care—an attention to balance, relationality, and justice that contrasts sharply with the exploitative logic of possession. As Moira Ferguson observes, "In *Mansfield Park*, women and colonies become interchangeable subjects of patriarchal control, revealing the extent to which domination crosses boundaries of gender, race, and ecology" (Ferguson 152). Thus, *Mansfield Park* goes beyond the question of whether women can inherit land. It demonstrates that patriarchal possession is not confined to England's estates but is part of a global system of domination. By placing Fanny Price at the heart of this narrative, Austen suggests that resistance is possible—not through dramatic revolutions but through moral clarity, ethical relationships, and the refusal to be commodified.

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