

In the 1790s, the framework of women's protests against the injustice they faced underwent a distinctive change, which inevitably imprinted itself into contemporary literature. The period discussed in this thesis was chosen to exemplify the beginnings of feminist awakening present in the novels of three women writers: Mary Hays, Mary Wollstonecraft, and Jane Austen. The aim of this thesis is to explore different attitudes towards attaining emotional, intellectual, social, and economic independence, while simultaneously discussing the period's construction of femininity, the discourse of natural rights, the issue of education, romantic love, and sensibility.

The introductory chapter describes the historical background and looks closely on the position of women in contemporary society in terms of their familiar and social status, economic dependence, education, character shaping, and their objectification of the marriage market. It also presents the view of women as depicted in conduct manuals and the works of the Jacobin (and also Anti-Jacobin) novelists. Finally, it introduces the novelists in question and elaborates on the influence of Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Women* on the authors under analysis.

The second chapter focuses its attention on the depiction of female independence in Mary Hays's *Memoirs of Emma Courtney*. It analyses the novel's approach towards social dependence, the influence of education and reading, emotional independence, and the question of maternity. As with all other analysed novels, the end of this chapter is devoted to the projection of the author into the polemics of the novel.

The third chapter pays attention to Mary Wollstonecraft's *Maria: or, The Wrongs of Woman*. It focuses mainly on the view of marriage as a prison and enslavement, arising from social, economic and legal oppressions of women. The issue of sensibility is dealt with in terms of Rousseau's *Julie, ou la nouvelle Héloïse*, the power of feeling and female desire. The

chapter also includes the analysis of madness and delusion, which leads to searching refuge in motherhood and a new kind of family based on sisterhood.

The following chapter focused on Mary Hays's *The Victim of Prejudice* explores such issues as determinism, cultural and social prejudices, inadequacy of the English legal system, male tyranny, or female objectification. Attention is also paid to the flexible notion of chastity and the heroine's refusal to submit to the fate of a fallen woman.

The final analytical chapter moves to the post-1810 period onto Jane Austen's *Persuasion* and places the author on the junction between the radical and conservatives female writers. It shows Austen as faithful to the historically conditioned construction of gender and social order; yet, it also refers her use subversive features, such as the question of spinsterhood, active female engagement in economy and society, or the challenging notion of separate spheres.

The main intention of this thesis is to describe a rather turbulent era of the 1790s onwards, analysing works of different, yet similar, authors to present a detailed picture of the depiction of female independence in contemporary literature.