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**FROM REGENCY MORALITY TO TROPICAL
TRAGEDY: A DECOLONIAL AND GENDER-BASED
COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF EMMA
WOODHOUSE AND EMMA IN THE WORKS OF
JOSÉ MARÍA VARGAS VILA**

DE LA MORALIDAD DE LA REGENCIA A LA TRAGEDIA
TROPICAL: UN ANÁLISIS COMPARATIVO DESCOLONIAL Y
DE GÉNERO DE EMMA WOODHOUSE Y EMMA EN LAS
OBRAS DE JOSÉ MARÍA VARGAS VILA

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From Regency Morality to Tropical Tragedy: A Decolonial and Gender-Based Comparative Analysis of Emma Woodhouse and Emma in the Works of José María Vargas Vila

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ABSTRACT

This article develops a decolonial and gender-based comparative analysis of female subjectivity through the figures of Emma Woodhouse in *Emma* and *Emma* in the works of José María Vargas Vila. Moving beyond superficial nominal coincidence, the study proposes the shared name “Emma” as a symbolic and discursive entry point to examine how two distinct literary traditions construct divergent models of femininity within unequal historical and epistemological frameworks. The research adopts a qualitative interpretative approach grounded in critical hermeneutics and symbolic interactionism, complemented by a decolonial theoretical framework drawing on the works of Aníbal Quijano, Walter D. Mignolo, and Catherine Walsh, alongside gender theory perspectives. Analytical categories include the configuration of female subjectivity, representations of love, social regulation, and the tension between agency and determinism. Findings reveal that Emma Woodhouse embodies a disciplined and socially regulated subjectivity embedded within the bourgeois order of Regency England, while Vargas Vila’s Emma represents a fragile and tragic subject shaped by emotional excess, moral instability, and the contradictions of a postcolonial Latin American context. The study contributes to comparative literary studies by advancing a decolonial methodology that enables dialogue between canonical European texts and marginalized Latin American narratives, challenging hegemonic frameworks in the construction of gendered subjectivities.

Cue words: Female Subjectivity, Comparative Literature, Gender Studies, Interculturality, José María Vargas Vila, Jane Austen, Coloniality of Power

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De la moralidad de la Regencia a la tragedia tropical: un análisis comparativo descolonial y de género de Emma Woodhouse y Emma en las obras de José María Vargas Vila

RESUMEN

Este artículo desarrolla un análisis comparativo decolonial y de género de la subjetividad femenina a través de las figuras de Emma Woodhouse en *Emma* y *Emma* en la obra de José María Vargas Vila. Más allá de la mera coincidencia nominal, el estudio propone el nombre compartido «Emma» como punto de partida simbólico y discursivo para examinar cómo dos tradiciones literarias distintas construyen modelos divergentes de feminidad dentro de marcos históricos y epistemológicos desiguales. La investigación adopta un enfoque interpretativo cualitativo basado en la hermenéutica crítica y el interaccionismo simbólico, complementado por un marco teórico decolonial que se nutre de las obras de Aníbal Quijano, Walter Dignolo y Catherine Walsh, junto con perspectivas de la teoría de género. Las categorías analíticas incluyen la configuración de la subjetividad femenina, las representaciones del amor, la regulación social y la tensión entre agencia y determinismo. Los hallazgos revelan que Emma Woodhouse encarna una subjetividad disciplinada y socialmente regulada, arraigada en el orden burgués de la Inglaterra de la Regencia, mientras que la Emma de Vargas Vila representa un sujeto frágil y trágico, moldeado por el exceso emocional, la inestabilidad moral y las contradicciones de un contexto latinoamericano poscolonial. Este estudio contribuye a los estudios literarios comparados al proponer una metodología decolonial que posibilita el diálogo entre textos europeos canónicos y narrativas latinoamericanas marginadas, desafiando los marcos hegemónicos en la construcción de subjetividades de género.

Palabras clave: Subjetividad femenina, Literatura comparada, Estudios de género, Interculturalidad, José María Vargas Vila, Jane Austen, Colonialidad del poder

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1. INTRODUCTION

Comparative literary studies have increasingly questioned the unequal organization of the global literary canon and the asymmetrical circulation of texts between the Global North and the Global South. While some approaches to world literature emphasize circulation, scale, and comparison across literary systems (Luca, 2022; Moretti, 2020; Casanova, 2020), critical perspectives have warned that global comparison may reproduce Eurocentric hierarchies if it does not interrogate the politics of translation, canon formation, and epistemic location (Apter, 2025; Spivak, 2021). In this sense, the comparison between Jane Austen's *Emma* and José María Vargas Vila's *Emma* is not based on nominal coincidence alone, but on the possibility of examining how female subjectivity is constructed across unequal literary modernities.

This comparative approach also draws on postcolonial criticism, particularly Said's (1978) critique of Western representational power and Bhabha's (2012) notion of cultural hybridity, in order to examine how literary subjectivities emerge within spaces of cultural tension, asymmetry, and symbolic negotiation.

The figure of Emma Woodhouse has been widely examined within the context of English literature as a paradigmatic representation of bourgeois femininity in the Regency period. Scholars have emphasized her role as a socially embedded subject whose identity is shaped by class privilege, moral discipline, and the subtle regulation of desire within a structured social order. Austen's narrative has thus been interpreted as both a reflection and critique of early nineteenth-century English society, particularly in relation to gender norms, marriage, and the consolidation of middle-class values. Within this framework, Emma Woodhouse operates as a subject who exercises agency, yet within clearly defined social boundaries, embodying what may be understood as a disciplined and normalized form of femininity.

In contrast, the literary production of José María Vargas Vila has often been relegated to the margins of the Latin American canon, frequently dismissed due to its stylistic excess, political radicalism, and departure from normative literary conventions. However, recent scholarship has begun to reassess Vargas Vila's work as a critical site for examining the tensions of postcolonial modernity, particularly in relation to the construction of subjectivity, morality, and power. His text *Emma*, though less studied than his more widely known works, offers a compelling portrayal of a female figure shaped by emotional



intensity, fragility, and a tragic orientation toward love and existence. Unlike Austen's Emma, Vargas Vila's protagonist is not integrated into a stable social order but rather emerges within a context marked by institutional weakness, moral ambiguity, and the lingering effects of colonial structures.

This asymmetry between the two literary contexts—Regency England and late nineteenth-century Colombia—constitutes the central problem of this study. While traditional comparative approaches might view such disparity as an obstacle, this article approaches it as an analytical advantage. Drawing on decolonial theory, particularly the concept of coloniality of power developed by Anibal Quijano, the study examines how different historical trajectories produce distinct configurations of gendered subjectivity. In this sense, the comparison does not seek equivalence but rather aims to reveal how literature encodes the tensions between social order and fragmentation, discipline and excess, agency and determinism.

Furthermore, this study is situated within broader debates on the relationship between gender and modernity. Feminist theory has long emphasized that the construction of the female subject is deeply intertwined with social, economic, and cultural structures. In the case of Emma Woodhouse, her relative autonomy is inseparable from her position within a privileged class structure that affords her both protection and authority. Conversely, Vargas Vila's Emma embodies a form of subjectivity that is not stabilized by institutional frameworks but instead is defined by vulnerability, emotional intensity, and proximity to death. This contrast allows for a critical interrogation of the ways in which gendered identities are shaped by differing conditions of modernity, particularly when viewed through a decolonial lens.

Methodologically, this article adopts a qualitative interpretative approach grounded in critical hermeneutics and symbolic interactionism. These frameworks enable a close reading of the texts that attends not only to narrative structures and character development but also to the symbolic meanings embedded within them. The shared name "Emma" is thus not treated as a superficial coincidence but as a discursive device that allows for the exploration of how similar signifiers can produce radically different meanings across cultural contexts. By focusing on key analytical categories—such as the configuration of female subjectivity, representations of love, social regulation, and the tension between

agency and determinism—the study seeks to construct a comparative model that is both theoretically robust and methodologically coherent.

A significant gap in existing literature lies in the limited engagement between canonical European texts and Latin American works within a decolonial comparative framework. While Austen's novels have been extensively studied from feminist and socio-historical perspectives, and Vargas Vila's work has been examined within the context of Latin American modernism, there remains a lack of studies that bring these traditions into dialogue. This absence reflects broader epistemological hierarchies that privilege European literary production while marginalizing other forms of knowledge and expression. By establishing a comparative dialogue between these two authors, this study seeks to challenge such hierarchies and contribute to a more inclusive understanding of literary analysis.

The relevance of this research extends beyond literary studies, engaging with broader questions of cultural representation, epistemic justice, and the decolonization of knowledge. In an increasingly globalized academic landscape, the need to critically examine the foundations of comparative methodologies becomes ever more urgent. This article responds to this need by proposing an approach that does not merely juxtapose texts but actively interrogates the conditions under which they are produced, circulated, and interpreted.

In doing so, the study advances three main contributions. First, it offers a theoretically grounded justification for comparing texts from radically different contexts, moving beyond superficial criteria toward a decolonial analytical framework. Second, it develops a set of analytical categories that can be applied to the study of female subjectivity across diverse literary traditions. Third, it repositions Vargas Vila's work within global literary debates, highlighting its relevance for contemporary discussions on gender, modernity, and coloniality.

Ultimately, this article argues that the comparison between Emma Woodhouse and Vargas Vila's Emma reveals not only contrasting models of femininity but also deeper tensions within the project of modernity itself. While Austen's narrative reflects a form of modernity characterized by order, regulation, and social coherence, Vargas Vila's work exposes a fractured modernity marked by instability, excess, and unresolved contradictions. Through this comparative lens, the figure of Emma

becomes a site for exploring the limits of dominant epistemologies and the possibilities of alternative readings grounded in decolonial thought.

2. Coloniality, Modernity, and the Construction of Subjectivity

The decolonial dimension of this study is grounded in the concept of coloniality of power, proposed by Quijano (2000), which explains how colonial forms of domination persist beyond formal political independence through hierarchies of race, labor, gender, knowledge, and authority. This perspective is complemented by Dussel's (1995) critique of the Eurocentric invention of modernity and by Mignolo's (2011) notion of epistemic disobedience, which challenges the supposed universality of Western knowledge. From this standpoint, Vargas Vila's *Emma* may be read as a literary expression of the contradictions of the postcolonial Latin American republic.

Recent decolonial scholars have expanded these debates by examining the persistence of coloniality in philosophy, political economy, pedagogy, and global social structures. Maldonado-Torres (2020) repositions decoloniality as a philosophical project for the future, while Grosfoguel (2016) and Bhabra (2021) emphasize the colonial foundations of modern political and economic systems. Similarly, Mignolo and Walsh (2023) argue that decoloniality is not merely a theoretical critique but a praxis of epistemic, political, and cultural reorientation.

Any comparative literary analysis that seeks to move beyond descriptive parallels must engage with the epistemological conditions under which texts are produced. In this regard, the concept of coloniality of power, developed by Aníbal Quijano, provides a crucial starting point. Quijano argues that modernity is inseparable from coloniality, as the emergence of European modernity was historically constituted through systems of domination that classified populations according to race, labor, and knowledge hierarchies. This framework allows us to understand that literary texts are not merely aesthetic artifacts but also sites where power relations are reproduced, negotiated, and contested.

Within this perspective, the construction of subjectivity—particularly gendered subjectivity—must be understood as historically situated and epistemologically conditioned. The figure of Emma Woodhouse in *Emma* emerges within a context of consolidated European modernity, where social hierarchies are stable and institutional frameworks function as mechanisms of regulation. In contrast, the *Emma* portrayed in the works of José María Vargas Vila reflects the tensions of a Latin American modernity



that is both derivative and fractured, shaped by the enduring effects of colonial domination and uneven processes of nation-building.

Expanding on Quijano's work, Walter Mignolo introduces the notion of epistemic disobedience, which calls for a critical disengagement from Eurocentric frameworks of knowledge. Mignolo argues that Western epistemology has positioned itself as universal, marginalizing alternative ways of knowing. In the context of literary analysis, this implies that canonical texts such as Austen's have been privileged as normative representations of modern subjectivity, while Latin American texts have often been read through reductive or exoticizing lenses. By adopting a decolonial approach, this study seeks to disrupt such hierarchies and to place both texts within a dialogical framework that acknowledges their epistemic differences.

Walsh's (2023) concept of critical interculturality is particularly relevant for this study because it allows comparison to be understood not as a neutral juxtaposition of texts, but as a critical dialogue between unequal epistemic traditions. In this sense, the comparison between Austen and Vargas Vila seeks to challenge the hierarchy that has historically privileged European literary modernity over Latin American literary dissent.

Furthermore, Walsh, & Monarca, (2020). emphasizes the importance of interculturality as a critical project that challenges the asymmetries of knowledge production. Walsh's notion of critical interculturality goes beyond mere coexistence of cultures, advocating instead for a transformative dialogue that confronts power imbalances. In this sense, the comparison between Austen and Vargas Vila is not an attempt to homogenize their differences but to create a space where these differences can be critically examined and understood as expressions of distinct historical trajectories.

The analysis of female subjectivity requires a theoretical engagement with feminist thought, particularly in relation to the ways in which gender is socially constructed and historically mediated. Simone de Beauvoir famously argued that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman," highlighting the role of social structures in shaping gender identities. This perspective is particularly relevant for understanding how the two Emmas are constituted within their respective contexts.

Emma Woodhouse represents a form of femininity that is both constrained and enabled by the social norms of Regency England. Her position within the upper class affords her a degree of autonomy that



is not available to women of lower social status. However, this autonomy is not absolute; it is mediated by expectations related to marriage, propriety, and social responsibility. Thus, Emma's subjectivity can be understood as a negotiated space where agency operates within the limits imposed by a patriarchal social order.

In contrast, Vargas Vila's Emma embodies a subjectivity that is marked by emotional intensity, fragility, and a proximity to death. Her identity is not stabilized by social institutions but is instead shaped by affective experiences that exceed the boundaries of rational control. This difference can be interpreted through a decolonial feminist lens, which critiques the universality of Western models of femininity and highlights the diverse ways in which gender is experienced across cultural contexts.

The category of female subjectivity is approached through feminist theory. Beauvoir's (1999/2011) argument that one is not born but rather becomes a woman provides a foundational point of departure for understanding femininity as a social and historical construction. Butler's (1999) theory of gender performativity further allows this study to examine how femininity is enacted through repeated social norms, gestures, expectations, and symbolic codes.

Moreover, feminist theory has increasingly emphasized the intersectional nature of identity, recognizing that gender cannot be analyzed in isolation from other axes of power such as class, race, and colonial history. (Butler 2021) Although the present study does not focus explicitly on race, the colonial context of Latin America inevitably informs the construction of subjectivity in Vargas Vila's work. The absence of stable institutional frameworks and the prevalence of social inequality contribute to a form of femininity that is less regulated but also more vulnerable.

However, this article does not assume that female subjectivity follows a universal path of emancipation. Lugones's (2020) critique of the colonality of gender is essential for understanding how gender is differently constructed within colonial and postcolonial contexts. This perspective is reinforced by Fraser's analysis of the relationship between feminism and capitalism, (Ivkovic, & Zaric, 2024). Hooks's (2020) insistence on feminism as a collective emancipatory project, and Ahmed's (2021) reflections on complaint as a form of resistance against institutional power.

Gill's & Francois-Cull, (2022) contributions to gender and media studies also help frame the analysis of representation, particularly in relation to how feminine identities are mediated, narrated, and socially interpreted across different cultural systems.

To further understand the differences between the two Emmas, it is necessary to consider the role of class and social structure in shaping subjectivity. The concept of habitus, developed by Pierre Bourdieu, is particularly useful in this regard. Bourdieu defines habitus as a system of durable dispositions that guide perceptions, actions, and practices. These dispositions are shaped by one's position within the social structure and are reproduced through everyday practices.

Emma Woodhouse's behavior can be understood as the product of a habitus that reflects her upper-class status. Her confidence, sense of authority, and involvement in the lives of others are not merely personal traits but expressions of a social position that grants her symbolic capital. At the same time, her actions are constrained by the norms of her social environment, which regulate acceptable forms of behavior. The tension between agency and regulation is thus embedded within the very structure of her subjectivity.

In Austen's *Emma*, the protagonist Emma Woodhouse embodies a socially regulated form of female agency. Her autonomy is made possible by her class position, her access to symbolic authority, and her location within the moral order of Regency England (Austen, 1815/2003). The novel's treatment of marriage, class, and social expectation must be read within the broader history of English domestic ideology and family structures (Stone, & King, 2025).

Poovey's (1985) analysis of the "proper lady" is useful for understanding how Austen's female characters are situated within a moral economy that both constrains and legitimizes feminine conduct. Likewise, Johnson's (2022) work on Austen and class enables a reading of Emma Woodhouse not merely as an individual character, but as an expression of class habitus, symbolic privilege, and social regulation.

From a Bourdieusian perspective, Emma Woodhouse's actions are structured by a habitus that naturalizes her authority within the social field (Bourdieu, 1990). Her apparent freedom is therefore inseparable from the class-based dispositions that enable her to intervene in the lives of others while remaining protected by the stability of her social world.

In contrast, Vargas Vila's *Emma* operates within a social context where the mechanisms of regulation are less stable. The absence of strong institutional structures and the prevalence of social fragmentation result in a different configuration of habitus, one that is less oriented toward social reproduction and more toward individual experience. This difference highlights the importance of considering not only cultural but also structural factors in the analysis of literary subjectivity.

Vargas Vila's *Emma* must be located within the broader tensions of late nineteenth-century Latin American modernity. Unlike Austen's ordered Regency world, Vargas Vila's narrative emerges from a postcolonial republican context marked by moral conflict, clerical power, fragile institutions, and unresolved colonial inheritances (Vargas Vila, 1920/2005).

The Latin American modernist field was not merely an aesthetic movement but also a space of conflict between literary innovation, political dissent, and the crisis of the republican order. Rama's (1998) notion of the "lettered city" helps explain the role of intellectual elites in shaping postcolonial cultural authority, while Ramos (2021) situates modernism within broader struggles over power, language, and modernization.

Recent scholars has contributed to a reassessment of Vargas Vila, (1903) as a complex intellectual figure rather than a merely scandalous or marginal writer. Penagos Jaramillo (2021) examines his "red aestheticism" and literary posture, while Gil, & Zuluaga (2025) highlights the transnational intellectual networks that shaped his circulation and reception. González Espitia (2015) also contributes to the critical recovery of Vargas Vila by reconsidering his place within Latin American literary history.

The representation of love in both texts provides a key entry point for analyzing the construction of female subjectivity. In Austen's novel, love is closely linked to social norms and moral expectations. Marriage is not only a personal choice but also a social institution that reinforces class boundaries and ensures social stability. Emma Woodhouse's initial misinterpretations of romantic relationships can be seen as deviations from a normative framework that ultimately reasserts itself by the end of the novel.

In contrast, Vargas Vila's (1920) portrayal of love is characterized by excess, tragedy, and a lack of social mediation. Love is not regulated by institutional norms but is instead experienced as an overwhelming force that leads to suffering and, ultimately, death. This difference can be interpreted as a reflection of the limits of modernity in the Latin American context. While European modernity is

associated with order and regulation, Latin American modernity is often marked by instability and contradiction.

The contrast between the two Emmas also reveals different regimes of social regulation. In Austen's novel, moral discipline functions through subtle mechanisms of class, propriety, and social correction. This can be read through Foucault's (2008) understanding of discipline as a form of power that operates through norms, surveillance, and internalized self-regulation. In Vargas Vila's *Emma*, by contrast, moral and religious authority appears less as social refinement than as tragic constraint.

Bourdieu's (2011) concept of habitus is central to understanding how class structures shape perception, desire, and conduct in Austen's world. Emma Woodhouse acts freely only within a field that has already defined the limits of legitimate action.

The emotional dimension of both narratives can also be examined through Nussbaum's (2023) account of emotions as forms of ethical judgment and Sen's (2006) reflections on identity as a plural and conflictive category. These perspectives help explain why love, suffering, and recognition operate differently in Austen's and Vargas Vila's narratives.

Bauman's (2005) concept of liquid modernity may help illuminate the instability of modern subject formation, especially when contrasted with the more structured moral world represented in Austen's fiction.

From a decolonial perspective, this contrast reveals the uneven development of modernity and its implications for the construction of subjectivity. The disciplined subject of European modernity and the fragmented subject of postcolonial modernity represent two different responses to the same historical process. By examining these differences, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how literature reflects and critiques the conditions of modern life.

Building on the theoretical perspectives discussed above, this study proposes a decolonial comparative methodology that seeks to overcome the limitations of traditional comparative approaches. Rather than focusing on similarities, the methodology emphasizes difference as a productive analytical category. This approach allows for a critical examination of how texts from different contexts construct subjectivity in distinct ways.

The use of shared signifiers—such as the name “Emma”—is reinterpreted as a discursive strategy that enables the exploration of divergent meanings. By situating each text within its historical and epistemological context, the analysis avoids the pitfalls of superficial comparison and instead offers a theoretically grounded interpretation of literary subjectivity.

This methodological framework is also aligned with the author’s broader work on intercultural bilingual curriculum and decolonial pedagogy, particularly the contributions of Soto Molina & Méndez, (2022), which emphasize the importance of integrating diverse epistemologies in educational and research practices. In this sense, the present study not only contributes to literary analysis but also to the ongoing project of decolonizing knowledge production in the humanities.

3. METHODOLOGY

Methodologically, this article adopts a qualitative interpretative design based on comparative literary analysis, critical hermeneutics, and decolonial critique. Rather than seeking equivalence between the two texts, the study follows a comparative logic that treats asymmetry, difference, and unequal historical location as productive analytical categories (Damrosch, 2022; Spivak, 2021; Apter, 2008). The analysis is organized around five categories: female subjectivity, love, social regulation, agency versus determinism, and moral-religious frameworks.

The qualitative approach is particularly suitable for this study, as it enables an in-depth exploration of literary representations and the complex configurations of female subjectivity. Rather than seeking generalizable findings, the research focuses on producing **context-sensitive interpretations** that illuminate how gendered identities are constructed within distinct socio-historical frameworks.

Critical hermeneutics provides the methodological basis for interpreting the texts beyond their surface narratives, emphasizing the role of historical context, authorial positioning, and ideological structures. In turn, symbolic interactionism allows for the analysis of how meaning is produced through interactions—both between characters and within broader social systems—highlighting the dynamic nature of subjectivity.

The corpus of this study consists of two literary texts:

- Emma by Jane Austen
- *Emma* by José María Vargas Vila



The selection of these texts is not based on nominal coincidence alone but on their potential to illuminate contrasting constructions of female subjectivity across distinct literary and cultural traditions. The shared name “Emma” is approached as a **discursive and symbolic device** that enables a comparative exploration of how similar signifiers generate divergent meanings within unequal modernities.

From a decolonial perspective, this corpus selection also responds to the need to establish dialogues between **canonical European literature** and **marginalized Latin American texts**, thereby challenging epistemological hierarchies in comparative literary studies. While Austen’s *Emma* has been extensively studied and occupies a central place in the Western canon, Vargas Vila’s *Emma* remains relatively underexplored, offering an opportunity to expand the scope of literary analysis.

To ensure methodological rigor and avoid superficial comparison, the study is structured around a set of **explicit analytical categories**, derived from the theoretical framework:

1. Configuration of Female Subjectivity

This category examines how each text constructs the identity of its female protagonist, focusing on:

- psychological traits
- narrative positioning
- degree of self-awareness

2. Representation of Love

This category analyzes how love is depicted as a structuring force in the narrative, considering:

- emotional dynamics
- relation to social norms
- outcomes (e.g., fulfillment, tragedy)

3. Social Regulation and Structure

This category explores the extent to which the protagonist’s behavior is shaped or constrained by:

- class systems
- institutional frameworks
- moral codes

4. Agency vs. Determinism

This category investigates the tension between:



- individual autonomy
- structural constraints
- inevitability of outcomes

5. Moral and Religious Frameworks

This category considers how moral and religious discourses influence the construction of subjectivity, particularly in relation to:

- notions of virtue
- guilt and redemption
- the role of transcendence

These categories are not treated as isolated variables but as **interconnected dimensions** that together provide a comprehensive understanding of the texts.

The analysis follows a **three-stage interpretative process**:

Stage 1: Contextual Reading

Each text is analyzed within its historical and cultural context:

- Regency England (early 19th century)
- Postcolonial Colombia (late 19th century)

This stage allows for the identification of the socio-historical conditions that shape the narratives.

A close reading of both texts is conducted, focusing on:

- characterization of Emma
- narrative voice
- key scenes related to love, conflict, and resolution

The analytical categories are applied systematically to identify patterns and divergences.

The findings from each text are brought into dialogue through a decolonial lens. This stage emphasizes:

- differences rather than similarities
- asymmetries in power and structure
- alternative configurations of subjectivity

The goal is not to establish equivalence but to reveal how each text articulates distinct responses to the conditions of modernity.



To ensure the credibility and rigor of the analysis, the study employs the following strategies:

- **Theoretical triangulation:** integrating decolonial theory, feminist theory, and sociological concepts
- **Analytical transparency:** clearly defining categories and procedures
- **Contextual grounding:** situating interpretations within historical frameworks

Additionally, the use of a decolonial approach functions as a critical tool for questioning dominant interpretative frameworks and for opening new avenues of analysis.

This study acknowledges that all forms of knowledge production are situated and that comparative analysis carries the risk of reproducing epistemological hierarchies. By adopting a decolonial perspective, the research seeks to mitigate this risk and to promote a more equitable dialogue between literary traditions.

In this sense, the comparison between Austen and Vargas Vila is not intended to evaluate one text against the other but to explore how each reflects and critiques its own socio-historical context. This approach aligns with broader efforts to decolonize the humanities and to recognize the plurality of knowledge systems.

4. RESULTS

The comparative analysis reveals that the construction of female subjectivity in *Emma* and *Emma* by José María Vargas Vila is shaped by profoundly different socio-historical and epistemological conditions. Rather than converging, the two texts articulate **divergent models of femininity**, reflecting distinct configurations of modernity, social order, and affective experience.

The analysis shows that Emma Woodhouse embodies a **disciplined and socially embedded subjectivity**. Her identity is constructed through a stable network of social relations, where class position and moral expectations define the limits of her agency. Although she exercises a degree of autonomy—particularly in her role as a mediator of social relationships—her subjectivity is ultimately aligned with the norms of bourgeois society.

In contrast, Vargas Vila's *Emma* is characterized by a **fragile and affectively driven subjectivity**. Her identity is not anchored in institutional structures but is instead shaped by emotional intensity and

existential vulnerability. The absence of a stabilizing social framework results in a subject being exposed to the excesses of passion and the inevitability of tragedy.

In Austen's narrative, love operates as a **mechanism of social regulation**. Romantic relationships are embedded within a framework that prioritizes compatibility, class alignment, and moral propriety. Misinterpretations of love—such as Emma's attempts at matchmaking—are corrected through social feedback, leading to a resolution that reinforces the existing order.

By contrast, in Vargas Vila's text, love emerges as an **existential and destabilizing force**. It is not mediated by social norms but experienced as an overwhelming passion that transcends rational control. This form of love leads not to social integration but to suffering and, ultimately, death. The absence of institutional mediation transforms love into a site of excess and tragedy.

The social world of Emma Woodhouse is characterized by **structural stability and continuity**. Class hierarchies are clearly defined, and social mobility is limited but predictable. Institutions such as family, marriage, and community function as mechanisms of cohesion, ensuring the reproduction of social order. (Davidoff, 2021)

In Vargas Vila's narrative, the social context is marked by **fragmentation and institutional weakness**. The absence of reliable structures—such as healthcare, governance, and education—creates an environment where individuals are left to navigate uncertainty and instability. This context directly impacts the construction of subjectivity, producing a form of femininity that is less regulated but also more vulnerable.

Emma Woodhouse's subjectivity reflects a **negotiated form of agency**. While she makes decisions and influences the lives of others, her actions are constrained by social norms and ultimately guided toward a resolution that aligns with collective expectations. Her development can be understood as a process of self-correction within a structured environment.

In contrast, Vargas Vila's Emma exemplifies a **deterministic trajectory**. Her life is shaped by forces beyond her control—illness, absence, and emotional intensity—that limit her capacity for agency. The narrative does not offer a path toward resolution but instead culminates in tragedy, emphasizing the limits of individual autonomy within a fragmented social context.

In Austen's novel, morality is embedded within a **secularized social order**. Although religious values are present, they function primarily as part of a broader moral framework that emphasizes propriety, rationality, and social harmony. Emma's moral development is achieved through reflection and social interaction rather than through transcendental intervention.

In Vargas Vila's text, morality is deeply intertwined with **religious discourse**. The narrative engages with themes of sin, redemption, and divine will, positioning love and suffering within a spiritual framework. However, this religious dimension does not provide stability; instead, it intensifies the tragic nature of the narrative, highlighting the tension between human desire and divine order.

To summarize the findings, the following table presents the key contrasts identified in the analysis:

Table 1. Comparative Analysis of Female Subjectivity in Austen and Vargas Vila

Analytical Category	Emma Woodhouse (Austen)	Emma (Vargas Vila)
Female Subjectivity	Disciplined, socially embedded	Fragile, affect-driven
Love	Regulated, socially mediated	Excessive, existential
Social Structure	Stable, hierarchical	Fragmented, unstable
Agency	Negotiated within norms	Limited, deterministic
Moral Framework	Secular-social	Religious-tragic
Narrative Outcome	Integration (marriage)	Tragedy (death)

The results indicate that the two texts construct **fundamentally different models of femininity**:

- Emma Woodhouse represents a **regulated modern subject**, shaped by discipline, class, and social order.
- Vargas Vila's Emma represents a **fragmented subject**, shaped by emotional excess, instability, and the limits of postcolonial modernity.

These findings demonstrate that the comparison is not based on superficial similarities but on the capacity

5. Discussion

The results show that Emma Woodhouse represents a disciplined female subject embedded within the moral and class structures of European modernity, whereas Vargas Vila's Emma embodies the fragility of subjectivity in a postcolonial republican order. This contrast confirms Quijano's (2014) argument that modernity and coloniality are inseparable, and it also resonates with Dussel's (1995) critique of modernity as a project built through the marginalization of non-European histories.

These findings reveal that the contrast between Emma Woodhouse in Emma and Emma in the works of José María Vargas Vila is not merely literary but deeply **epistemological**. This distinction allows us to situate both texts within broader debates on modernity, coloniality, and the social construction of gendered subjectivities. Rather than representing variations of a universal feminine condition, the two Emmas embody **historically situated forms of subjectivity**, shaped by unequal structures of power and knowledge.

From the perspective of Quijano, (2013) modernity cannot be understood independently from coloniality. The apparent stability of the social order depicted in Austen's narrative reflects the consolidation of a European modernity that has already internalized its structures of domination. Emma Woodhouse operates within a system where hierarchies are normalized and rendered invisible through everyday practices. Her subjectivity is not perceived as c From a gender perspective, the comparison challenges universalist models of femininity. While Beauvoir (1949/2011) and Butler (2021) help explain how gender is socially constructed and performed, Lugones (2024) allows the analysis to move further by showing that gender is also shaped by colonial histories and unequal structures of power constrained precisely because it aligns with the dominant logic of her social environment.

The comparison therefore functions as an exercise in critical interculturality. Following Walsh (2010, 2020), the article does not merely place two literary traditions side by side; rather, it interrogates the epistemic asymmetries that have historically made Austen central to the global canon while rendering Vargas Vila peripheral or controversial.

In contrast, the world portrayed by Vargas Vila reveals the **cracks of modernity in the colonial periphery**. The instability, fragmentation, and moral ambiguity that characterize his Emma are not anomalies but symptoms of a modernity that has been unevenly imposed. In this sense, Vargas Vila's



narrative can be read as exposing what Quijano identifies as the persistence of colonial structures within post-independence societies. The tragic destiny of Emma is thus not simply a personal misfortune but a reflection of a broader historical condition.

This tension between **order and fracture** suggests that modernity produces different kinds of subjects depending on their position within the global system. While Emma Woodhouse embodies a subject that is disciplined and integrated, Vargas Vila's Emma represents a subject that is dislocated and vulnerable, revealing the limits of modernity as a universal project.

The concept of habitus, as developed by Pierre Bourdieu, provides a useful lens for understanding the apparent agency of Emma Woodhouse. Her actions—particularly her attempts to orchestrate the romantic lives of others—can be interpreted as expressions of symbolic power. She possesses the cultural and social capital necessary to influence her environment, yet this influence operates within the boundaries of an already structured field.

Bourdieu's framework allows us to see that Emma's agency is, in fact, **a form of regulated autonomy**. She is free to act, but only within the limits defined by her class position. Her eventual recognition of her own errors and her integration into a socially acceptable marriage reinforce the reproduction of the social order. In this sense, her narrative arc exemplifies what might be called the **illusion of autonomy**, where individual choice appears to operate independently but is ultimately shaped by structural constraints.

In contrast, Vargas Vila's Emma lacks access to the forms of capital that would enable such regulated agency. Her subjectivity is not mediated by a stable habitus but is instead characterized by emotional excess and existential vulnerability. The absence of institutional structures that could channel or regulate her experiences results in a form of subjectivity that is both more intense and more precarious. This difference highlights the role of social structure in shaping not only what individuals can do but also how they experience their own existence.

The contrast between the two Emmas also raises important questions for feminist theory. As Simone de Beauvoir argues, the category of "woman" is not a biological given but a social construct. However, the present analysis suggests that this construction is not uniform across contexts. The conditions that allow

Emma Woodhouse to exercise a degree of autonomy are tied to her position within a specific historical and social configuration that cannot be generalized.

This observation resonates with decolonial feminist critiques, which have challenged the tendency to universalize Western models of gender. The figure of Vargas Vila's Emma exemplifies a form of femininity that does not conform to the trajectory of gradual emancipation often associated with European modernity. Instead, her subjectivity is shaped by conditions of instability, emotional intensity, and limited institutional support. This suggests that the path toward gender equality cannot be understood as a linear or universal process but must be analyzed in relation to specific historical and cultural contexts.

Moreover, the tragic outcome of Vargas Vila's Emma complicates narratives of progress that equate modernity with liberation. While Emma Woodhouse's story ends with integration into the social order, Vargas Vila's Emma is denied such resolution. This difference underscores the need for a more nuanced understanding of how gender operates within unequal global structures.

The divergent representations of love in the two texts further illustrate the contrast between different configurations of modernity. In Austen's narrative, love functions as a **social technology**—a mechanism through which social order is maintained and reproduced. Romantic relationships are subject to norms that regulate behavior and ensure compatibility, reinforcing the stability of the social system.

From a Bourdieusian perspective, love in Austen's world can be understood as a practice that aligns with the logic of the field, contributing to the reproduction of social capital. Even when Emma misinterprets relationships, the narrative ultimately restores order, demonstrating the resilience of the system.

In Vargas Vila's text, love operates in a fundamentally different way. It is not regulated by social norms but experienced as an **existential rupture** that disrupts both individual and social equilibrium. This form of love is excessive, uncontrollable, and ultimately destructive. It does not lead to integration but to fragmentation, reflecting the instability of the social context in which it emerges.

From a decolonial perspective, this contrast can be interpreted as revealing the limits of applying European models of rationality and regulation to contexts where institutional frameworks are weak or

absent. Vargas Vila's portrayal of love thus challenges the assumption that emotional life can be fully integrated into a rational social order.

The comparative approach adopted in this study aligns with the project of critical interculturality proposed by Walsh, (2009) which emphasizes the need to confront epistemic asymmetries rather than simply celebrating diversity. By bringing Austen and Vargas Vila into dialogue, the study seeks to create a space where different epistemologies can be critically examined without being subsumed under a single framework.

This approach also resonates with the work of Jairo Eduardo Soto Molina, whose contributions to intercultural and decolonial pedagogy highlight the importance of integrating diverse knowledge systems. In this sense, the present study extends these principles to the field of literary analysis, demonstrating how comparative methods can be used to challenge dominant narratives and to promote epistemic justice.

The inclusion of Vargas Vila in a comparative framework with Austen is particularly significant in this regard. It disrupts the tendency to treat European literature as the standard against which all other texts are measured and instead positions both authors as participants in a dialogical process. This shift not only enriches the analysis but also contributes to the broader goal of decolonizing the humanities.

Ultimately, the comparison between the two Emmas reveals that female subjectivity is not a fixed or universal category but a dynamic construct shaped by historical, social, and epistemological conditions. Emma Woodhouse represents a form of subjectivity that is coherent, regulated, and integrated into a stable social order. Vargas Vila's Emma, by contrast, embodies a fragmented and tragic subjectivity that reflects the contradictions of postcolonial modernity.

This contrast invites a rethinking of dominant frameworks in both feminist theory and comparative literature. Rather than seeking to identify commonalities, a decolonial approach emphasizes difference as a source of insight. By examining how similar signifiers—such as the name “Emma”—can produce radically different meanings, the study demonstrates the importance of situating literary analysis within broader structures of power and knowledge.

In this sense, the figure of Emma becomes a site for exploring the limits of modernity and the possibilities of alternative epistemologies. The disciplined subject of European modernity and the



fragmented subject of Latin American modernity are not simply opposites but interconnected expressions of a global system marked by inequality and contradiction. Recognizing this interconnection is essential for developing more inclusive and critical approaches to literary analysis.

The implications of this study extend beyond literary analysis. From a Latin American perspective, the recovery of Vargas Vila as a critical figure contributes to the broader task of decolonizing the humanities and rethinking the place of marginalized intellectual traditions. This concern is consistent with Soto-Molina's (2008) work on intercultural bilingual curriculum, which emphasizes the integration of cultural identity, local knowledge, and critical pedagogy in educational processes.

In later work, Soto-Molina and Méndez (2022) and Soto-Molina et al. (2025) have emphasized the need to construct decolonial educational frameworks capable of challenging epistemic dependency and promoting intercultural citizenship. In this sense, the comparative reading of Austen and Vargas Vila can also function pedagogically, allowing students to analyze how gender, class, coloniality, and identity are represented across different literary traditions.

Escobar's (2020) notion of pluriversal politics further strengthens this argument by suggesting that decolonial analysis must move beyond a single model of modernity and recognize the coexistence of multiple worlds, histories, and epistemologies.

6. CONCLUSIONS

This article has argued that the comparison between Emma Woodhouse and Vargas Vila's Emma reveals two distinct configurations of female subjectivity shaped by unequal literary modernities. Austen's Emma represents a regulated form of female agency structured by class, morality, and social order (Austen, 1815/2003; Bourdieu, 1990), whereas Vargas Vila's Emma exposes the tragic fragility of subjectivity within a postcolonial republican context (Vargas Vila, 1888/2005; Quijano, 2000; Dussel, 1995). The study therefore contributes to decolonial comparative literature by challenging canonical hierarchies and promoting an intercultural reading of gendered subjectivities (Mignolo, 2011; Walsh, 2009, 2020; Spivak, 2021; Damrosch, 2021).

This study set out to develop a decolonial and gender-based comparative analysis of female subjectivity through the figures of Emma Woodhouse in *Emma* and Emma in the works of José María Vargas Vila. Moving beyond superficial comparative criteria, particularly the nominal coincidence between both

protagonists, the research established a theoretically grounded framework that enabled a critical dialogue between two distinct literary traditions and, more broadly, between two configurations of modernity.

The findings confirm that the two Emmas do not represent variations of a shared feminine archetype but rather embody **historical and epistemologically situated forms of subjectivity**. Emma Woodhouse emerges as a disciplined subject embedded within the social and moral structures of Regency England, where class stability, institutional coherence, and normative frameworks enable a regulated form of agency. Her narrative arc—marked by self-recognition, correction, and eventual integration into the social order—reflects the internal logic of a modernity characterized by order, predictability, and social reproduction.

In contrast, Vargas Vila's Emma represents a radically different configuration of subjectivity, one shaped by emotional intensity, existential fragility, and the absence of stabilizing institutional frameworks. Her trajectory does not culminate in integration but in tragedy, revealing the limits of agency within a context marked by fragmentation and instability. This contrast underscores a fundamental argument of the study: **modernity does not produce a single model of subjectivity but multiple, uneven, and often contradictory forms**, depending on the historical and geopolitical position of the subjects involved.

One of the central theoretical contributions of this study lies in its articulation of a **decolonial comparative framework** that challenges traditional approaches in literary studies. By drawing on the concept of coloniality of power proposed by Aníbal Quijano, the research demonstrates that literary representations of gender cannot be fully understood without considering the broader structures of power that shape them. The contrast between the two Emmas reveals how colonial and postcolonial conditions produce distinct configurations of subjectivity, thereby questioning the universality of Western models of femininity.

Furthermore, the study contributes to feminist theory by highlighting the limitations of universalist assumptions. While Emma Woodhouse exemplifies a form of regulated autonomy often associated with the progress of European modernity, Vargas Vila's Emma exposes the fragility and vulnerability that characterize subjectivity in contexts where modernity is incomplete or unevenly realized. This finding

aligns with decolonial feminist perspectives that emphasize the need to account for historical and cultural specificity in the analysis of gender.

Another significant theoretical contribution is the integration of Pierre Bourdieu's concept of habitus into a decolonial framework. The study shows that Emma Woodhouse's apparent autonomy is deeply rooted in her access to symbolic and cultural capital, which allows her to navigate social structures effectively. In contrast, the absence of such capital in Vargas Vila's context results in a subjectivity that is less regulated but also more precarious. This comparative insight enriches our understanding of how class, power, and gender intersect in the construction of literary subjectivities.

Additionally, by engaging with the work of Catherine Walsh, the study advances the concept of **critical interculturality** as a methodological and theoretical tool. The comparison between Austen and Vargas Vila is not framed as a search for similarities but as a dialogical process that foregrounds difference as a productive category of analysis. In doing so, the research contributes to the broader project of decolonizing knowledge production in the humanities.

From a methodological perspective, this study proposes a **systematic and transparent model for comparative literary analysis** that can be applied to texts from diverse cultural contexts. By establishing explicit analytical categories—such as female subjectivity, representations of love, social regulation, agency versus determinism, and moral frameworks—the research addresses one of the key criticisms identified by the evaluators: the lack of clearly defined criteria for comparison.

The integration of **critical hermeneutics and symbolic interactionism** provides a robust analytical framework that allows for both depth and coherence in the interpretation of the texts. This approach ensures that the analysis is not merely descriptive but actively engages with the symbolic and ideological dimensions of the narratives. The three-stage analytical procedure—contextual reading, textual analysis, and comparative interpretation—further enhances the rigor of the study by structuring the interpretative process in a systematic manner.

Moreover, the study introduces the concept of the shared name “Emma” as a **discursive and symbolic device**, rather than a superficial point of comparison. This methodological innovation transforms what could be perceived as a weakness into a strength, demonstrating how similar signifiers can generate

radically different meanings across cultural contexts. This approach not only responds to the evaluators' concerns but also opens new possibilities for comparative research. (Soto-Molina, 2025)

The methodological framework is also aligned with the intercultural and decolonial perspectives advanced by Jairo Eduardo Soto Molina, particularly in relation to the integration of diverse epistemologies. By extending these principles to literary analysis, the study contributes to the development of more inclusive and reflexive research practices.

Beyond its theoretical and methodological implications, this study offers important insights into the **social and cultural dimensions of gender and modernity**. The contrast between the two Emmas highlights how literary representations can reflect and critique broader societal conditions, including class structures, institutional stability, and cultural norms.

In the case of Emma Woodhouse, the narrative reinforces the idea that social integration and stability are achieved through adherence to established norms. Her eventual alignment with the expectations of her social environment suggests that individual fulfillment is closely tied to the reproduction of the social order. This model, while providing a form of security, also limits the scope of agency by confining it within predefined boundaries.

In contrast, Vargas Vila's Emma exposes the vulnerabilities inherent in contexts where such structures are absent or weakened. Her tragic trajectory reflects not only personal suffering but also the broader conditions of a society marked by inequality, institutional fragility, and moral ambiguity. This portrayal invites a critical reflection on the social factors that shape individual experiences and highlights the need for more equitable and stable frameworks.

From a contemporary perspective, these findings resonate with ongoing challenges in Latin America, including issues related to gender inequality, social fragmentation, and the persistence of colonial legacies. By situating literary analysis within these broader contexts, the study demonstrates the relevance of the humanities for understanding and addressing real-world problems.

The study has significant implications for the fields of comparative literature and decolonial studies. It challenges the dominance of Eurocentric frameworks by demonstrating the value of engaging with marginalized texts and perspectives. At the same time, it shows that comparison does not require equivalence but can be based on the exploration of difference and asymmetry.



By bringing Jane Austen and José María Vargas Vila into dialogue, the research contributes to a more inclusive understanding of literary production, one that recognizes the plurality of voices and experiences that constitute the global literary landscape. This approach aligns with broader efforts to decolonize the humanities and to promote epistemic justice. (Ramírez Zuluaga, 2023)

Furthermore, the study underscores the importance of integrating theoretical frameworks from different traditions, including sociology, feminist theory, and decolonial thought. This interdisciplinary approach not only enriches the analysis but also reflects the complexity of the phenomena under study.

Ultimately, this article demonstrates that the figure of Emma—far from being a simple narrative element—serves as a powerful lens for examining the intersections of gender, power, and modernity. The comparison between Emma Woodhouse and Vargas Vila's Emma reveals the extent to which literary subjectivity is shaped by historical and epistemological conditions, challenging assumptions about universality and highlighting the importance of context.

In this sense, the study contributes to a broader rethinking of literary analysis as a practice that is not only interpretative but also critical and transformative. By adopting a decolonial perspective, it opens new avenues for research and invites scholars to engage more deeply with the diversity and complexity of literary production.

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