

PROJECTION OF WOMEN IN VICTORIAN NOVELS WITH REFERENCE TO JANE AUSTEN'S PRIDE AND PREJUDICE

ARUNIMA RAYALU

Abstract: This paper is dedicated to the study of the social, psychological and economic reality of women in the Victorian Era portrayed in the novel *Pride and Prejudice*. Women in the 19th century were not just a product of the societal norms imposed on them, but also, of their emotional relationships. The approval of society, wealth and financial security were valued more than love or emotional stability. This research paper aims at bringing forward the female protagonist, Elizabeth Bennett's relationships with the other prominent characters in the novel as well the prevalent social forces that moderated these relationships. I argue that Elizabeth Bennett's character can be seen as a reaction to the prevalent societal norms that tried to crush the individuality in women. While the social system of Patriarchy and economic dependence inspired most women to adapt to the social conventions in order to enhance their odds of marriage, Elizabeth tenaciously refuses to cede and thus artfully challenges gender inequality. When society and a biased culture come together to turn marriage into an economic arrangement, a myriad of emotions emerge which shape the psychological aspect of the characters that help the readers understand the status of women in the 19th century. Thus, it is concluded that the confluence of norms and social relationships that dictated the portrayal of women in that era, can be understood only in relation to each other and not in isolation.

Keywords: Elizabeth Bennett, Gender inequality, marriage, norms, patriarchy, relationships.

Introduction: "Being married gives one, one's position like nothing else can."

- Queen Victoria

As the quote suggests, in the Victorian Era women had a very specific role in the society and were expected to be both docile and subordinate. The primary role of women in that age was to get married, to maintain a household for their husband and to bear children. Women were rarely acknowledged for their intelligence or for having an opinion. This research paper will analyze Jane Austen's novel, *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) to highlight the portrayal of women in Victorian novels. The novel predominantly deals with the position of women in the 19th century and their social expectations, most of which correspond to marriage.

In the nineteenth century, contradictions were prevalent in all spheres of life, including politics, science, religion, society and hence, that period often referred to as the age of paradox. The inalienable inconsistency existed even in the circumstances of women and their representation in literature. The constricting standards of propriety and patriarchal framework tried to dictate the activities of women, which further encouraged writers to present images of women of substance with significant and worthwhile pursuits.

The novels of Jane Austen examine the position of women within the institution of marriage. In *Pride and Prejudice*, the issue of marriage gains greater primacy as the novel deals not with fortunes of a single protagonist (as in *Emma* or *Persuasion*) or with those of two sisters (as in *Sense & Sensibility*) but with a family of five daughters and their unmarried female acquaintances.

Women in this novel depict how society shaped not just their actions but also, their interpersonal relationships and the consequent portrayal of women in Victorian novels.

Hypothesis : Jane Austen's novel, *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) is set in the region of Hertfordshire, about 50 miles outside London. The story revolves around the Bennett family, especially Elizabeth Bennett. The story opens at Longbourn, the family estate of Bennett family. Mr. and Mrs. Bennett have five children: Jane, Elizabeth, Mary, Kitty and Lydia.

The opening sentence of this novel is one of the most iconic sentences of all of literature for reasons that are manifold. It not only highlights the theme of the novel, i.e., marriage, but also, gives us a glimpse of Austen's feminist side by starting the novel with such a sentence and contradicting it throughout the novel.

Let us take a look at the opening sentence,

"It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife." -P&P(I)

The pressure clearly was on women even though the sentences addresses a man. After all, for most nineteenth century women, financial security, which was closely linked to overall well being, relied on marrying well. The English conceptions of family and the role of women began to change in the late eighteenth century as the accumulation and concentration of wealth within the family became a prominent part of the British culture. Advantageous marriages were one of the most common ways of accumulating wealth rapidly. Consequently,

daughters became the means through which the family could attain greater wealth and hence their role in the family changed. Familial goals, combined with women's expanded reliance on marriage for financial security, made courtship a focal point of women's lives.

Entailment was a major part of the economic aspect of the Victorian Era. Patriarchy is depicted in Austen's novels in terms of the existing system of entailment. Entailment in *Pride and Prejudice* is seen as the restriction of future ownership of real estate to particular descendants being limited solely to male heirs. Therefore, the pressure on women to get married was amplified. It is in this way that it becomes, in Austen's words, "a truth universally acknowledged." Austen's views on the patriarchal society, expressed through Elizabeth are explained by Marxist Feminist Theory. This concept of Marxist Feminism is based on a patriarchal view of the world, as discussed by Donovan(1991). According to Jameson's theory of Marxist historicism, if one were to consider the effect of politics, history and societal norms on the development of literature, one would be left with a completely new understanding. (in Sullivan,1991 571)

The female characters in the novel most concerned with the economic aspect were Elizabeth's mother, Mrs. Bennett and Elizabeth's friend, Charlotte Lucas. Mrs. Bennett's one passion in life is to see all her daughters married. She is not just terrified of entail on the property, she also yearns for a wealthy lifestyle. In the novel, at first she relentlessly tries to set up Mr. Bingley with her eldest daughter, Jane and ironically, she later becomes one of the major factors responsible for the postponement of Jane's marriage. Even with the best of intentions, Mrs. Bennett scares away the most eligible of men because of her obvious maneuvers. Charlotte on the other hand, settles for Elizabeth's conceited cousin, Mr. Collins not for love but for financial stability.

This congruent with Newman's theory that a close examination of *Pride and Prejudice* shows that women were at the mercy of the "male control of the means of production;" (1983,699) thus highlighting the female subordination and economic desperation of the period. It is worth noting that Austen was as ill provided for as Miss Lucas. While Austen examined the vulnerability and prudential desperation of gentry women with meager fortunes in the novel, she herself chose not to succumb to economic pressures and led her life without compromising her dignity.

Elizabeth's relationship with these two women shapes her character to a great extent. While Mrs. Bennett and Miss Lucas are embodiments of desperation, Elizabeth emphasizes the elements of Free Will by choosing to marry for love instead of money. Austen's purpose of such depiction of Elizabeth's character

becomes clear when Charlotte's loveless marriage of compromise comes to the forefront. Austen highlights the need for acknowledgement of women's desires which were conveniently ignored in that era.

The psychological reality of women too was a result of the economic and social constraints. The characters that bring this aspect to fore are Elizabeth's elder sister, Jane and Mr. Bingley's sister, Caroline. Initially, Caroline along with her married sister, Mrs. Hurst are pronounced to be 'fine women with an air of decided fashion;' the truth is realized only by Elizabeth who is able to perceive pride and haughtiness underneath the polished exteriors of Miss Bingley. Her general attitude of superiority and contempt for those she considers inferior to herself turns into positive malice when she realizes that Mr. Darcy is interested in Elizabeth. The social hypocrisy prevalent in the society can be understood through Caroline's character as her ostentatious ways and her relentless attempts at flirting with Mr. Darcy are as contemptible as her attacks on her rival, Elizabeth. Shakespeare described jealousy as a green eyes monster feeding upon itself and Miss Bingley is a vivid example of the same. She says what she thinks Mr. Darcy will like and shows no depth of character. While her overt expressions of her intentions often cast her in an unflattering light, Jane's inability to express herself, too, proves to be almost fatal for her own self. Jane is the quintessentially ideal woman who is pretty and polite. Sweetness and gentility are the essence of her character. She does not possess the liveliness of mind and spirit that is characteristic of Elizabeth. Jane is sensible and kind but constitutionally incapable of displaying her feelings. This results in the delay in the realization of her dreams and she almost loses Mr. Bingley due to her passive behavior. Jane is modest and virtuous but incapable of imagining evil in others. Elizabeth is clear-sighted in this respect and is able to understand the defects of others almost at first sight.

Both these women, Caroline and Jane not only are in contrast to Elizabeth's personality, but also, they play an important role in the growth of her character. Elizabeth is the embodiment of fierce individuality, which both of them seem to be lacking. Caroline displays the negative consequences of excessive wealth, whereas Jane projects the shortcomings of having a utopian world-view. Austen's portrayal of Elizabeth is essentially feminist. Elizabeth is confident and not afraid to speak her mind. She is not pompous like Caroline and is very realistic in her approach. Also, while Jane is too eager to please, Elizabeth refuses to accept people uncritically. Elizabeth is a memorable character because of her uniqueness and her portrayal alerts us of Austen's preoccupations with women's dignity at a historical point of change. In the novel, the protagonist,

Elizabeth is depicted as the antithesis of the ideal woman. She is opinionated and intelligent. Elizabeth is portrayed as a strong and sympathetic character who is unlike most women in her society. Women of this period were expected to be submissive and to accept the decisions made by men, irrespective of their own feelings.

During this period in the history, it was audacious for a woman to have her own opinion and Jane Austen through Elizabeth seems to suggest that such characteristics were desirable. As feminism can be seen as the "the advocacy of women's right on the ground of equality of the sexes"(<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Feminism>), and the idea of preserving women's individuality. Austen was in a way persuading women to believe in themselves to be confident of their opinions. So far through the economic and psychological perspective, it is understood that by choosing to marry for love instead of money, Elizabeth is able to find happiness without compromising her personality and individuality. Despite the contrast, Jane, who is portrayed to be the ideal woman, too, married for love but without the pride or prejudice of Elizabeth. Thus, while Austen projects the belief that the choice of love over money is a better one, she also demonstrates that no particular set of traits are required to reach this end and that it may vary from individual to individual, thereby re-emphasizing the importance of individuality even in this assertion.

The social aspect of women's reality in the nineteenth century is a culmination of the psychological and the economic aspects. The Victorian Era was not just an age of contradictions but also of appearances. The need to climb up the social ladder and to accentuate one's status was of prime importance. The Regency period of 1810s-1820s was one of the most conflicting periods of British history. In the words of Gillian Russell, "The hum of wartime, if not the blast or cry of battle, pervades [Austen's] fiction." In the novel, the presence of troops at Brighton raised wider concerns regarding the place of military in English civil society.

The superficiality of the society comes to fore through the portrayal of the youngest Bennett sister, Lydia. Anyone not in scarlet, the color of the uniform of the militia in England cannot interest her. As was characteristic of many silly girls of the period, she is strongly attracted by the officers that have their camp at Meryton. She is more in love with the idea of being in love with persons in uniform and her

foolishness is encouraged by her mother. Austen displays an extremist situation when Lydia elopes with Mr. Wickham, thus highlighting the senseless of Lydia and the relative moral correctness of Jane and Elizabeth. Even though Elizabeth shows signs of anti-establishment, she never crosses the boundaries, unlike Lydia. While Lydia is an immature girl, Lady Catherine de Bourgh is a domineering, haughty lady whose snobbery is based on wealth and rank. She wishes to force her daughter into marrying Mr. Darcy solely because she sees it as a marriage between families of equal status. Despite of the over-bearing nature of Lady Catherine, Elizabeth stands up to her own convictions. This suggests Elizabeth's own sense of personal worth.

Following the publication of Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in 1792, the late eighteenth century witnessed a transformation in the conception of women's rights. Elizabeth is an example of the conflicting transformations that occurred in women's roles. She is not financially independent, her future survival depends upon an advantageous marriage. Despite of this, she constantly asserts an intellectual and moral independence that reflects a Wollstoncraftian conception of gender politics. Elizabeth further asserts her feminist perspective by shaping Mr. Darcy's world view to match her moral standards. Elizabeth inspires Mr. Darcy to set aside the pride he has in his high status in society in order to win her affections and take her hand in marriage.

Thus we understand that Austen's feminist perspective exhibits her resolve to emphasize freedom from societal bounds and manipulate the traditional views about marriage that stalled women's self-autonomy at the time in Regency England.

Austen, through her beautifully etched characters, not only gives us a glimpse of women of the nineteenth century but also, she gives us a timeless motto that is relevant in every age. In her last spat with Lady Catherine, Elizabeth proclaims,

"I am only resolved to act in that manner, which will in my opinion, constitute my happiness, without reference to you or any other person so wholly unconnected with me." - P&P(56)

Thus, it is through Elizabeth's interpersonal relations that we better understand not just her character but also, Austen's intentions behind such portrayals. Austen presents the reader with a splendid treats to re-live the ironies and charms of the Victorian Era.

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Arunima Rayalu
MA (English Literature) I,
Fergusson College (Autonomous), Pune