

Jane Austen's *Pride & Prejudice*

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Abstract

Under the title *First Impressions*, Jane Austen submitted the book for publication in 1796 and 1797. With new title *Pride and Prejudice* was released in 1813. Despite being single, Jane Austen defined love, arranged and eloped marriages. She writes about sociological, realistic, and broadly appealing issues and is regarded as a sentimentalist as opposed to a romantic. *Pride and Prejudice* was considered a feminist book during the British Regency era, but its relevance today might be identified as a work of gender sensitization. In the book, males handle women's sentiments and emotions with the utmost care and concern rather than oppressing or suppressing them. Austen emphasizes the value of men and women having faith, love, and understanding for one another before entering the institution of marriage, In the light of contemporary viewpoints on gender sensitization, the present paper attempts to critically examine both feminist and masculine attitudes of the two genders.

Key words: Marriage, sociological, misunderstanding, feminist, masculine, universal, gender, sensitization.

Introduction

Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* is a complex and nuanced topic. Her portrayal of gender roles and expectations is often seen as both insightful and critical. On the one hand, Austen's novels reflect the social norms of her time, in which women were expected to be submissive and passive, and men were expected to be dominant and assertive. To contextualize, Elizabeth Bennet's mother constantly urges her daughters to marry well, and Mr. Darcy is initially portrayed as a proud and arrogant man who looks down on women. On the other hand, Austen's novels also contain subtle critiques of these gender roles. Elizabeth Bennet is

a strong and independent woman who is not afraid to challenge authority. She is also intelligent and witty, and she often gets the better of Mr. Darcy in their verbal sparring matches. Ultimately, Austen's portrayal of gender is ambiguous and open to interpretation. Some readers see her as a feminist who was ahead of her time, while others see her as a conservative writer who was simply reflecting the social norms of her day. Two months after the publication of *Pride and Prejudice*, the first response appeared in *The Critical Review*. The anonymous reviewer described the plot and characters in detail and remarked it “as a novel of whole family which explores beyond social and psychological realism with moral and practical advice” (March 1813). Recently, Hudson Glenda observes that Marina Cano in her *Jane Austen and Performance*, remarks that *Pride and Prejudice* has the healing power. In Hudson’s words, “[...] Austen’s works soothe and heal those who are emotionally and physically damaged in an internationalized contemporary world, claiming that her fiction helps readers to overcome personal limitations and even helps young academics to deal with the depression and isolation of modern university careers” (I JES 2017). Critical appreciation in the span of two centuries on *Pride and Prejudice* shows that the first and the latest reviews reflect on the same psychological and sociological perspectives. Cano, Marina observes that, “[...] their artefacts, are involved in a perpetual process of construction and reconstruction that results in the modern Austen icon” (Marina,2017: 162).

Feminist and Masculinist critiques

Austen’s characters mirror strong men and women characters who are intellectual women and caring men. They believe in the institution of marriage. Floti Sorin, observes *Pride and Prejudice* in masculine perspectives as “[...] considering masculinity to be the ability to attract women and secure a marriage, we will find that all the eligible men in the novel are successful and thus masculine, be it through their physical attractiveness, their status and power, or a combination there of. Austen is thus hinting at the idea that masculinity is in the eye of the beholder, and that there is no universal recipe for attraction” (Sorin, 2017).

The feminist concerns are patriarchy, son preference, strong women characters in the novel. Patriarchy in the form of entailment reflects in Mrs. Bennet’s words, “Five daughters successfully entered the world, but yet the son was to come; and Mrs. Bennet, for many years after Lydia’s birth, had been certain that he would” (Austen, 2010, 296). Bennet’s

Longbourn estate is entailed in favour of Mr. Collins and none of the Bennet girls can inherit it. Austen signifies the gender discrimination where women are not equal to men. Women are in search of fortune in the name of marriage. The opening lines of Mrs. Bennet not only mark her major concern to get her daughters married but also to seek fortune in the name of marriage. To her, “It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife. Netherfield is taken by Mr. Bingley, a young man of large fortune from the North of England. (2010, 3). Lloid Brown observes that, “Mrs. Bennet is the conventionally educated woman whose sex-oriented view of women's roles limits her ambitions in her own marriage, and, eventually, in the marriages of her daughters.” (Lloid, 2017.337) Jane Austen is considered as proto- feminist however she also contributed to the construction of masculinity. In a recent article, Devoney Looser questions Austen’s constructions of masculinity. She asks, “Is not it possible that Austen, who has been so influential in our histories of women, is also an important voice in histories of men, masculinities and the novel?” (Devoney, 2013, 164).

In her thesis Ailwood, Sarah observes, “Austen’s novels seek to reform socially-approved codes of gentry masculinity by endorsing a model of male identity that is not dependent on the submission or passivity of women in courtship or domestic relationships, promoted by conventional patriarchal ideologies”(Sarah, Abstract). Mr. Bingley and Mr. Darcy are the two gentlemen of good fortune. Mr. Bingley is good looking, lively and unreserved gentleman with pleasant countenance and easy unaffected manners. He is accompanied by his friend Mr. Darcy who is also equally handsome to capture the attention of the ladies in the ball at Netherfield. Ladies consider Mr. Darcy as the man of disagreeable countenance and unworthy to be compared to his friend. He stands aloof declining to be introduced to any other lady. In the same ball when Bingley tries to introduce Elizabeth to Mr. Darcy, he looks at her for a while catching her attention and says, “She is tolerable but not handsome enough to tempt me; and I am in no humor at present to give consequence to young ladies who are slighted by other men. You had better return to your partner and enjoy her smiles, for you are wasting your time with me” (Austen, 2010, 10). Elizabeth is terribly hurt by his bitter comments and fixes her first impression as a disagreeable man of pride. The entire women folk frame their opinions about Mr. Darcy. To Mrs. Bennet he is the most disagreeable,

horrid man, unpleasing and very much concealed and not handsome enough to dance with. According to Miss Bingley, he is reserved in nature and speaks among his intimate acquaintance to whom he is remarkably agreeable. In Miss. Lucas's opinion he has a right to be proud. According to Mary, Pride is a very common failing that human nature is particularly prone, in other words a feeling of self-complacency on the score of some quality or other, real or imaginary. She brings about the clarity between two words vanity and pride though used synonymously. According to her a person may be proud without being vain. Further she says, pride relates more to one's own opinion, vanity to what others think. Bingley is endeared to Darcy by the easiness, openness, ductility of his temper. Darcy is clever at the same time haughty, reserved, and fastidious, though well bred his manners are not inviting. Mr. Darcy observes that Miss. Elizabeth is unfashionable. To her he is only the man who made himself agreeable nowhere, and who had not thought her handsome enough to dance with. Elizabeth is hurt for the second time at Lucas's party when Sir William Lucas, neighbour of Bennets appreciates Eliza's singing with Mary's music and addresses Darcy to Dance, When sir William mediates that Elizabeth and Darcy to dance together she expresses, "Indeed sir, I have not the best intention of dancing. I entreat you not to suppose that I moved this way in order to beg for a partner. At this juncture nobility of Mr. Darcy is exhibited with grave propriety requests to be allowed the honour of her hand, but in vain. Elizabeth was determined "(2010,24). They retort each other with sharp words.

Conflict between Mr. Darcy and Miss. Elizabet

Mr. Darcy remarks to Miss. Bingley that his mind is totally engaged in meditating on the fine eyes of a pretty woman and declares that it is Elizabeth Bennet and continues, " It jumps from admiration to love, from love to matrimony in a moment"(2010, 25). Miss Bingley observes Elizabeth's examination of Darcy's pride as, "where there is a really superiority of mind, pride will be always under good regulation" (2010,53) she further says that she is perfectly convinced that Mr. Darcy has no defect without any disguise. Darcy says that pretending is against his nature and knows he is faultless. He further says that he cannot forget the follies and vices of others very soon. There develops a friendly conversation between Elizabeth and Darcy which does not stay longer. It is at Meryton, Mr. Wickham prejudices Miss Elizabeth's mind with his false impressions on Mr. Darcy that everybody in

Hertfordshire is disgusted with his pride. He attributes the words like malicious, revenge, injustice and inhumanity. Elizabeth remarks, “How abominable – I wonder that the very pride of this Mr. Darcy has not made him just to you. [...] that he should not have been too proud to be dishonest – for dishonesty I must call it” (2010,78). Wickham pictures Mr. Darcy as a hypocrite who pretends to be liberal and generous for the sake of family pride, and filial pride. It is Mr. Bingley who warns Miss. Elizabeth that Mr. Wickham is not to be given implicit confidence to all his assertions as they are perfectly false, and he uses them for ill purpose.

Love hate relationship continues between Mr. Darcy and Miss. Elizabeth. At Netherfield when Mr. Darcy dances with Elizabeth for a while and leaves her, Charlotte consoles her for which Elizabeth says, “[...] the greatest misfortune of all – To find a man agreeable whom one is determined to hate! – Do not wish me such an evil” (2010, 87). Elizabeth behaves in a rude manner many a times with Mr. Darcy. In course of conversation when Darcy comments if she talks by rule while dancing, she replies, “We are each of an unsocial taciturn disposition, unwilling to speak [...] Mr. Darcy, that you hardly ever forgave, that your resentment once created was unappeasable [...] and never allow yourself to be blinded by prejudice” (2010,90). Elizabeth is always judgmental about his character. Fed up with her harsh comments and her inability in trusting him as a gentleman, Mr. Darcy retorts gravely, “that reports may vary greatly with respect to me; and I could wish, Miss Bennet, that you were not to sketch my character at the present moment, as there is reason to fear that the performance would reflect no credit on either.” (2010,90). It is Elizabeth who tries to undermine Mr. Darcy’s nature purely based on the words of others. Mrs Bennet warns Elizabeth not to offend Mr. Darcy. Elizabeth starts realizing the words of her mother and blushes with vexation. She frequently glances her eye at Mr. Darcy and notices that his attention is invariably fixed by her. The expression of his face changes gradually from indignant contempt to a composed and steady gravity.

Another misunderstanding of Miss. Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy is his interference in Mr. Bingley and Jane’s acquaintance. When Mrs. Gardiner says that Mr. Bingley is ‘violently in love ‘she is hackneyed, doubtful, indefinite which gives her very little idea about the reality. Elizabeth thinks that Mr. Bingley is under the custody of his friend Mr. Darcy and no chance

of calling Jane to London which ultimately makes Jane to drop her acquaintance completely. In Kent, a conversation between Colonel Fitzwilliam and Elizabeth gives an impression to her that Mr. Darcy takes care of his friend Bingley. “That he congratulated himself on having lately saved a friend from the inconveniences of a most imprudent marriage” (2010, 179) Miss. Elizabeth strongly believes that Mr. Darcy is concerned in the separation of Mr. Bingley and Miss. Jane.

In Kent, Mr. Darcy is desperately hurt and agitated at her cold civility of replying manner when he enquires about her health which makes him to burst out, “In vain have I struggled. I will not do. My feelings will not be repressed. You must allow me to tell you how ardently I admire you and love you” (2010, 183). Elizabeth’s astonishment is beyond expression and stares him in silence. In spite of all his endeavours he understands that it is impossible to conquer her acceptance. Mr. Darcy accepts Elizabeth’s rejection but also tries to know her reasons of it. “And this is all the reply which I am to have the honour of expecting. I might, perhaps, wish to be informed why, with so little endeavour at civility, I am thus rejected. But it is of small importance” (2010,184). She considers his words as offending and insulting because he chooses to tell her that he liked her against her will, reason and even character. She predicts it as his excuse for incivility. She questions him if any of his consideration would tempt her to accept the man who has been the means of ruining the happiness of her most beloved sister. Mr. Darcy’s elegancy is seen in receiving her furious blaming. He receives her words with no indignation, unmoved by any feeling of remorse; he even looks at her with a smile of affected incredulity. On repeated provocation, he replies with assured tranquility that he has no wish of denying of what he had done everything for his power to separate his friend from her sister. She disdains to notice Darcy’s civil reflection. Further she adds that her dislike for him is grounded through Mr. Wickham and demands Darcy to defend himself. She blames Darcy to be the reason of Wickham’s present status of reduced poverty and that he had withheld his advantages and also depriving the best years of his life. Darcy is shocked and desperately hurt about Elizabeth’s holding of his character and thanks her for explaining his faults.

Elizabeth grows angrier, “you could not have made me the offer of your hand in any possible way that would have tempted me to accept it.” [...] I felt that you were the last man in the

world whom I could ever be prevailed on to marry” (2010,186-87). At last Darcy speaks in a gentle way that he is ashamed and asks her to forgive him for having taken up her time and wishes her the best of health and happiness. The readers can understand how judgmental Miss. Elizabeth regarding Mr. Darcy’s character. Elizabeth is astonished at his avowal of what he has done to Jane and the unfeeling manner of mentioning Mr. Wickham. When he does not deny anything, Elizabeth feels pity and starts reconsidering her attachment.

Elizabeth discovers about her blind, partial, prejudiced and absurd behavior. Elizabeth feels, “How despicably I have acted! She cried- ‘I who have prided myself on my discernment! - I who have valued myself on my abilities, who have often disdained the generous candour of my sister, and gratified my vanity, in useless or blamable distrust. How humiliating is the discovery! - yet how just a humiliation – Had I been in love “(2010,202). Elizabeth’s love towards Mr. Darcy is strengthened when Lady Catherine warns Elizabeth as, “Mr. Darcy is engaged to my daughter. Now what have you to say? [...] if you willfully act against the inclinations of all, you will be censured, slighted and despised, by everyone connected with him. Your alliance will be a disgrace; your name will never even be mentioned by anyone of us” (2010,342). Elizabeth replies,” But the wife of Mr. Darcy must have such extra ordinary sources of happiness necessarily attached to her situation”(2010,342).

Conclusion

Austen portrays the masculine and feminine roles of British Regency period. They were the days of post French Revolution. Literature on revolutionary ideas, politics and gender equality were the most expected genres. Gender equality was non-prevalent as the women were treated as passive and meant for marriage and supporting husbands. Women were protected by fathers before marriage and by husbands after the marriage, which was a typical feature of patriarchy. Elizabeth challenges these traditional norms with independent rational thinking in rejecting Mr. Collins proposal of marriage. Dignity of Mr. Collins lies in his accepting the rejection in a decent manner. The other prominent character is Fitzwilliam Darcy who breaks the stereotypical nature of a man in Regency period. The flexible natures of Mr. Darcy and Miss. Elizabeth to reconsider their attitudes and behavior towards each other in re discovering their true personalities makes the novel meaningful. Gender

sensitization is the unique feature of *Pride and Prejudice* irrespective of the past and present ongoing debates of feminist and masculinist concerns.

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