



## A QUEST FOR FEMININE IDENTITY IN JANE AUSTEN'S *PRIDE AND PREJUDICE*

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### ABSTRACT

*Literature has always acted as a mirror to the society. As the human society evolved slowly and gradually, literary writings, especially the novels played a pivotal role in reflecting and expressing the social scenarios and defining the human psyche. Women are the most integral part of the social discourse. Since centuries, they have strived hard in search of their true identity and worth. Turning through the pages of literary history, we can easily trace the footmarks of the transformation in the position of the females through societies and ages. Women writers and critics have given a glimpse of the social norms and structures prevalent during their times through their writings. Jane Austen is one such poignant writer from the Romantic Period of English Literature who broke apart from the traditionally accepted storyline through her youthful spirits and portrayal of strong female protagonists, who could think for themselves and take their own decisions. Born in a society that hugely discriminated between the rights given to men and women, Austen, since her childhood developed an internal anguish against the unjust social system. This even resulted in her being unmarried throughout her life and continued writing as a profession to be financially independent. Austen always advocated marriage in her novels, but she believed in marriage for love and not for gaining social status. Women during Austen's times were expected to be submissive*

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and timid. They were considered incapable of thinking wisely and hold own individuality. Her novels parodied the then conventional novel plot of love, marriage and courtship through youthful playfulness and subtle irony. Her female protagonists were the heroes of her novels; they were progressive as well as headstrong. They did not believe in social conformity in the male dominated society.

**Keywords** -: Feminism, identity, society, male-dominated, novels, satire

## LITERATURE REVIEW

A close and critical study of the works of Jane Austen clearly suggests her to be a great feminist critic along being a novelist. *The Critical Review* reviewed the novel *Pride and Prejudice* in March 1813, two months after its publication and acclaimed it as a novel of realism and morality. It compared the playful combats between Elizabeth and Darcy to the characters of Beatrice and Benedick from William Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*. Laura Dabundo of Kennesaw State University studies the novel as a representative of five styles of women's roles in the five Bennet daughters. She states that the central theme of the novel is gender politics and the changing roles of women in this rapid changing world. Hui-Chun Chang in her research article *The Impact of the Feminist Heroine: Elizabeth in Pride and Prejudice* critically examines the character of Elizabeth Bennet in contrast to the other chief female characters of the novel such as Caroline, Jane and Charlotte. She defines Elizabeth as a feminist character who not only defies socially imposed gender roles but she even helped in moral development in Mr. Darcy to put his pride aside and win Elizabeth's affections.

## INTRODUCTION

Jane Austen published her first novel, *Sense and Sensibility* anonymously in 1795 in epistolary form. The novel highlights the challenges and hardships faced by the women of that era in order to find the suitable match for themselves through her two female protagonists; the Dashwood sisters, Elinor and Marianne. Austen's second published and widely popular novel, *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) is considered as a timeless classic. The novel was earlier named as '*First Impressions*.' Though the central theme of this novel is marriage, which was considered extremely essential for a woman to get social mobility, yet it beautifully portrays female sensitivity, emotions and their desire to be understood in this patriarchal and materialistic society. The characterization of the female protagonist, Elizabeth Bennet is a masterpiece by Austen. Even the women of the present generation can relate with the fierceness and out rightness shown by her. The novel is about Mr. and Mrs. Bennet and their five unmarried daughters who lived in the town of Meryton near London. The only desire of Mrs. Bennet is to get her daughters married to men with handsome fortunes.



Elizabeth is second amongst the Bennet sisters. Her views on marriage and courtship differed from her mother widely. Throughout the novel, Elizabeth unabashedly expresses her opinions and stands for her virtues and beliefs. She is not ready to be demeaned for belonging to a middle class society. Elizabeth is comfortable with her own identity, she didn't need a man just to provide her a social standing on the other hand she wants to be respected and valued. In Elizabeth Bennet, Jane Austen has replicated her own personality, identity and belief. She strongly opposes the position of women in the English laws of inheritance and wealth distribution. *Pride and Prejudice* provides a social commentary all the major aspects of the English society of the early nineteenth century with an underlying satire. It also uniquely builds up a feminist character in Elizabeth Bennet.

## Textual Study:

### *Pride and Prejudice* as the Feminist voice of its time

In her last completed novel, *Persuasion* (1817), Jane Austen wrote, "I hate to hear you talk about all women as if they were fine ladies instead of rational creatures. None of us want to be in calm waters all our lives." What Austen intended to speak through these lines is to break the conventional stereotypes regarding women. Her novels vociferously advocated about providing equal rights to women and empowering them with independence and courage. The position and status of women in the English society during the Romantic age witnessed a steady transition. The role of women in the society became a topic of debate among poets and novelists. Many prominent female novelists as well as critics such as Molly Wollstonecraft, Maria Edgeworth and others took the front stage to express their views and opinions on female education and upbringing. Wollstonecraft highly criticised women to be judged by male perspective. She argued that the conventional education provided to women is improper and women should be educated to attain equal social footings as men and gain individual liberty. This fight for female independence has been a long one. The ancient Greek mathematician, Pythagoras wrote, "There were a good principle that created order, right and man and a bad principle that created chaos, darkness and woman." This perception has remained prevalent in human minds in years to come. Women have always been considered as the 'other one'. French existentialist Simone de Beauvoir in her 1949 book, *The Second Sex*, analysed the treatment received by women throughout the history by the hands of their male counterparts. She argues that man is considered as the default creation of God whereas woman is considered as the 'other'. Women have always been defined in relation to men. Her identity is entirely conditioned by the biological fact of sex. This universal notion was greatly challenged by Jane Austen back then when she created heroines as creatures with a brain of their own.



*Pride and Prejudice* opens with the line, “It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife.” Ever since Austen has written this novel, this opening statement has caught the attention of all. It very lightly hints at the cut-throat competition among upper class English woman of that period to find a suitable husband as soon as they achieve marriageable age. One of the prime reasons for this line to be extremely popular even today is that women face the pressure to get married at a proper age even today, albeit the conditions have slightly improved. The Bennet family faced the same trouble with five daughters. Mrs. Bennet was paranoid to get her daughters married to men with good fortunes in order to prevent them getting socially destitute.

The story chronicles the life of the Bennet family, especially their five unmarried daughters, Jane, Elizabeth, Mary, Kitty and Lydia. With no son to be named as the future heir of the family, their entire fortune is bound to be inherited by their distant relative, Mr. Collins as per the English rule of that period. The eldest and most beautiful daughter is Jane. Jane is good at heart, submissive and her sister Elizabeth’s true confidant. She gets to meet, Mr. Charles Bingley, the new and wealthy tenant of their neighbouring estate, Netherfield at an assembly. They both take an instant liking for each other and Jane falls in love with Mr. Bingley. The family’s second daughter and the novel’s protagonist is Elizabeth Bennet. She is quick-witted and rational and virtuous. Though at times her hasty judgments lead her astray but she is ready to learn from her mistakes. The entire story is about Elizabeth’s journey to find her true love. She meets Mr. Darcy, a friend of Mr. Bingley in the same assembly where Jane meets Bingley. Contrary to Jane and Bingley’s mutual affections, Elizabeth found Darcy too proud and arrogant and developed a strong hatred towards him. This misunderstanding leads to many obstacles in their future relation until they finally realise their love and deep feelings for one another and get married.

Although the story seems simple enough, but it covers a series of social and psychological traumas faced by a young girl entangled with the burden to marry by her family and society. She is judged for every step she takes and criticised for her decisions. When Mr. Collins arrived at Meryton with the proposal to marry Elizabeth, Mr. Bennet is goaded with happiness. She believed it to be the perfect match for Elizabeth as it will ensure security of the family fortune. But Elizabeth straight away rejected the marriage as she was not ready to spend the rest of her life with the shallow and pompous Collins. Not only her mother but even her neighbours raised their concerns about her decision when the proud Mr. Collins married Elizabeth’s best friend Charlotte on being rejected by her. But Elizabeth didn’t regret, neither was she heartbroken. Elizabeth always stood on her own terms in the society which was economically and socially controlled by men. Through this struggle Elizabeth emerged as a strong feminist character.



The definition and concept of feminism in the era of Jane Austen largely differed from today. Feminism in her times was restricted to providing equal voting rights to women and a few other basic fundamental rights. Even female writers were not taken seriously as it was considered that they lacked matter and depth. This was one such reason that Austen throughout her writing career Austen hid her true identity and wrote anonymously. Today feminism has touched every aspect of our life. It is an idea that equates men and women as equal. Elizabeth showed characteristic traits of that of a modern woman. She did not want to be a submissive and obedient wife but wanted to have her own voice even after marriage. This unique quality of her kept Mr. Darcy fascinated towards her in the entire novel. Even when he tried to stay away from Elizabeth, he was constantly attracted by her carefree personality. But Elizabeth was a woman who liked to live on her own terms. Finally, when Mr. Darcy realised his love for Elizabeth and proposed marriage to her, she declined multiple times till she realised her own feelings for him. Her strong feminine identity could also be witnessed when the rich and arrogant Lady Catherine de Bourgh visited Elizabeth and tried to demean her for her middle class upbringing and her relation to Mr. Darcy, Elizabeth retorts, “he is a gentleman; I am a gentleman’s daughter, so far we are equal.” Here Elizabeth truly reveals the feminist inside her. She didn’t allow anyone to make her feel inferior on the basis of social status and wealth. She never showed intentions to marry only to gain a comfortable living and secured future. This is one of the major reasons for the continued popularity of *Pride and Prejudice* through ages. A modern woman can step into the shoes of Elizabeth Bennet and justify her decisions. Elizabeth befits the modern woman’s ideology. She lives life the way she wants and not on the way paved for her by the society. She unabashedly speaks her views and puts a strong face during difficulties but inside her heart she is just like a normal woman who wants her to be loved and respected. This quest for her identity and love makes this novel a masterpiece by Austen.

Austen has kept on discovering and rediscovering the vices and virtues of her society through most of her novels, each of them focussing on a strong female protagonist. Her famous novel, *Emma* (1815) tells the tale of beautiful, vain and youthful Emma Woodhouse who takes immense pride in her match-making skills. Though, most of her attempts ended terribly causing extreme misunderstandings but Emma continued her efforts. Austen never tried to show the women in her stories to be the epitome of perfection. They had their own follies and imperfections. They were round characters with the blend of all the traits of human beings. This made her novels interesting and witty.

One of the fundamental requirements of all human beings is respect and value of their opinion. Women during the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century were not viewed as creatures with much of a choice. Their upbringing mostly comprised of domestic education making them competent to look after the household and fulfilling their husband’s demand. As they attained





the right age for marriage, the entire focus of the family and society was to get them married to men probably of a higher social hierarchy and the women accepted it with great pleasure. As the women were subjugated to the rules of the patriarchy, they could not raise their voice against it. On the other hand, there was horizontal hostility among the women and they would scuffle with each other to gain the attentions and favours from their superior male counterparts. The most famous part from the novel is when Mr. Darcy proposes Elizabeth for the first time. Though it seemed quite like a fairy tale but the pages were filled with social realism. When Darcy expressed his love to Elizabeth, it was certainly a romantic offer and he had high hopes that Elizabeth would most likely accept it. He had all the reasons to believe so; he had a much higher social standing and was well-connected. He was easily the most desirable man for many women but Elizabeth was in a vulnerable state. Her family had seen poverty and the future of spinsterhood looms over her head. It was most unlikely for her to reject such an alluring proposal and Darcy too realised it. He was quite confident for an affirmative reply. But the graceful and decisive rejection of Elizabeth makes her one of the strongest feminist characters of all time. She resiliently waited till Darcy came out of his male pride and truly confessed his love for her with open heart. Ultimately she won his respect and love.

## CONCLUSION

One of the greatest novelist and literary critic of the modern times, Virginia Woolf rightly said about Jane Austen, “Austen is mistress of much deeper emotion than appears upon the surface.” Through a story of courtship and marriage, Austen gives an impactful social message which is relevant even today after 200 years of its publication. There have been numerous television and web adaptations of *Pride and Prejudice* and taught in schools and colleges as a part of their curriculum. The novel provides an insightful criticism of the male dominant society where rules are made only in favour of the men. Austen’s novels throw light at the injustices of these rules and how they cause long- term damage to women. Although, Elizabeth accepts the social pattern and got married at the end but she married on her own condition and made her husband realise her worth. She never accepted being married to be a trophy wife but lived on her own terms with mutual love and respect for each other. This novel proves to be inspiring and motivating for the women of many years to come. Her novels are very relevant today in the context of daily life and her plot line is believable and hence, the readers are able to relate with her works.



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