

Reflection of Patriarchal Society in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*

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Abstract. Jane Austen is a prominent woman English novelist of Romantic period. *Pride and Prejudice* is her most famous novel. If we talk about plots of her most of the novels, though fundamentally comic, they give us a vivid reflection of the dependence of the women on marriage to secure standing and economic security under the patriarchal society of her contemporary age. No doubt, her works were usually popular but these were published first time anonymously and brought her little fame. In *Pride and Prejudice*, the heroine, Elizabeth Bennet is a girl of spirit, but unfortunately she has no extraordinary qualities except her prejudice. Jane Austen embarks upon the arduous task of making a thorough scrutiny of the man to be accepted by a very sensible young woman, Elizabeth Bennet. In this context Austen creates a 'round' character of the name of Darcy who becomes the object of scrutiny on the part of Elizabeth Bennet. And Elizabeth shows her reflection as an authentic feminist.

Keywords: Pride and Prejudice; marriage; patriarchal society.

Jane Austen, born in Hampshire in the year 1775, was a writer of the Romantic Age, though her works were mostly published towards the end of the era and posthumously. Penguin Popular Classics mentioned that Austen was the seventh child of Reverend George Austen and her works were greatly influenced by her own life, if one was to observe her personal history during her writing years, as could be seen in the social status of the women in Austen's works, who were of landed gentry like Austen herself. Austen's reading habit gave her an extensive knowledge about the writings of authors such as Sir Walter Scott and George Crabbe.

Feminism, though not introduced during the Romantic Age, certainly received its boom from the masses of female writers who made themselves published in the era. Mellor observes, "women writers unknowingly elevated the status of women as their works were acknowledged as eligible material that could be enjoyed by readers, additionally commenting that works published by women also generated a newmarket of readers among women which gave the patriarchal society of the Romantic Age reason to worry that women may step out of the boundaries of their traditional duties as their status were still inferior to men". (183-84) Such inequality was protested by Mary Wollstonecraft, and it was believed that many female writers echoed her call for acknowledgement that women were capable equals to men.

Such portrayal of equality has been reflected by the heroine of *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth Bennet, leading to one of the factors of widespread debate as to whether *Pride and Prejudice* was a feminist writing or not. Satire, although not a feature of Romantic Age literature, was often said to be the antithesis of the themes of the literature of the Romantic Age. It focused on realistic matters and mocked them, and no one utilised the genre of satire better than Jane Austen in the Romantic Age (Jones, 391).

The main plot of *Pride and Prejudice* revolved around the recurring themes of *Pride and Prejudice*, both aspects which could be readily identified with the hero, Mr Darcy, and the heroine Elizabeth Bennet. The novel progressed in a state where Mr Darcy was aware of both his *pride and prejudice*, but never quite realised how these two aspects of himself affected his character so badly that he was chastised by Elizabeth's comment, "...had you behaved in a more gentlemanlike manner." (Austen) (150) Elizabeth Bennet, on the other hand, was not aware that her ability to discern a person's personality had become her pride, leading her to develop prejudices against Mr Darcy, and was utterly rebuked when she was made aware that she possessed the two aspects she never thought she would have. The irony of such situations that involved the characters in the novel drove home the implications of the novel's central theme that cautiously balanced the matter of pride, prejudice, and the social status of men and women. The satire which mocked the traditional constitutions of the social community of the Romantic Era subtly underlined the fact that Austen may have been a feminist, as seen in the novel *Pride and Prejudice*, which tackled the issue of status and gender inequalities with delicate manoeuvring to make the main characters see each other as equals, an achievement in the opinion of feminists.

To the opinion of Jane Austen as a feminist writer in general, there had been many accounts of researchers both supporting and denying the theory that Jane Austen was a feminist, as stated by Tuite, who also added that such attackers and defenders of Austen's feminist stand were complicated by contradictory evidences of feminism and anti-feminism in *Pride and Prejudice*. To increase explicit understanding on the elements that point Jane Austen's works in the direction of proto-feminist literature, Tuite described that Austen's portrayal of the feminine consciousness, market of readers and the beliefs concerning the status of women that Austen upheld were crucial indicators of Austen's feminist stand. (9) Tuite added that Austen's representation of the relationship between genders, class and genre created a niche for female writers and a market of female readers alike, reforming concepts of property relations and women's status; in Tuite's opinion, particularly the bourgeois and cultured women. (10) In a nutshell, Austen had revolutionised the female identity in writing and in reading culture. (Tuite 10)

In the novel *Pride and Prejudice*, there are a lot of obvious instances of ironic or satirical statements, but not all of them contain implicit feminism. The extracts that would be analysed should contain both irony and feminism. In fact, in the novel, the very first sentence itself was ironic and feminist :

It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife. (5)

From the surface, it seemed to be a simple statement, the narrative expressing the statement as if it were a common fact that everyone should know. The irony however, lies in the fact that the exact opposite is meant from the statement. In the setting of the novel, in fact, the setting of Austen's society who would read the novel, it is women who are in want of a husband with good fortune. A bachelor with good fortune is not necessarily in want of a wife, and even if he is, he has the leisure to choose, as it is illustrated later in the novel by Mr Collins, who thought to propose to Jane Bennet when he finds out that Jane is likely to marry another man and so simply turns his attention on to Elizabeth Bennet, who rejects him before finally proposing to Elizabeth's best friend, Charlotte Lucas, all which is done in a short span of three days.

A woman on the other hand, has nothing unless she marries. Only by marriage can a woman secure her social status and financial security. This was where the feminism was found; Austen implied the disadvantages of women in the society that she lived in, that they have no means but to rely on men and marriage for a secure livelihood. The manner in which she phrased it so ironically basically was a mockery of that fact, an implication of how unfair it was to have such segregation between men and women. This segregation was in reality, still encouraged, with some authors publishing works that determined that women are of the inferior gender and must be subservient to men; to them it is an obvious culture, as the first example in character analysis showed, in regards to the inclusion of Fordyce's Sermons in the text :

This he considered sufficient encouragement; and the avowal of all that he felt... but was very unlikely to recommend his suit. In spite of her deeply-rooted dislike, she could not be insensible to the compliment of such a man's affection... she lost all compassion in anger. (147-48)

This verse was a narrative on the proposal of Mr Darcy to Elizabeth, describing the mode of proposal that Mr Darcy made to Elizabeth and Elizabeth's reaction to it. The irony in this extract was quite obvious to the reader, as Mr Darcy

was certain that his proposal would be most flattering to his intended listener, the narrative made it obvious to the reader how Elizabeth shifted from an awkward and appreciative mood into a mood of anger and disapproval following Mr Darcy's proposal which was narrated to be rather arrogant in recommending his suit and emphasising the disadvantages of Elizabeth's connections and status, ironic as Mr Darcy was convinced that Elizabeth was pleased and would readily agree to his proposal when the reader knew otherwise. It was this point that revealed the implicit feminism, where Elizabeth could not rationalise herself to accept Mr Darcy who could have given her all the wealth and status that were desirable, instead becoming offended at being treated inferior as she did not see herself lacking compared to Mr Darcy, thus enforcing the concept of feminism that there should be equality between genders :

Jane and Elizabeth attempted to explain to her the nature of an entail. They had often attempted it before...in favour of a man that nobody cared about.
(50)

The extract above was a narrative on Mrs Bennet's reaction in the entailing of their home to another male relative, Mr Collins, who could evict the entire Bennet family out of Longbourn, the entailed home, should Mr Bennet pass away and the home be inherited by Mr Collins. The ironic fact here was that readers of *Pride and Prejudice* in Austen's era probably appreciated the protests of Mrs Bennet as what it seemed, the protest of a woman whose intelligence was unfortunately limited to the settlement of marriages for all her daughters. Despite how strong the protest sounded from the narrative style, the reader would take it as a joke as it is Mrs Bennet's emotions that were used for the basis of narration.

The irony is further strengthened by the satirical view that Austen has subtly included by using Jane and Elizabeth in the narrative to explain the inevitability of the entail, that the laws had made it so that the living male relatives must always be the first choice to inherit property, and that there was nothing the women can do, enhancing the irony that was performed on the readers by Mrs Bennet's rant, which would actually be the most sensible thing that she had ever said. The feminism within this extract was actually in plain view, which was in the form of Mrs Bennet's protests. Women should have just as much rights to inherit the property of their father as his closest living relatives, rather than entailing the property to a male relative whom they had never even seen before, further emphasising on the unfairness of the laws on women and mocking it with the seemingly harmless and comedic narrative :

When she remembered the style of his address, she was still full of indignation; but when she considered how unjustly she had condemned...nor could she

for a moment repent her refusal, or feel the slightest inclination ever to see him again. (165)

This narrative extract portrayed Elizabeth's emotions as she recalled the letter that she read, dissatisfied at first with his manner of writing, but feeling sympathetic and sorry for how she had reacted earlier to Mr Darcy's proposal. The reader would expect Elizabeth's sympathy to lead to her regret of rejecting Mr Darcy's proposal as it was a valuable offer in the mind of the reader, but the irony of the situation came from the following statement, as Elizabeth considered that she could not feel sorry for her rejection of Mr Darcy, nor did she regret it, betraying the reader's expectations.

As the narration created a mood that the reader would interpret as a moment of Elizabeth's weakness and surrender to her feelings of sympathy to Mr Darcy, their expectations were betrayed as the atmosphere created by the narrative sharply turned to Elizabeth's honest feelings that she did not regret a single thing that she did, allowing the reader to appreciate the ironic twist as Elizabeth stayed true to her firm personality. This reaction from Elizabeth is feminist in nature as she understood that despite the sympathy she felt for Mr Darcy, she could not regret her decision of rejecting Mr Darcy as she understood as well that Mr Darcy did not consider her an equal, a matter which she took to heart :

Her father, captivated by youth and beauty, and that appearance of good humour which youth and beauty generally give, had married a woman whose weak understanding...all his views of domestic happiness were overthrown. (183)

This narrative explored the circumstances of Mr Bennet's marriage, detailing the consequences of his poor choice in his life partner. The irony of this narrative is that Mr Bennet, despite his intelligence, chose for his wife someone most unsuitable to his personality, Mrs Bennet, who was both shallow and insipid, which should be a matter of great misfortune, but the narrative expressed it as if it was a trifle matter, which, when the issue was given a closer look, was about as insignificant as it should be, as men had freedom in the selection of a wife and it was just Mr Bennet's folly that he made a wrong choice. The feminism therefore, laid in the fact that Mr Bennet found his domestic happiness ruined from a marriage to a woman who could not be his equal or at least possess the same common sense as he did, which implied that due to the inferior view of women, they could not develop as they could have, and the consequence was that someone like Mr Bennet, despite his brilliance of mind, suffered from his unequal marriage, which further stressed the feminist opinion that women should be given equal opportunities and rights as men for them to develop as it would benefit both themselves and men :

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You are mistaken, Mr Darcy, if you suppose that the mode of your declaration affected me in any other way, than as it spared me the concern which I might have felt in refusing you, had you behaved in a more gentlemanlike manner. She saw him start... (150)

This statement originated from Elizabeth, who boldly explained to Mr Darcy as to why she would have the courage to reject his proposal, which is related to the central theme of the text, *Pride and Prejudice*. In this extract, Elizabeth had clearly defined that Mr Darcy had not acted as a proper gentleman would have, implying that Mr Darcy did not even treat her equally to other women that he had interacted with in the text, especially in an occasion so important as a proposal, and the narration which followed allowed the reader to experience the irony as Mr Darcy's reaction to Elizabeth's statement clearly showed that he was unaware of his manners which were likely to be the way it was due to his pride in his status and his prejudice towards Elizabeth's familial connections.

It was understood that his possession of *Pride and Prejudice* had been the main cause of the ironic reaction, and Elizabeth's severe reproof had called Mr Darcy's consciousness to it, finally allowing him to be aware of his failings as a gentleman, especially towards the woman he claimed to love. The feminism in this extract is that it was unacceptable for women to be viewed as inferior to men, and for men to act as if women were inferior, no matter of what status they are, and Austen utilised this instance of irony to ridicule the segregation of men and women:

He expressed no regret for what he had done which satisfied her; his style was not penitent, but haughty. It was all pride and insolence...Astonishment, apprehension, and even horror, oppressed her. (159)

“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...Till this moment, I never knew myself.” (162)

These two extracts built up to the development of Elizabeth's relationship to the theme of the text, which has been so far overshadowed by her own ignorance and the effect of Mr Darcy's proposal. The first extract depicted that Elizabeth still held contempt for Mr Darcy's personality as his letter still reflected a sense of pride, but those feelings were erased as she was made to understand the reasons behind it, especially as the letter from Mr Darcy had rationalised his contempt for her relations and his dark history concerning Mr Wickham. The second extract now

showed Elizabeth's reaction upon the realisation that she was guilty of the same faults that she had accused Mr Darcy of, that she too, was proud in her own judgements and had unconsciously developed a prejudice towards Mr Darcy based on the opinions of others about him.

The development of her remorse stemmed from the effect of her character coming in touch with the central theme which produced the ironic effect, after several occasions in which Elizabeth reaffirmed that she could neither be moved to accept Mr Darcy nor feel regret for what she had done to him. The fact that she expressed her remorse vexingly would truly catch the reader off guard, but it was a reasonable twist in the plot as a reaction to the theme of *Pride and Prejudice*, as Elizabeth's character underwent a change that allowed her to express remorse over her actions.

At a glance, there seemed to be no implicit feminism in these extracts, but if one was to critically consider the concept of feminism, which exhorted equality between genders, one must also see that men ought to be seen as equals by their female counterparts. Elizabeth, who had seen herself as an equal to Mr Darcy, had unconsciously lowered Mr Darcy beneath herself due to her prejudice, and feminism was implied as she was rudely awakened to her prejudice and realised her errors. And only then she saw Mr Darcy as a proper equal once more :

They were within twenty yards of each other, and so abrupt was his appearance that it was impossible to avoid his sight...advanced towards the party, and spoke to Elizabeth, if not in terms of perfect composure, at least of perfect civility. (192)

"My object then," replied Darcy, "was to shew you, by every civility in my power...by letting you see your reproofs had been attended to..." (285)

These two extracts showed the change in Mr Darcy's personality after his revelation concerning his pride. In the first extract, the irony was shown as Elizabeth, who expected Mr Darcy to ignore her, or perhaps even act condescending towards her, was shocked to discover that Mr Darcy had civilly addressed her and maintained a perfectly polite manner.

The reader, who anticipated the same reaction as Elizabeth did, would be caught off-guard by this ironic twist, and would not understand the reason behind it until the second extract, which explained that Mr Darcy's behaviour towards Elizabeth had changed because of her reprimand when she had rejected his proposal, which had made him aware to his pride and prejudice. The feminism implied here was found in Mr Darcy's actions, who sought to make himself an equal to Elizabeth,

by changing his behaviour and the way he treated her, which echoed with the concept of feminism. It was by Mr Darcy's exposure to the central theme of the novel which made it possible for the change in himself, which in turn allowed for the expression of feminism.

As feminism during Austen's era was more focused on the rights of women, particularly in the education of women and their right to have the horizons of their mind broadened, this sense of feminism becomes strong even without the use of irony. As Austen depicted the misery of uneducated women with her characters in *Pride and Prejudice*, often ending up in poor marriages, unable to attain a state of happiness that a liberal-minded woman could, as illustrated by her characters, which only served to highlight the importance of education and equal rights for women.

It could be seen that Jane Austen was a crucial author in the Romantic Age. It could be possible even to say that Austen was a turning point within the Romantic Age, with her unique style of the novel form that contained the key elements to the development of feminism. *Pride and Prejudice* illustrated her abilities to do so, as noted by the various researches on how Austen's style of writing, utilisation of irony and narrative stances expressed her thoughts and principles on the society that she lived in.

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