

Gender Sensitization in Jane Austen's *Pride & Prejudice*

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Abstract

Jane Austen submitted the novel for publication between 1796 and 1797 with the title *First Impressions*. Later it was changed to *Pride and Prejudice* and published in 1813. Though unmarried, Austen gave the definition of marriage in *Pride and Prejudice*. She exemplifies arranged marriage, love marriage and eloped marriage but not a broken marriage. She is considered a sentimentalist rather than a romanticist as her themes are, sociological, realistic and universal in appeal. Though *Pride and Prejudice* was branded as a feminist novel in British Regency period, its contemporary relevance can be marked as a novel of gender sensitization. Women in the novel are not oppressed or suppressed instead their feelings and emotions are dealt with utmost care and concern by men. Austen signifies the importance of faith, love and understanding between men and women before they enter the institution of marriage. The present paper tries to critically approach both feminist and masculine perspectives juxtaposing the two genders in modern perspectives of gender sensitization.

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

Introduction

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). Surprisingly there are great people who hated Jane Austen. In her article, ”7 People Who Hated *Pride and Prejudice*” Linda observes that Charlotte Bronte, Winston Churchill, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Virginia Woolf, D.H. Lawrence, Anne Loise Germaine De Stael and Mark Twain commented adversely on Austen’s themes, plots and narrative style.

Feminist and Masculinist critiques

Most of the critics consider Jane Austen as a feminist writer even before feminism emerged. She was not part of any women’s rights movement. Just publishing her books is considered an act of feminism. Most of the women during her time published either with pseudo names or anonymous. Her characters reflect strong wo(men) 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 pointed out by majority of the critics is the prevalent concepts of 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). In another situation, “I do think it is the hardest thing in the world, that your estate should be entailed away from your own children” (2010, 45). 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.

Another major feminist concern is that the women in *Pride and Prejudice* 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) Most of the critics and widely read academia consider that Jane Austen is a 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 inherited nearly hundred thousand pounds of property from his father. He 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, "Mr. Darcy! – There is nothing like dancing after all – I consider it as one of the first refinements of polished societies for which Darcy replies, "[...] and it has the advantage also of being in vogue amongst the less polished societies of the world – Every savage can dance" (2010,23). 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). In this manner both of them retort each other with sharp words.

Mis(understanding) between Mr. Darcy and Miss. Elizabeth

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.

Elizabeth's independent and determined ways become prominent when Mr. Collins expresses his positivity of marrying her. She declines to agree with his proposal as she finds him pompous and selfish. He considers that it is common for ladies to reject which secretly means as their acceptance without the slightest discouragement. However, Elizabeth makes it

clear that she is perfectly clear about her refusal and that he cannot make her happy and vice versa. Mr. Collins's greatness lies in understanding her bashful modesty and the genuine delicacy of her character. Mr. Bennet warns, "An unhappy alternative is before you. Elizabeth, from the day you must be a stranger to one of your parents. Your mother will never see you again if you do not marry Mr. Collins and I will never see you again if you do" (2010,108). Austen unfolds how women in those days are pressurized to get married. It is Elizabeth's greatness to be bold enough in exercising her discretion of opinions regarding marriage. Her friend Lady Charlotte warns, "Miss Lizzy – if you take it into your head to go on refusing every offer of marriage in this way, you will never get a husband at all – and I am sure I do not know who is to maintain you when your father is dead – I shall not be able to keep you – are so I warn you. (2010, 109) Elizabeth feels that Mr. Collins and Miss Charlotte make unsuitable match and it is also ridiculous that Mr. Collins makes two offers of marriage within three days. Lady Charlotte says to Elizabeth that she is not romantic but wished for a comfortable home and considering Mr. Collins' character, connections and situation in life, is convinced to home a chance of happiness in marriage.

The third 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 further holds Mr. Darcy's pride and caprice to be the cause of Jane's suffering.

The fourth misunderstanding is at Rosings when Colonel Fitzwilliam requests Elizabeth to play music, she thinks that she is put in comparison to Mr. Darcy's sister in the art of playing Piano. When he pays attention to her music, with a sense of rudeness she says, "you mean to frighten me [...] but I will not be alarmed though your sister does play so well."(2010,168). She asserts that she is stubborn enough and can neither be frightened nor intimidated. Darcy

retorts that she takes pleasure in her prejudices for which Elizabeth does not wish to continue the conversations as it may lead to provocations and retaliations. The readers can understand that Miss. Elizabeth keeps on testing Mr. Darcy all the time giving an impression that she is correct in her assessment of Darcy's nature.

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. Though his countenance expresses real security she says, "I believe the established mode to express a sense of obligation for the sentiments avowed however unequally they may be returned [...] if I could feel gratitude, I would thank you now. But I cannot. I have never desired, your good opinion and you have certainly bestowed it most unwillingly. (2010, 184).

Not only Mr. Darcy's 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 elegance 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. The next day, Darcy gives a letter dated from Rosings. It clears the two charges alleged against him, firstly the detachment of Mr. Bingley from Jane, Secondly in defiance of honour, prospects and humanity of Mr. Wickham. Mr. Darcy mentions in his letter that he has perceived Mr. Bingley’s partiality for Miss. Bennet because of her cheerful and engaging ways, however she does not invite them by any participation of sentiment. Finally Darcy says, “On their subject I have nothing more to say, no other apology to offer [...] if I have wounded your sister’s feelings it was unknowingly done” (2010,193). He also clears that he has not deceived Mr. Wickham by explaining the entire episode of their association. Darcy’s father had high intention of Mr. Wickham to provide him for the church profession. Unfolding the real character of Mr. Wickham, Darcy says that the legacy is to provide thousand pounds. In addition, Wickham expected immediate pecuniary advantage. His intention is studying law to which Mr. Darcy readily accepts. Mr. Wickham resigns all claim of his assistance in the church and accepts to return three thousand pounds and studying Law is a mere pretence and attempts of eloping with Darcy’s sister as her fortune is thirty thousand pounds. Miss. Elizabeth reads Mr. Darcy’s faithful narrative of every event with excitement and eagerness. She remembers that Mr. Bingley, when questioned by Jane, has asserted Mr. Darcy’s blamelessness in the affair. Being proud and repulse were his manners.

Very soon Elizabeth discovers about her blind, partial, prejudiced and absurd behavior. The self realization of Elizabeth in her own words” 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). In Pemberly, Elizabeth is dumb struck at the elegance of Mr.

Darcy's house and she thinks," I might have been mistress! With these rooms I might now have been familiarly acquainted! Instead of viewing them as a stranger, I might have rejoiced in them as my own, and welcomed to them as visitors my uncle and aunt"(2010,238). The governess Mrs. Reynolds says that Mr. Darcy is the best landlord and the best master. Elizabeth feels ashamed of her feelings of dislike against him. She creates respect for his valuable qualities and develops a sense of gratitude, respect, good will and esteem for loving her still well enough to forgive all the petulance and acrimony of her manner in rejecting him and all the unjust accusations accompanying her rejection. Once again the noble behaviour of Mr. Darcy is clear when Miss Elizabeth receives a letter from Miss. Jane regarding Miss. Lydia's elopement to Scotland. Mr. Darcy observes Elizabeth's face growing pale. Worried about the family prestige, Elizabeth says, "We may draw from in this useful lesson; that lot of virtue in a female is irreversible-one false step involves her in endless ruin – that her reputation is no less brittle than it is beautiful – and that she cannot be guarded in her behaviour towards the understanding of the other sex" (2010,270). In this context Collins writes a letter to Mr. Bennet, "The death of your daughter would have been a blessing in comparison to this. And it is the more to be lamented [...] they may agree with me in apprehending that this false step in one daughter will be injurious to the fortunes of all the others" (2010,285).

To, Mrs. Bennet, Lydia's marriage is not a disgrace in fact triumph. The marriage of her daughters is the first object of her wishes since Jane was sixteen. She does not bother whether it is her first or last daughter. Mr. Bennet makes it clear that she shall never have admittance. He protests that she should receive from him no mark of affection whatever on the occasion. His anger is carried to such a point of inconceivable resentment, as to refuse his daughter a privilege without which her marriage would scarcely seem valid. After marriage, Lydia is Lydia still. Untamed, unabashed, wild, noisy and fearless. She turns from sister to sister demanding their congratulations. She says, "Ah, Jane, I take your place now and you must go lower, because I am a married woman[...] I am sure my sisters must all envy me. I only hope that they may have half my good luck. They must all go to Brighton. That is the place to get husbands" (2010,305).

Lydia gives an account of how her wedding took place at St, Clement's that Mr. Darcy was at her Wedding. Through Mrs. Gardiner letter, Elizabeth comes to know the truth that it is Mr.

Darcy who traces Lydia and Wickham. He says that it is his duty to step forward and endeavour to remedy an evil which has been brought on by him. Mrs. Gardner says that she likes Mr. Darcy for his behaviour in every respect pleasing. Miss. Elizebeth understands that Darcy has favoured Lydia and Wickham purposely. Now she doubts, “A man who has once been refused, how could I ever be foolish enough to expect a renewal of his love? Is there one among the sex, who would not protest against such a weakness as a second proposal to the same woman?” (2010,328).

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). Lady Catherine says that her daughter and Mr. Darcy are destined for each other and that their fortune on both sides is splendid. Elizabeth retorts, “He is a gentleman. I am a gentle man’s daughter. So far we equal”(2010,343). Elizabeth says that she will never give up and cannot to be intimidated into anything so wholly unreasonable. She questions, “Your ladyship want Mr. Darcy to marry your daughter [...] would my refusing to accept his hand make him to bestow it to his cousin? [...]How far your nephew might approve of your interference in his affairs, but you certainly no right to concern yourself in mine” (2010,344).

Mr. Darcy admires Miss. Elizabeth for making him to introspect himself and says, “[...] dearest, loveliest Elizabeth, What do I owe you? You taught me a lesson, hard indeed at first, but most advantageous. By you, I was properly humbled. I came to you without a doubt of my reception; you shewed me how insufficient were all my pretentions to please a woman worthy of being pleased” (2010, 355). Darcy clears the cloud of misunderstanding regarding his interference as absurd and impertinent in Jane and Bingley’s connection. He says that he has mistaken Jane’s indifference and confirms his undoubted belief in Mr. Bingley and Jane’s happiness together.

Marriage in its true sense: Elizabeth frames a pleasing picture of conjugal felicity, in other words the example of her own family of domestic comfort. She observes that her father has

married a woman who has weak understanding which put an end to all his real affection for her respect, esteem and confidence throwing away all his views for domestic happiness. Elizabeth understands that her father has created his own world of happiness of book reading and analyses that, “where other powers of entertainment are wanting, the true philosopher will derive benefit from such are given” (2010, 229). Finally, Mr. Bennet says, “But let me advise you, to think better of it [...] I know that you could be neither happy nor respectable, unless you truly esteemed your husband, unless you looked to up to him as a superior. Your lively talents would place you in the greatest danger in an unequal marriage. You could scarcely escape discredit and misery. My child. Let me not have the grief of seeing you unable to respect your partner in life. You know not what you are about” (2010, 361-62). Mr. Bennet wonders at the change of Elizabeth’s opinion on Mr. Darcy. He says, “Are you out of your senses, to be accepting this man? Have not you always hated him? [...] we all know him to be a proud, unpleasant sort of man; but this would be nothing if you really liked him” (2010, 362). Elizabeth replies with repeated assurances that Mr. Darcy was really the object of her choice, and the gradual change which her estimation of him had undergone, relating her absolute certainty that his affection is not the work of a day but had stood the test of many months. Elizabeth conquers her father’s incredulity and reconciles him to the match. The accomplishment of Mrs. Bennet in getting her daughters married makes her sensible, amiable, well informed woman for the rest of her life.

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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