

Gender and Class Oppression in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*

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The social world of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* is one in which women are reduced to commodities for marriage on account of their gender. In Austen's world women have few opportunities to support themselves in society aside from becoming governesses or marrying into wealth and prestige. Females had little opportunity for employment, to become a governess was considered degrading, and when there are no brothers or heirs to the estate, as in the case of Elizabeth Bennett's family, the family then has to entail its fortune, in this case to a distant cousin, Mr Collins. Women thus suffer on many counts on account of their gender, in the suffocating society of manners and class pretension that Austen depicts, marriage becomes a need for survival. Yet, Elizabeth remains an independent minded heroine who rejects Mr Collins proposal and initially Mr Darcy's proposal as she does not believe in marrying simply for status or wealth, so it becomes a felicitous situation when she finds herself in love with the obnoxious Mr Darcy, who holds a large estate and is esteemed highly in society.

The novel depicts a social world highly stratified and laden with class struggle and pretension. Darcy is depicted as someone who is haughty, and initially does not think Elizabeth worthy of him because she originates from a family of no consequence, she is middle class and not beautiful enough for him to deign to dance with her because she 'smiles too much'. However in their course of interaction he discovers that Elizabeth has a lively mind and a forthright and honest manner that contrasts with the artificial Miss Bingleys who are constantly flattering him and throwing themselves at him. Elizabeth initially also disdains Darcy because she finds him superior and condescending but discovers he has a heart when Darcy rescues the Bennett family from disgrace by intervening in the Wickham and Lydia sexual scandal which nearly brings the Bennett family to disgrace as Wickham tries to elope with Lydia and sexually taints her but is eventually coaxed into marriage by Darcy's intervention. Elizabeth finds that she had misjudged Darcy and thought Wickham to be superior to him as well as believed Wickham's lies about him but now becomes moved by the act to rescue her family honour, a move that can only be motivated by selfless motives of love.

Indeed a woman had to marry to survive in such a society, in Elizabeth Bennett's case the situation is dire because Mr Bennett's fortune is to be entailed to Mr Collins because there is no son and heir to the Bennett estate. An unmarried woman could only tutor and become a governess, which was then considered a very degrading vocation. Yet Elizabeth is not moved by her circumstances to play her mother's game at fortune hunting rich husbands for her daughters. Darcy's distaste of the Bennett family initially arises too from the vulgar Mrs Bennett who is quite a disgrace to Elizabeth because she is so crude and single minded and determined to marry her daughters off. Yet if one looks a little deeper, it is economic necessity that drives Mrs Bennett's actions. With the fortune of the Bennett family to be entailed upon Mr Bennett's demise, it is little wonder she is so driven and determined to get her daughter's married in order to ensure their survival.

Elizabeth Bennett is thus a feminist before her time because she will not bow to the need for economic survival and turns down Mr Collins' and initially Mr Darcy's proposals of marriage because she believes in marrying for love and

genuine affection. The novel shows a breaking down of Mr Darcy's pride and Elizabeth Bennett's prejudice. Initially Elizabeth had dismissed Darcy as a supercilious and smug misanthropist who thinks himself above most of society, but discovers there is more behind the arrogant demeanour when he rescues her family from scandal and disgrace. Darcy had initially also thought Elizabeth to be beneath him as she originates from a family of no consequence but discovers from his conversations with Elizabeth a lively mind and a woman who dares unlike others not to fawn upon him and flatter him but indeed be impertinent to him, stand up to him, challenge him and whom he eventually discovers is his equal in intelligence if not in social class.

The novel is thus a look beyond the highly stratified society segregated by class in 18th century England, it is shown that class snobbery is an illusion and no real barrier to marriage because Elizabeth, while socially inferior to Darcy, is no way intellectually inferior to him. Darcy thus finds that his class snobbery is misplaced towards Elizabeth Bennett, as she also discovers that her prejudice towards his superior and snobbish manner is misplaced when Darcy rescues the Bennett family from disgrace and scandal.

The novel thus can be read as a critique of 18th century England in which women were to marry for survival and there was a high level of social pretension and class snobbery. Austen can be read as being feminist and Marxist before her time because she sees beyond class distinctions and gender discrimination because Elizabeth Bennett proves herself to be Darcy's intellectual equal and not inferior to him on any account because of her class or gender though Mr Darcy had initially experienced disdain for her on these accounts. It is then shown that while gender and class barriers had initially placed Darcy in a place of privilege and scorn towards Elizabeth, he finds himself falling for her because of her candour, honesty and intellect. Austen then can be read as a feminist ahead of her times as she does not view women as intellectually or morally subordinate to men though this is indeed the circumstance women find themselves in during 18th century England. Austen is then a bold precursor of what was eventually to become the feminist movement, which did not view females as sex objects solely for the purposes of marriage or morally and intellectually inferior to males though law and religion as well as society had inscribed them as such.

The novel, while described as charming and light thus conceals a dark critique of 18th century England as a repressive society which is deeply segregated by class and social pretension. The situation is indeed grave for women who are reduced to commodities for marriage and sexual objects at the mercy of male desire and who find themselves heavily indebted and subordinated by men as marriage is the only means by which they can escape poverty and low status in society. Rousseau has written that women exist only to please men, to serve them and humour them, to bring up children for them, their entire existence was to revolve around the men they served and they were only to be considered as ornaments to men whom they had to serve and surrender to in order to get by in society. Thus it is highly ironic that Elizabeth, who is anything but an ornament, succumbs to marriage to Darcy in the end.

Elizabeth is not the stereotype of the typical 18th century woman, in that she possesses a keen intellect and an independent mind. At every turn, she defies and challenges Darcy because of his initial slighting of her and will not surrender like other females to him and fawn upon him just because he is rich and handsome. Indeed this is probably what draws Darcy to her because he is

intellectually stimulated by her lively mind and is probably tired of the empty and mindless aristocrats who throw themselves at him. In daring to depict Elizabeth in such a light, Austen was defying social stereotypes of what a woman should be- servile, dependent, subservient, fundamentally a doormat for men to tread on and dispose at their pleasure.

Austen is also deeply satirical of the institution of marriage as a source of entrapment for females though she ironically ends the novel with happy marriages. Beneath the veneer of charm and brightness is a deep resentment of the dependency that women had on marriage to escape lives of poverty and no name. While *Pride and Prejudice* is a comedy of manners it is also a satire of the society in which marriage was the only means to social mobility for women in which to escape lives of drudgery and ignominy as governesses' women had to fortune hunt for rich husbands in order to support themselves. Patriarchy governs society through and through, and in the law of entailment it is seen that fortune is only to be transferred and distributed amongst males while females, were to be married off or live lives of poverty and dependency on male members of the family to support them. Austen has thus written a biting critique of patriarchy in 18th century England, females only had marriage as a means to supporting themselves, to be unmarried was to face certain doom and misfortune, and it is seen that women are very much victims of their times in this apparent comedy of manners. The feminist movement has done much to improve the circumstances of women by enabling women to support themselves in the workplace, but as seen in this novel, this was not always the case. Women had no place in society apart from opportunities for marriage, and as such Elizabeth Bennett is highly fortunate that a man like Darcy, despite her defiance and prejudice towards him, takes an interest in her, if circumstances were otherwise her fate would be quite tragic, and perhaps this is my criticism of the novel, in ends in unrealistic triumph for Elizabeth and ends with her marriage and thus servitude to Mr Darcy, so if she does triumph by marrying him it is a hollow triumph because she succeeds in marrying Darcy only to become his slave.

Indeed not all the nuptials in *Pride and Prejudice* are blissful. Mr Bennett married Mrs Bennett for her looks in his youth, only to regret marrying someone so mindless, crude and embarrassing later in his life. Charlotte Lucas marries Mr Collins but the marriage like the Bennett marriage turns out to be a loveless marriage. So indeed these are marriages made with the same social climbing and fortune hunting ambitions as those of the Bennett sisters but both turn out loveless and unfulfilling. Marriage was then a source of entrapment, one had to marry to rise in society, only to find that one is enslaved to someone one loathes for the rest of their life. This is clearly the case of Mr and Mrs Bennett. Mr Bennett is quick witted and loves knowledge which is why he prefers Elizabeth to the rest of the daughters but his wife is crude, simple minded, mean spirited and offensive or vulgar to most people she meets, including and especially Mr Darcy. The conventional view of marriage as a business proposal could be summed up in Mr Collins proposal to Elizabeth:

Before I am run away with by my feelings on the subject, perhaps it will be advisable for me to state my reasons for marrying- and moreover coming into Hertfordshire with the design of collecting a wife, as I certainly did.

My reasons for marrying are: first, that I think it a right thing for every clergyman in easy circumstances (like myself) to set the example of matrimony in his parish. Secondly, that I am convinced it will add very greatly to my happiness,

and thirdly- which perhaps I ought to have mentioned earlier, that it is the particular advice and recommendation of the very noble lady that I have the honour of calling patroness...It was but the very Saturday night before I left Hunsford,,that she said, "Mr Collins, you must marry. A clergyman like you must marry. Choose properly, choose a gentlewoman for my sake and for your own, let her be an active, useful sort of person, not brought high, but able to make a small income in a food way. Find such a woman as soon as you can, bring her to Hunsford, and I will visit her." The fact is that being, as I am to inherit this estate after the death of your honoured father, I could not satisfy myself without resolving to choose a wife among his daughters, that the loss to them might be as little as possible, when the melancholy event takes place. (Austen 1966:91)

Mr Collins fails to consider that Elizabeth would not marry merely for commercial or pragmatic reasons to safeguard a portion of her father's estate by marrying him and that she thinks of marriage as something that should be more than a business proposal but a matter that should involve love and personal feelings of attraction and passion as well. Hence it is little wonder that Elizabeth turns down his business proposal, but indeed what Mr Collins sets out as their imperative for marriage was the imperative of many marriages of their day, indeed marriage was an event of crude economics and a means for women to secure themselves worldly ambitions of rising in the world by marrying respectable men.

On the other hand here is Charlotte Lucas' very pragmatic view of marriage:

Happiness in marriage is entirely a matter of chance. If the dispositions of the parties are ever so well known to each other, or ever so similar beforehand, it does not advance their felicity in the least. They always contrive to grow sufficiently unlike afterwards to have their share of vexation, and it is better to know as little as possible of the defects of the person with whom you are to pass your life. (Austen 1966: 18)

Elizabeth thinks Charlotte is wrong but Charlotte is entirely pragmatic and takes Mr Collins' rejection by Elizabeth as an opportunity by wooing and then marrying him. Charlotte sees no need for love in a marriage and views marriage in an entirely pragmatic and fortune hunting light. To further lend support to the idea that Charlotte is not marrying for love Elizabeth:

rather wondered that Charlotte should not prefer the dining parlous for common use, it was a better sized room, and had a pleasanter aspect, but she soon saw her friend had an excellent reason for what she did, for Mr Collins would undoubtedly have been much less in his own apartment, had they sat in one equally lively; and she gave Charlotte credit for the arrangement. (Austen 1966: 144)

Above we see that Charlotte wishes to create some distance and space between herself and Mr Collins her husband, she does not desire the constant company of her husband. This confirms Charlotte has not married for love or companionship but has a keen understanding of propriety and what being a clergyman's wife entails. A loveless marriage she thus settles for in the hope of advancing her status and good name, and indeed she triumphs in this aspect but whether the union entails any passion or genuine love for companionship is a separate matter altogether.

Then we have the loveless marriage of Elizabeth's own parents, Mr and Mrs Bennett. We are shown that:

Had Elizabeth's opinion been all drawn from her own family, she could not have formed a very pleasing picture of conjugal felicity or domestic comfort. Her father, captivated by youth and beauty, and that the appearance of good humour, which youth and beauty generally give, had married a woman whose weak understanding and illiberal mind, had very early in their marriage put an end to all affection for her. Respect, esteem, and confidence had vanished forever, and all his views of domestic happiness were overthrown..To his wife he was very little otherwise indebted, than as her ignorance and folly had contributed to his amusement. (Austen 1966: 202)

Mr Bennett had been captivated by youth and beauty without attending to the mind that informed such a beauty which turns out to be a weak and illiberal mind which vexes him and kills all the joy in their marriage, turning it into a stale and loveless one in which he merely tolerates the presence of his wife in his later years. Hence we see that the commonly held pragmatic and superficial reasons for settling into marriage as in the case of Charlotte and Mr Bennett turn out to be misfortunes for them as they settle into what are essentially loveless marriages which take a toll on them in their later life and suppress their authenticity and freedom as well as individualism.

Mr Darcy himself is a fine example of male privilege. Indeed he is rich, handsome, famous and possesses all the traits who would make him an ideal lover, which is why countless women throw themselves at him, but he is also haughty, class conscious, condescending, and it takes Elizabeth who is forthright and will bear no condescension to point out his faults and correct his opinions of the middle and lower classes. Mr Darcy discovers that character is not a function of class, belonging to an upper class family does not necessarily make one stronger in character or more moral, as he discovers from the vapid Miss Bingleys who keep throwing themselves at him. Indeed, one might criticize Austen who starts out writing a perfect feminist tract in her depiction of Elizabeth Bennett who is strong minded and independent only to have her yield to social hierarchy and order by marrying the pretentious Mr Darcy. But what would be the alternative? Indeed it would be a waste if Elizabeth Bennett, full of intelligence and wit were to moulder away as a governess for the rest of her life because she is too strong headed to yield to marriage, and hence Austen's happy ending is not so much a compromise as a depiction of what it meant to be victorious as a woman in those days. To triumph as a woman in those days one had to marry well. Austen is not compromising but being ironic in her depiction of the situation, women have to lose in order to win, that is, women have to lose their freedom and rights to self-determination in order to win at life- that is by marrying into an upper class that would support them for the rest of their lives.

Mr Darcy initially offends Elizabeth by what comes across as a very superior and condescending attitude towards her. But upon closer examination it turns out that:

I have been a selfish being all my life, in practice, though not in principle. As a child I was taught what is right, but I was not taught to correct my temper. I was given good principles, but left to follow them in pride and conceit. Unfortunately an only son (for many years an only child) I was

spoilt by my parents, who though good themselves (my father particularly, all that was benevolent and amiable) allowed, encouraged, almost taught me to be selfish and overbearing, to care for none beyond my own family circle, to think meanly of all the rest of the world, to wish at least to think meanly of their sense and worth compared with my own. Such I was, from eight to eight and twenty. (Austen 1966: 319)

Darcy's parents indulgence of him have allowed him to grow into the proud, superior, obnoxious and overbearing man he is we meet initially, but he was also taught to be benevolent and amiable, and we witness this in Darcy's rescue of the Bennett family from disgrace by getting Wickham to marry Lydia and seeing economically that they had the means to do so, showing motives of pure selfless love and benevolence towards Elizabeth's family. Hence Darcy, while being supercilious and superior initially, is moved by falling for Elizabeth's candour and honesty to rescue her family from disgrace and ruin by a scandal, which Elizabeth is eventually greatly moved by.

Elizabeth is indeed prejudiced towards Darcy as well in her first impression of him. The narrator informs us that: "He was discovered to be proud, to be above his company, and above being pleased." (7) Before the evening was over, "his character was decided. He was the proudest, most disagreeable man in the world, and everybody hoped that he would never come there again." Elizabeth experiences some of this arrogance in being slighted for a dance because she is deemed not handsome enough by Darcy. Thus, when she later notices that his eyes are frequently 'fixed on her' she does not know what to make of it:

She hardly knew how to suppose that she could be an object of admiration to so great a man, and yet that he should look at her because he disliked her was still more strange, She could only imagine at last, that she drew his notice because there was something about her more wrong and reprehensible, according to his ideas of right, than in any other persons present. This supposition did not pain her. She liked him too little to care for his approbation. (Austen 1966: 42)

Elizabeth clearly does care for his opinion though she dismisses Darcy as proud, she would not be unsettled by the attention he pays to her if she did not care. When Wickham claims to have been mistreated by Darcy, Elizabeth accepts it without questioning as she finds Wickham more agreeable and sociable than Darcy, but she is eventually shown to be mistaken about Wickham after reading Darcy's letter to her about him:

When she read...a relation of events, which, if true, must overthrow every cherished opinion of Wickham's worth, and which bore so alarming an affinity to his own history of himself, her apprehension, and even horror, oppressed her. She wished to discredit it entirely, repeatedly exclaiming "This must be false! This cannot be! This must be the grossest falsehood!" – and when she had gone through the whole letter, though scarcely knowing anything of the last page or two, put it hastily away, protesting that she would not regard it, and that she would never look at it again. (Austen 1966: 175)

Upon simmering down and distancing herself from her prejudice against Darcy sufficiently, Elizabeth reads the letter again and finds reason to question her attitude towards Darcy:

She perfectly remembered everything that had passed in conversation between Wickham and herself, in their first evening at Mr Philip's. Many of his

expressions were still fresh in her memory. She was now struck with the impropriety of such communications to a stranger, and wondered it had not escaped her before, She saw the indelicacy of putting herself forward as he had done, and the inconsistency of his professions and his conduct. She remembered he had boasted of having no fear of seeing Mr Darcy – That Mr Darcy might leave the country- but he should stand his ground, yet he avoided the Netherfield ball the very next week. She remembered also, that till the Netherfield family had quitted the country, he had told his story to no one but herself, but that after their removal, it had been everywhere discussed that he had then no reserves, no scruples in sinking Mr Darcy's character, though he had assured her that respect for the father would always prevent him exposing the son.

How differently did everything now appear in which he was concerned.
(Austen 1966: 177)

Elizabeth desperately wishes to cling on to her prejudices and judgments, but is forced to concede otherwise through examining the facts that confront her:

She grew absolutely ashamed of herself- Of neither Darcy nor Wickham could she think without feeling that she had been blind, partial, prejudiced, absurd.

“How despicably I have acted” she cried –“I, who have prided myself on my discernment!- I who have valued myself on my abilities!...Pleased with the preference of the one, and offended by the neglect of the other, on the very beginning of our acquaintance. I have courted prepossession and ignorance, and driven reason away, where either were concerned. Till this moment, I never knew myself.” (Austen 1966: 178)

Elizabeth thus concedes that she has been prejudiced and quick to judge when she did not have the entire scenario before her. She acknowledges her prepossession and propensity to believe who flatters her and resist who she finds rude and offensive, even when it is true. It is only when she begins to acknowledge her pride and propensity to prejudge and be prejudiced and overcomes the fact that she had been wrong about Darcy and Wickham altogether that she begins to mature into the strong and humbled woman we see at the end of the novel.

Pride and Prejudice is also social satire of the crude economic realities that underpinned or drove the relentless drive to marriage in those days. Indeed marriage was very much a business proposal, as Mr Collins' proposal to Elizabeth demonstrates. He highlights her economic situation to her and how a marriage to him would alleviate her economic distress, with no heed of whether she feels anything for him. The various marriages can be described as forms of fortune hunting, with the females marrying as usual into wealth and privilege. Indeed Austen could be described as a Marxist before Marx and a Feminist before Feminism, who sees beyond the hollow class pretensions and class aspirations that drive marriage in those days and sees beyond the need for women to be servile and absolutely subservient before men, as Elizabeth's wilful defiance of the haughty Mr Darcy demonstrates. It is shown that even if Elizabeth originates from a lower class than Mr Darcy, she is his equal in terms of intellect as all the verbal sparring scenes demonstrate. Mr Darcy is probably drawn to Elizabeth because she is not an absolute doormat like other women are before him, she will

rise to his challenge and provide witticisms and challenges that stimulate rather than bore him as the tedious and servile Miss Bingleys do.

Indeed Elizabeth Bennett hardly fits Rousseau's definition of the perfect woman- a slave to man- mastering the art of pleasing men, succumbing to men, serving men, deferring to men, allowing men to rule completely over her, because she is so fiercely independent and contrarian to Mr Darcy, she presents herself essentially as someone who is not to be an ornament to him but an equal, and this is perhaps what Darcy admires about her. Darcy is haughty and highly indifferent to her initially but is drawn to her fighting spirit and her knack of being impertinent to him and challenging him where he is so used to being fawned upon and served as Lord and master of all the women he meets, indeed it is perhaps boredom with women who would pander to his every whim and fancy as well as treat him as a god that draws him to Elizabeth because she dares to see him for what he is- a proud aristocrat who thinks himself above those around him or the society he keeps.

Darcy thinks himself above society because he is old money- his fortune is the by-product of several generations of inheritance, unlike Mr Bingley or Mr Collins, and so one would highly question the apparent victory Elizabeth derives at the end by marrying into his family- a family so laden with class snobbery and pretension. Indeed Elizabeth finds herself defending the marriage before Darcy's aunt who thinks Elizabeth's family is not in the least worthy of Darcy's family whom she is marrying into. Indeed with marriage being an apprenticeship- a discipleship in learning the art of pleasing men and succumbing to men and flattering them- it seems the real victor is Darcy in having tamed Elizabeth sufficiently to entice her to marry him and learn to be subservient to him and must henceforth bow to his every whim and fancy, including bearing and raising children for him. Hence Elizabeth's victory is hollow and ironic- ironic because she gains in order to lose- her apparent victory in marrying into old money is that she must now be an apprentice in the ways and arts of pleasing men and being subservient to the order of old money and all the dowagers within the sphere of old money such as Darcy's forbidding aunt.

These are probably the reasons Austen herself chose to remain single even though she had a couple of suitors. 18th century England was steeped in the ways of patriarchy and this can be seen in the way wealth was only to be distributed among men as the law of entail demonstrates and in the way women peddle themselves as consumer products and commodities as brides to all the rich and handsome men who come their way. Women had no means of becoming wealthy independently as wealth by way of inheritance was forbidden to them and they had little opportunity or making a living outside marriage except by way of becoming governesses which was viewed as a very degrading profession. The only way to escape the rut of poverty and low status was to marry- in this sense Elizabeth's defiance of Mr Darcy is a gamble. Had he not found himself challenged and stimulated by Elizabeth but slighted and rebelled against he might have left her to an ignominious fate of spinsterhood and becoming a governess in order to support herself.

Hence Elizabeth certainly suffers from pride and prejudice, but this is no less an ailment of Darcy as well. Darcy has to overcome his preconceived ideas about Elizabeth's inferior looks and class in order to concede she is handsome, eloquent, and very witty and intelligent – his equal in intelligence, if not in possessions. Class distinctions are then exposed to be illusions and minor

barriers to true love because it is she who captivates him with her wit, honesty and intelligence rather than all the simpering fawners who throw themselves at him and defer to him simply by virtue of his looks and fortune. *Pride and Prejudice* is thus a novel about the overcoming of these vices of pride and prejudice in the protagonists Elizabeth and Darcy in order to encounter true love.

REFERENCE

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