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Elizabeth Bennet as the Embodiment of the New Woman in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*

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Abstract:

Jane Austen lived in a period at the turn from the eighteenth century to the nineteenth century, which was a period of mixed thoughts, which conflicted all the times. Among all the conflicts, the most important one was the disparity in social status between men and women. Not only men's status was in the center of the society but also common people thought it was right that men were much more important than women were. In those days girls were neither allowed nor expected to study much because they did not have to work for a living. They were supposed to stay at home and look beautiful in order to get suitable husbands. Jane Austen, especially in *Pride and Prejudice* has managed to convey that a woman can be intelligent and her intelligence can be very impressive. Elizabeth Bennet is good-looking but Darcy is more influenced by her witty answers and intelligence rather than her beauty. The present paper discusses that how Austen, through her character of Elizabeth Bennet, showed that intelligent woman can succeed in society.

The relation of women to culture has historically been different from that of men. Schools and Universities have been until very recently a male preserve, which has effectively excluded all but a handful of upper-class women from the resources of the official culture. Many educationalists as late as the nineteenth century believed that a woman needed to be literate enough to read her Bible, but could not aspire to the arrogance of authorship. Consequently, women's creativity has traditionally been expressed in anonymous, ephemeral forms: domestic arts such as, cooking, and embroidery; the creation and re-creation of ballads; and in private writing, particularly letters and diaries. Like all simplifications, this one can be challenged by a wide variety of exceptions.

Although the social and ideological constraints on women's authorship mean that these are fewer for English women writers than men, their contribution to literary culture of England can be traced right back to the very beginning of writing in England.

In eighteenth century we see how quickly novels became popular among women. It can be judged not only by the increase in number of women readers, but also by a significant rise in the women novelists too. Such women writers as Mary Shelley, Mrs. Anna Radcliff, and Clara Reeve made a great impact and achieved popularity in the genre of Gothic fiction. Women also tried their hand and registered significant success in other types of novel, as we note in the works of Fanny Burney, Sarah Fielding, Mary Russell Milford, Susan Ferrier, and others.

This is the quite and placid tradition of women's writing that preceded Jane Austen, who was called the last exquisite flower of the eighteenth century.

Jane Austen raised novel writing to the level of aesthetic perfection by making use of this material and showed that artistic genius can transform any experience into an ennobling passion provided one had the necessary artistic talent for it.

The genius of Jane Austen wove in fine gossamer threads a tapestry pattern that resulted from the detached observation of the character and behaviour of people brought together by chance. From *Sense and Sensibility* to *Persuasion*, Austen delineated the lot of upper-middle-class girls who can escape the constraints of family life only by marrying.

Jane Austen's second novel *Pride and Prejudice* was written between October, 1796 and August 1797. The novel was first written in the epistolary form entitled *First Impressions*. However, this title was later dropped in preference to a more appropriate and literary title *Pride and Prejudice*.

Elizabeth Bennet is the heroine of the novel. She is one of the favourite heroines of Jane Austen herself.

The story of the novel concerns a family of five girls whose home is 'entailed' to their so-called cousin, Mr. Lucas, after their father's death. They will be left destitute and homeless, in this way Austen is throwing young women into a 'sink or swim' position on the subject of marriage, marriage being the sole means of survival for these five girls. Their mother, Mrs. Bennet, is a silly, foolish woman who is frantically trying to dispose of the girls the only way possible, through marriage. The novel begins with the famous lines:

It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife. (Austen, 15)

Elizabeth Bennet is a strong-willed and intelligent young woman. This provides the fuel for the novel that explores the relationship among her prejudices, her intellectual independence, her social status and the unique picture of economic power and social superstructure examined in the work. In the Chapter IX of the book, she says: "Intricate characters are most amusing." (Austen, 49). And we find that she herself is one of the intricate characters. She is also profound and perceptive. There is a good deal of intellectual complexity about her. We find that her prejudice doesn't just represent as is commonly understood, but her prejudice stems from pride in her own perception, just like Darcy's pride leads him into prejudice against the rural gentry. When she is rejected by Darcy for a dance, her pride is mortified by his, and she gets prejudiced against him. According to Deborah Kaplan:

She watches Mr. Darcy demonstrate power based specifically on gender at a neighbourhood ball. Because only gentlemen are endowed with the power to ask women to dance, as only they are empowered to propose marriage, Elizabeth has no option but to wait powerless, while Mr. Darcy relishes his power to decide to dance or not. (61)

Out of all the five Bennet sisters, Elizabeth is the one who stands out of the group. She is witty, discerning, courageous, confident, capable of her own in face of the strongest possible antagonism. Her eyes render her exceptionally intelligent. Succeeding generations of readers have fallen in love with her sprightliness. Though her insight into human nature is indisputable where others are concerned, ironically, she, like Emma, has a tendency to self-deception.

In her novels, Jane Austen deals with neither the aristocracy at the top nor the poor. She practically identifies herself with the upper-middle and middle-class proper and their various involvements, their clashes and adjustments that constitute the main interest of her novel. Since this class was not required to work, its occupations were mainly social: dinners and balls. Girls belonging to this class were not educated for any profession. But they were expected to be accomplished in music, drawing, dancing, needle work etc. Since women could not legally inherit their parents' property, in case they did not marry, they had no economic security. An ageing spinster was, in most cases, neither respected nor properly cared for. Hence the principal aim of girls was to get married to eligible bachelors.

In this kind of atmosphere Elizabeth shows her courage by declining two marriage proposals - both undesirable but attractive in their own way. She is a young, unprovided girl. Her connections are very low and vulgar. It is not certain that any other attractive offers of marriage will be made to her ever in future. Her mother, Mrs. Bennet, warns her that she will not be able to maintain her after her father's death, and in her society, ageing maids were faced with the appalling prospect of a bleak future full of privation and humiliation.

Mr. Collins' proposal at least promises the comforts, economic security and security of a home, if no love. The second proposal is that of Mr. Darcy's. His proposal is still more attractive, for even she realises that to have been mistress of Pemberley would be something. In these situations, it needed great moral and spiritual courage to reject these proposals. But Elizabeth did not want to marry where there was no love. She withstands the pressure and resists the temptation. What would have been her lot if Darcy had not proposed her second time? It is rare strength of character indeed that Elizabeth is gifted with.

It is only these marriage proposals where she exhibits her strength of character. There are indeed a toughness of fibre and fine independence of mind which assert themselves whenever she is challenged or she is up against an act of absurdity or folly. She draws herself up most spiritedly in all the scene in which she is matched against Darcy.

Elizabeth's wit and intellect impresses us, but sometimes, her "unladylike" behaviour is a revelation of feminist views. Her thinking too much and saying what she thinks echoes the words of Wollstonecraft when she advises us to imitate men on matters of intellect, virtue and learning. She promotes being a friend and soul-mate to a man and not just an ornament. Elizabeth is to Jane Austen "one of the most delightful characters to appear in print"⁴, so we can assume that she embraces, Austen's personal perspective. She speaks her mind too much as her mother notes and warns her not to run on in the wild manner that she is suffered to do at home. It is a fact that Elizabeth does not doubt her own perspective for a single moment. As Deborah Kaplan observed, she is,

. . . confident in conversation and sure of her opinion. Elizabeth does not hesitate to convey either her certainty or her views.(185)

It is for this reason her mother believes she will never secure a husband as women, like children, should be decorative ornaments to be seen and not heard at least not on matters of importance.

Her intellectual sparring with Darcy would seem to be perceived as inappropriate a lady who would dare to do combat with the mind of a man? Elizabeth and Darcy are thrown frequently into each other's company and fiery conversations are common. According to an eminent critic:

Of the characters, Elizabeth Bennet, the heroine, is supported with great spirit and consistency throughout; there seems no defect in the portrait; this is not precisely the case with Darcy her love; his easy unconcern and fashionable indifference, somewhat abruptly changes to the ardent lover.(189-190)

Generally, Elizabeth's perception is quite admirable. She claims that she fully comprehends Bingley, and we see that she is right. She knows Mr. Collins to be an affected fool from the very first letter he writes to his father. She also takes a full measure of Lady Catherine de Bourgh at their very first meeting. Her perspicacity excels even that of her father when she alerts him of the impending dangers of Lydia's flirtations. The vulgarity of her mother, the pleasant ingenuity of Jane, the listless pedantry of Mary, the frivolity and empty headedness of Kitty and Lydia - We see that Elizabeth is awake to all of them. Deborah Kaplan explains about Elizabeth:

Austen's conviction that Elizabeth was a delightful creature as ever appeared in print, was well founded, for as she could not fail to realize, no heroine like Elizabeth Bennet had appeared in print before . . . standing where we do we tend either to overlook or underestimate Elizabeth's outrageous unconventionality which, judged by the standards set in conduct looks and in conservative fiction, constantly verges not merely on impertinence but on impropriety." (185)

When we see all the five Bennet sisters we find that they are all completely different from one another. Jane Bennet, the prettiest and eldest and gentlest of them all, is blessed with an angelic disposition. She is completely free from vanity. She is incapable of thinking ill of anybody and the magnanimity of her nature forgives even those who are obviously responsible for her initial frustration in love. Undoubtedly, she enjoys the admiration of both Elizabeth and Jane Austen. And still she almost pales into insignificance in comparison with Elizabeth. She represents simplicity while Elizabeth symbolizes intricacy. Intricacy, notwithstanding the dangers inherent in it, is always fascinating. Simplicity, in spite of its instinctive appeal, is always a little insipid and colourless. It is passive and

easy to be imposed upon. Her passive suffering can evoke sympathy but not admiration. She is also undemonstrative in the presence of Bingley. Even she lacks personality. In company, Elizabeth would be brilliantly outstanding; Jane unobtrusive, and but for her physical beauty, she would hardly be noticeable.

The other two sisters, Lydia and Kitty are, according to their father, two of the silliest girls in the country. They are compulsive flirts, with Lydia, the younger of the two, giving the lead. Lydia, like her mother, Mrs. Bennet, bears a remarkable resemblance, she has a very shallow and unstable personality devoid of judgment and of any sense of shame and responsibility. Her elopement with Wickham provides Darcy with an opportunity to show his nobility, to be of use to Elizabeth and to earn her gratitude, and with it, her love. She also provides an example of a marriage for wrong reasons, as does Charlotte Lucas.

Kitty, it is believed, gets a little refined from the healthy influence of her two elder sisters once they get married. And Mary is a pedant, with a tendency to moralise. There is also a touch of vanity in all that she does.

Charlotte Lucas, an intimate friend of Elizabeth, is also clearly distinguished from her. Faced with identical economic constraints, Elizabeth protects her autonomy almost aggressively whereas Charlotte sacrifices her personal happiness to procure economic security for herself and great relief from burden for her parents. In her opinion, a girl should be demonstrative in her love. While talking to Elizabeth about Jane Bingley affair, she says that Jane should make the most of every half-hour in which she can command his attention. In her opinion, marriage, though appearing, is quite realistic. She says:

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. . . .

Whereas Elizabeth believes that women should marry for love and not just financial consequence. We see that when Elizabeth has turned down Mr. Collins' marriage proposal, Charlotte sets out to win him. She succeeds in it barely twenty-four hours after Elizabeth has rejected him.

Lady Catherine is proud, arrogant and very crude and representative of the aristocratic hauteur. She is so obsessed with self-importance that everything around her seems to her infinitely inferior, both in social status and mental quality. Elizabeth notices that though Lady Catherine is not in the commission of the peace for the country, she is the most active magistrate in her parish. She is as ridiculous in her endeavours at match-making as Mrs. Bennet. She contemplates an alliance between her sickly daughter and her nephew Darcy so that the two estates might be joined. She visits Elizabeth to persuade her that Darcy is not for her. And when Elizabeth refuses to be forced into compliance by her wealth and authority and answers back with vigorous self-assurance, she gives a strong threat to her.

In this way a critical analysis of Jane Austen's women's characters has provided an ample evidence of her dismay with the social condition of women in her socio-economic class. Austen paints a picture of luxury and excess, but she is

also careful to point out for us the flaws in the society and areas desperately needing correction. She is careful technically creating only situations she is intimately familiar with using such subtle irony and wit we scarcely know that she is influencing our perspective. A contemplation of feminist theory in Austen's work is to assess its attempts at changing women's lives. Her novels reveal to us the ways in which woman sought happiness, love, financial security, social position and marriage in the nineteenth century British aristocratic class. Ian Watt tells us, ". . . perhaps Walter Scott described it best in an entry found in his private journal:

Also read again, and for the third time at least, Miss Austen's very finely written novel of P&P. That young lady had a talent for describing the involvement and feelings and characters of ordinary life, which is to me the most wonderful I ever met with". (3)

Austen questioned the constraints placed upon women in a male dominated society that prevented the growth and development of the minds and talents of women. A thorough exploration of two of her early works, in addition to each of her six novels, reveals the troubling sense of injustice Austen had for her sex and her determination to bring it to light. Elizabeth Bennet has become one of the most famous heroines in the history of English literature, known for her intelligence and independent thinking from the expected ambitions of her society. In this way she was a 'New Woman' who push against the limits which society imposed on women.

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