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Elizabeth Bennet and Fitzwilliam Darcy in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*: A Feminist Study

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Abstract:

Jane Austen was a writer of 'Romance novels' in 19th Century England. Whether Austen was a feminist or not is widely debated. Critics like Lloyd Brown, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar believed Austen was a feminist. But critics like Edna Steeves and Katherine Webb thought Austen was not bold enough. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth and Darcy started off as daring characters showing insubordination to social prescripts. But in the end, Austen also damaged them by codifying them. I think Austen was, what could probably be called, a cryptic feminist. Being an unmarried woman writing in a sexist society of 19th century, Austen naturally had had to remain extra careful and had had to veil her streak to remain acceptable. This paper would explore Austen's brand of feminism as reflected in the characters of Elizabeth and Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice*.

Keywords: Feminism, Cryptic feminist, social prescripts, Sexist society, Insubordination, Codifying.

In *Austen, Feminism and Fiction*, Margaret Kirkham identified Austen as an author of feminist tradition. Generally, we get to meet substantial female characters in the novels of Jane Austen where the author had happened to disclose strong propensity towards understanding social codes through female characters. This had naturally reduced men in importance in her novels. But sadly also Austen novels ultimately conformed to conservative twists to not frustrate popular taste. However, in *Much Maligned Men*, G.Aparna found Austen's men as naturally important. There, G.Aparna even recognized Austen's effort to scrupulously manipulate and re-form the idea of '19th century masculinity' through Darcy's Character in *Pride and Prejudice*.

In the present paper the effort would remain to understand why despite starting off as ideologically cutting edge characters Jane Austen's Darcy and Elizabeth in the end submitted to orthodox expectations related to fixed and oversimplified images of 19th century Romance novel hero-heroine.

In the beginning Austen's Elizabeth had all the promise to develop into an unconventional heroine of 19th century English literature but somewhere midway the author collapsed her (Elizabeth) natural growth to the text's private conservative politics. In Jane Austen's *Cover story and Its Secret Agents*, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar referred to this strategy as "the

necessity of female submission for female survival".What they pointed out in the essay while commenting on Austen's technique is an intriguing insight.

"Austen's story is especially flattering to male readers because it describes the taming not just of any woman but specifically of a rebellious, imaginative girl who is amorously mastered by a sensible man....Austen's cover story of the necessity for silence and submission reinforces women's subordinated position in the patriarchal culture" (Gilbert & Gubar274).

But here we need not to ignore that Austen was writing at a point of time in history when female authors were yet to find what Gilbert and Gubar themselves referred to as "literary autonomy"(Gilbert & Gubar596) in *The Madwoman in the Attic*. They were yet to free themselves from "mythic masks" (Gilbert & Gubar596) forced upon them and the prejudiced misogynist expectations that they were quelled under.

In *Wuthering Heights* (1847) Emily Bronte -another 19th century female author - ultimately suppressed her heroine Catherine Earnshaw's epic vivacity to conform her to the codified feudal discourse of femininity in order to transform her into "a lady" by marrying her to Edgar Linton though Catherine loved Heathcliff. But Heathcliff was a foundling and dark and Byronic and not a feudal lord. Hence the most Bronte could do was to only hint at their metaphysical union in death. This apparently was less shocking for contemporary taste.

In yet another iconic 19th century novel *Middlemarch* (1871-72) George Eliot's heroine Dorothea accepted elderly Edward Casaubon's marriage proposal because she believed him to be morally and knowledge wise superior. Their marriage had no prospect of love. But Dorothea's 19th century social conditioning made her to believe that ethical fulfillment was more important than sexual fulfillment. However this marriage remained a disaster and after Casaubon died Dorothea married Will Ladislaw- again very unbecoming of Dorothea. In this marriage Eliot made her find fulfillment as a mother of two children and thus blighting all her initial prospects Dorothea was finally made into a conventional Victorian heroine.

It is needless to say that the attitude which hindered authors such as Bronte or Eliot from approaching their fictional characters like Catherine or Dorothea more progressively, might have had been even more severely present in the social fabric when Austen was writing. Knowing that, what Austen could manage to achieve through Elizabeth's character and through Darcy-Elizabeth relationship in *Pride and Prejudice* appears as very impressive from a feminist viewpoint.

In the beginning of *Pride and Prejudice* the Elizabeth Bennet we meet appeared as a departure from stereotype being a contrast to the heroines of sentimental cult. She came across as sharp witted like Shakespeare's Beatrice in *Much Ado About Nothing* and she was both beautiful and strong. In chapter 6 Darcy found that Elizabeth's face was "rendered uncommonly intelligent by the beautiful expression of her dark eyes" (Austen19) and in the very next chapter Elizabeth, anxious to meet her ailing sister at Nether field Park happened to cross "field after field at a quick pace, jumping over stiles and springing over puddles with impatient activity" (Austen27) Austen depicted her as having a rare endurance for a lady of her time or any time for that matter. Finally she reached there in a disheveled state for which she seemed to be least embarrassed proving that her mind was inhibition free. It is interesting to note that Austen did not posit beauty

and physical strength as either or binary while creating Elizabeth- a rare feat for an author of her time. In chapter 19 William Collins proposed marriage to Elizabeth and irritatingly kept on his hope to marry her despite that he was immediately declined. Collins was Austen's fool in the story. But the tenor of what he said after Elizabeth's rejection reflected how the society was taken to perceive women-

"...it is usual with young ladies to reject the addresses of the man whom they secretly mean to accept....I am therefore by no means discouraged" (Austen95).

What Austen made Elizabeth to say in response to this gibberish seemed priceless confirming Elizabeth's conceited assertiveness- not common among 19th century Romantic heroines –

"I do assure you that I am not one of those young ladies (if such young ladies there are) who are so daring as to risk their happiness on the chance of being asked a second time. I am perfectly serious in my refusal....I have no pretensions ...to that kind of elegance which consists in tormenting a respectable man....Can I speak plainer? Do not consider me now as an elegant female intending to plague you, but a rational creature speaking the truth from her heart" (Austen95-96).

Thus as Austen's surrogate in *Pride and Prejudice* Elizabeth came very close to reprise Mary Wollstonecraft's plead in *A Vindication of the Rights of woman* to uphold virtue as superior to elegance:

"I earnestly wish to point out in what true dignity ...consists, I wish to persuade women to endeavor to acquire strength both of mind and of body... to show that elegance is inferior to virtue, that the first object of laudable ambition is to obtain a character of a human being regardless of the distinction of sex...." (Wollstonecraft5).

But Austen also made Elizabeth to lose this verve eventually to the text's Burkean scheme. The same Elizabeth who was scandalized by her friend Charlotte Lucas' decision to sacrifice "better feelings for worldly advantage" (Austen, 111) and marry William Collins from objective desire for a "comfortable home" (Austen, 111), changed her opinion about Darcy after she met him at Pemberley. Pemberley revealed to Lizzy the extent of Darcy's social power which pressed her to rethink about Darcy's regard with deeper gratitude. In chapter 59, Elizabeth told Jane:

"Perhaps I did not always love him so well as I do now....But I believe I must date it (love) from my first seeing his beautiful grounds at Pemberley"(Austen324)

Thus, she was not totally blind to money while deciding about Darcy.

In 1816 in a letter to Fanny Knight Jane Austen wrote "single women have a dreadful propensity for being poor which is one very strong argument in favour of matrimony" (Letters, Austen135). However this social plight (that single women had dire chances of being poor) was premised on the gender discrimination in property accession and also on the fact that girls then were never encouraged or made prepared for vocation. Hence as a girl of a respectable family the best thing Elizabeth could do for herself was to marry a gentleman like Darcy and likewise as an authoress of 19th century England the best thing Austen could do to ensure the novel's commercial success was to transform Elizabeth- 'a rebellious imaginative girl', who according to Susan Fraiman in *The Humiliation of Elizabeth Bennet* for the most part in the novel performed her gender wrong

, into a social code abiding typical heroine of Romantic literature who could neither be happy nor respectable unless she could “look up to her husband as her superior”(Austen327)

In 1798 William Godwin published biography of his dead wife Mary Wollstonecraft named *Memoirs of the Author of A Vindication of the Rights of Women* where Wollstonecraft's deviational life got described and which received hostile reactions. According to Margaret Kirkham in *Austen, Feminism and Fiction*, this might have had an impact on author Austen and she knew where to draw the line to remain mainstream.

Interestingly, Lydia was the only girl in the novel whose choice of mate was not practical. It was based on sexual attraction. Like a true rebel, Lydia showed the courage to transcend boundaries by eloping with Wickham but Austen pictured her as a shallow girl.

In Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* (1847) Bertha Mason was portrayed as a madwoman locked in the attic. But scholars often interpret this iconic character as Bronte's cryptic defender of women's liberation. Likewise, that Austen happened to essay a character like Lydia in *Pride and Prejudice* (though she failed to provide her with fairy-tale happiness), itself could be included as one of Austen's cryptic feminist achievements in the novel.

In *Much Maligned Men* G.Aparna quipped about 19th century England in regard to *Pride and Prejudice* that, the society that forced women to ‘turn parasitic on male providers also reduced men to the status of milch cows’. Actually what Fitzwilliam Darcy had to finally achieve in the novel was a difficult masculine ideal which required him to reject traditional male power while also selectively sticking to some aspects of it because on the one hand Elizabeth as an intellectually empowered girl wanted a liberal man as her mate and on the other hand she also required “a superior” whom she could respect.

Darcy's initial offensive pride that in chapter 5 in *Pride and Prejudice* Charlotte Lucas attributed to his social standing and had no qualms putting up with (“His pride does not offend me as pride often does, because there is an excuse for it. One cannot wonder that so very fine a young man with family fortune everything in his favour should think highly of himself. If I may so express it, he has a right to be proud”. Austen16) and for which Mrs. Bennet called him a “disagreeable and horrid man” (Austen10) - Austen, in the end, toned down to construct him into Elizabeth's suitable mate. This transformation required Darcy to partially step out of the gender role stipulated for a 19th century Romantic hero. G.Aparna in *Much Maligned Men* referred to this difficult balance as a “careful tight rope-walk” which, it seems, Darcy ultimately accomplished.

In the novel Darcy proposed to Elizabeth twice in all. In chapter 34 Darcy proposed to her first time. In this, though what he said clearly expressed his admiration for Elizabeth (“In vain have I struggled.... My feelings will not be repressed. You must allow me to tell you how ardently I admire and love you”. Austen165) but it also meant things beyond just love. The author observed:

“He spoke well, but there were feelings besides those of the heart ..., and he was not more eloquent on the subject of tenderness than of pride. His sense of her inferiority-of its being a degradation...” (Austen165)

Interestingly in this occasion Darcy spoke in a language not dissimilar to that of William Collins when Collins proposed to Elizabeth. Both the men specified her insignificant connections and small fortune. In chapter 19, Collins told Elizabeth that it was upon Lady Catherine De Bourgh's advice to marry a girl "not brought up high" that he decided to marry Elizabeth and Darcy in chapter 34 haughtily couched his proposal in a language that 'evidently offended and insulted' Elizabeth ("could you expect me to rejoice in the inferiority of your low connections?...whose condition in life is so decidedly beneath my own? Austen168).

In *Constructing Mr. Darcy: Tradition, Gender and Silent spaces in Jane Austen's Pride and Prejudice*, S.N.Hamilton quite appropriately viewed Darcy as a product of 'patriarchal historicity' and a rendering of 'hegemonic masculinity'(Hamilton5) mandated to view women as subordinates before Austen presented a 'feminist recasting'(Hamilton Abstract) of his character in the end .Darcy was very rich. His annual income of ten thousand pound made him highly desirable in the marriage market and accordingly also conditioned his mentality supported by the constant over praising of the girls like Caroline Bingley. Thus, quite understandably his egotistical supposition about himself was disturbed by fortuneless Elizabeth's immediate and rudely brief rejection. This was also a turning point in the story craftily posited by Austen as the premise on which she could construct Darcy's ultimate change of perspective.

Actually in the beginning of the novel Darcy too, as much as Elizabeth was, remained inadequate to perform gendered prescripts. In chapter 34 Elizabeth told Darcy:

"You are mistaken...if you suppose that the mode of your declaration affected me in any other way than as it spared the concern which I might have felt in refusing you, had you behaved in a more gentlemanlike manner" (Austen168)

In *The Humiliation of Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy*, Bettina Bennet pinpointed Darcy's feminine sides expressed in his reserve ("He waits to be approached, he prefers listening to talking; he is receptive rather than aggressive, he is anxious about his reputation..."Bennet4) and in his delicate well composed emotional letters. In chapter 10, Caroline Bingley asked Darcy: "How can you contrive to write so even? ...do you always write such charming long letters...? (Austen40-41)

Here, it becomes hard to ignore the feminine epithets used by Austen for Darcy's writing.

In *The Humiliation of Elizabeth Bennet*, Susan Freiman thought that Elizabeth was finally rendered powerless in *Pride and Prejudice* by her marriage to Fitzwilliam Darcy. She was divested of all her feminist prospects and was dispiritedly metamorphosed into a fitting Regency era heroine. However, in her rebuttal essay to Freiman's ('*The Humiliation of Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy*'), Bettina Bennet aptly observed that Darcy too was rendered powerless by Austen to make him conform to social prescripts. He had to abandon his 'passive observing and letter writing' and was made to act as a saviour capable of liberating Lydia-the damsel in distress- from the disgraceful condition and he had to become 'amiable', a courteous talker (in chapter 58 Darcy couched his second proposal to Elizabeth in obsequiously tender language: "I believe I thought only of you....You are too generous to trifle with me. If your feelings are still what they were last April, tell me so at once. My affections...are unchanged but one word from you will silence me in this subject forever" (Austen317) Later in the same chapter Darcy told Elizabeth: "My object...was to show you... that I was not so mean...I hoped to obtain your

forgiveness...by letting you see that your reproofs had been attended to". Austen320), a gallant and so on to suit Elizabeth's fancy as her 'superior'.

Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in *The Madwoman in the Attic* said, 19th Century women writers' struggle for self definition was marked by anxiety regarding the inexactness of female invention. It is quite likely that Austen as an authoress of that period experienced the same anxiety. Furthermore, Austen was unmarried which made her socially awkward and powerless. Of course in *Pride and Prejudice* Austen 'disempowered' Elizabeth and Darcy. She 'cultured' them against their innate dispositions. But as a woman writing in a closed society where her acceptability depended on her conformity, Austen probably could not have had finished Elizabeth and Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice*, differently.

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