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

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Abstract:

The main objective of this paper is to show how well Austen has reflected the mannerism of the Georgian era in her most famous novel *Pride and Prejudice*. Based on a society that aims at financial interests and arranged marriages, the woman's main role is to long for a comfortable life by the side of successful husband. However, some women like Elizabeth are loyal to their feelings, go through the stages of the judgment and reach the peak of the discovery of true love.

Keywords: woman, marriage, love, family, money.

Jane Austen's novels are entirely situated during the reign of George III; they describe their everyday lives, their joys and sorrows as well as their loves. Jane Austen's novels deal with such varied subjects as the historical context, social hierarchies of the time, the role and status of the clergy, gender roles, marriage, or the pastimes of well off families. Without even the reader noticing, many details are broached, whether of daily life, of forgotten legal aspects, or of surprising customs, thus bring life and authenticity to the English society of this period. Jane Austen describes England of that period very nicely because she herself was the part of English gentry, belonging to a reasonably well off family, well connected and remarkably well educated for rural England around the late 1790s or early nineteenth century. Some essential aspects of the Georgian era such as the American Revolutionary War and the loss of the Thirteen Colonies, the French Revolution, and the birth of the British Empire are absent from her novels. The reign of George III if one includes in it the Regency period that took place during his final illness- encompasses all of Jane Austen's life, and even beyond, as it started in 1760, just before her parents married in 1764 and ended up in 1820, after the death of Jane Austen in 1817.

WOMEN'S PLACE IN SOCIETY DURING JANE AUSTEN'S TIME

During the time when Jane Austen was first trying her hands at novel writing she was only nineteen years old. She began serious writing in the 1790s at a time when at least half the nation of Great Britain was under twenty-one years of age and Jane Austen could be sure that there were many readers of her own age who would identify with the world she presented. Life expectancy back then was about thirty- seven years but she herself lived four years longer than the life expectancy for the period, reaching just forty- one years.

During the time when Jane Austen was writing, women were not given equal rights and place with that of men. Women were considered as secondary while men were primary. All kinds of restrictions were for women only and men were free to do anything. During that time girls were not given any access to legal rights or professional opportunities. There was an assumption that men and women were different in natural capabilities. In the words of Nico Hubner, "Eighteenth century England was time in which women had little to say in society" (1).

Both men and women were denied equality of opportunities in areas such as education, business and action. Girls were praised for being submissive, modest, pure and domesticated. The qualities of being independent minded, studious or talented were seldom regarded as feminine attractions. Austen in her novels tried to keep the female characters within the boundaries which were made by the society of her times. She even tried to show how a female is disliked when she tries to come out of these boundaries. Elizabeth the protagonist of *Pride and Prejudice* is the best example. She earns the disliking for herself from her mother when she refuses to marry Mr. Collins. Mrs. Bennet calls her "headstrong, foolish girl" (92). The famous opening lines of the novel, "It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a large fortune must be in want of a wife" (1) reflects the outlook of the society.

Another example of unequal opportunity between the sexes concerned is the physical relationships before marriage. A girl's chastity was absolutely vital for her good name, while a man's was not. The reason behind this was if a young lady slept with a man other than her husband, there was a risk that any baby boy born in the subsequent marriage might inherit property which did not rightfully belong to him, as the baby had been secretly conceived out of the marriage. A baby girl posed less of a risk as she never going to inherit property. This inheritance arrangement was called "male primogeniture", and it was an established legal system at that time. Jane Austen presents the five Bennet girls as victims of this procedure in *Pride and Prejudice*. As they Mr. Bennet had no son so after his death his property had to be taken over by Mr. Collins and this was the main reason why Mrs. Bennet wants Elizabeth to marry Mr. Collins. This system ensured that women rarely became heirs to property. If there were no sons available, closest male relatives inherited the family estates. Jane Austen in her works illustrates the injustices and problems when women faced, with lack of fortune and legal rights. This is pointed out by the feminist critics Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in the book *The Madwoman in the Attic*:

Austen examines the female powerlessness that underlies monetary pressure to marry, the injustice of inheritance laws, the ignorance of women denied formal education, the psychological vulnerability of the heiress or widow, the exploited dependency of the spinster, the boredom of the lady provided with no vocation. (136)

Courtship, then was a complicated business for the more privileged members of society in England during Jane Austen's time. A son from a noble family might successfully court a merchant's daughter, if she had a large fortune and her reputation beyond question, in order to bring in a huge boost to the family's wealth. However, a nobleman's daughter was never allowed to get married to a merchant because family's estates might then fall under the control of a dealer in trade, and the family name and continuity might be lost. In those days, people who were born into the higher classes regarded themselves as more established and important than people who had only recently become wealthy. Being "in trade" was thought of as earning "new money" in contrast to being rich with "old money".

Jane Austen herself, as a clergyman's daughter, did not hold sufficient promise of land or dowry to attract a noble suitor. But her attractive vitality did win her the interest of more than one suitable young man during her courtship days but she was not prepared to endure "the misery of being bound without love" and therefore chose to reject the offer.

EDUCATION

In most of the eighteenth century education was confined to the monied classes. Male children of the upper class were either educated at home by tutors or sent to the primary preparatory school and then public schools. After that they entered university, usually one of the two oldest, Oxford or Cambridge and later went to the church or went into the Army, civil service or back to the family estate to begin their role as great or small proprietors. Sons of upper middle class who could scrape up the money took the same route but with a different destination, depending upon their social ambitions. Like Mr. Bingley in *Pride and Prejudice*, the newly arrived gentleman's social goal was to buy an estate and become a great proprietor.

In the early nineteenth century there were nine, all male public schools namely, Eton, Harrow, Rugby, Shrewsbury, Winchester, Westminster and Charterhouse where boys boarded, and two London day schools, St. Paul's and Merchant Taylor's. These ancient institutions were the most prestigious and drew mostly upon upper class families; below them a large number of other public schools of Anglican, Non-Conformist or Catholic origin flourished that catered more to the sons of the middle class. All these institutions openly aimed to inculcate aristocratic and bourgeois values as much as to educate. The ancient motto of Winchester was "Manners Makyth the Man". The headmaster of Rugby, Dr. Thomas Arnold, crystallized the nineteenth-century ideal of the "Christine gentleman" who combined aristocratic and bourgeois virtues with a natural ability to rule, a sense of social responsibility, and a strong competitiveness in sports as well as classroom subjects.

Dr. Arnold is generally considered the great innovator of the public schools system; he introduced new subjects such as French, history and mathematics, and emphasized content as well as language in reading classical authors. He is also credited with improving living conditions and discouraging practice of the harsher forms of discipline. Though the above mentioned public schools were not founded by the Church of England but they were connected to it. Therefore, school masters, like private tutors were likely to be Anglican clergyman. The public school education, followed by Oxford or Cambridge shaped the sons

of the upper middle class and upper classes for position of leadership in the Church of England, the Army, the Political world and the professions.

Daughters of middle class families during that time were educated at home by tutors or sent to schools that taught music and drawing things that were not "serious" like girls in Jane Austen's novels were praised for playing piano and for painting. In *Pride and Prejudice* Austen very nicely makes the readers aware of the talents of the female characters. But the talents were not at all related with the studies rather the talents were that of painting, playing piano, stitching etc. the activities which are considered serious. In *Pride and Prejudice* Elizabeth plays piano when asked by Lady Catherine de Bourgh.

Women during that time were not at all encouraged to study. Even the protagonist of the *Vanity Fair*, throws her copy of Dr. Johnson's dictionary out of the window of her departing carriage when she leaves her secondary school, in order to survive in the social world of London, all she needs to understand are the forces of class and money. From 1850 to 1880, several boarding schools and day schools were opened which offered more serious education for girls. During the beginning of 1871 at Cambridge, women were admitted to universities in small numbers. But still, educational equality for women was not achieved until twentieth century.

MARRIAGE

To get married during that time was very important for a middle class lady with a limited fortune. Marriage is one of the major themes of Austen's novels as she herself was aware of the importance of marriage during Regency period. In the words of Jaclyn Geller:

A young woman of small fortune in England in 1813 had few options. She was barred from the professions and could exercise no voting rights to alter this state of affairs. In marriage she ceased to exist as a legal entity; outside of wedlock, she was destined to a life of grinding poverty and shameful spinsterhood. Domestic law in itself effected the legal oppression of women by making it virtually impossible to exist outside of marriage. (13)

People looked down upon those who remained unmarried and had no fortune. In *Pride and Prejudice* Charlotte Lucas too marries Mr. Collins just because she already twenty-seven, still unmarried, and is not as rich.

Earlier in olden times, before industrialization, there was domestic industry in which both the parents that is husband and wife together worked as a team, so wife was also given the due respect as she too works for the earning of the livelihood. But industrialization changed the position of middle class wives, by making them economically useless at home. With the rise of living standards deprived women from the work they earlier did at home. Servants took over household chores, and clerks and assistants those of the home centered business. Not only the middle class women but upper class women were affected by these changes. As women had fewer responsibilities, they became a greater burden to their working husbands. In country families the husband and wife viewed the home as their joint territory. Yet, when

the all-male professions began to take the man away from the home, the home became the exclusive territory of the women. The separation of husband and home contributed to the polarization of sex roles that characterized the age and was partly responsible for its sexual stereotypes took hold most strongly in the middle class. The stereotypes took hold most strongly in the middle class. Austen was very well aware of this kind of stereotypes existing in her society. She made use of this in her novels as well. It can be noticed that for Mrs. Bennet (who is the part of middle class) her five daughters are burden on her and she is always concerned about their marriage no matter her daughters like the boy or not. In England, the upper class has always, to some extent, been free of them. Women of the upper class had more control over their money and so found themselves in a less subordinate role. In *Pride and Prejudice* the upper class is represented by Miss Bingley and Lady Catherine de Bourgh.

Individual women like Harriet Martineau and Caroline Norton rebelled against this life of genteel uselessness in the first half of the century, but it was not until the 1850's that legal reforms were enacted that affected women as a class. English matrimonial law stipulated that through marriage the husband became the owner of property, including real estates, of his wife. In 1855, a movement led by Barbara Bodichon began to protest this, but did not have its first victory until 1870.

The Married Women's Property Acts of 1870, 1882, and 1893 gave wives the same property rights as unmarried women. This strengthened the position of upper class women who had money and property to inherit, but since women of the middle class were still denied entrance into most areas of work and the professions, few had earnings to keep. Careers for genteel women were confined to writing, journalism, and governess work until the end of the century, when teaching, civil service, and nursing rose in status. Lower middle class women began to fill jobs in shops and offices that had multiplied by the Property Acts. Working class women were, of course, unaffected by these new laws because they had no property, and their earnings were immediately used up for survival.

Before 1857, divorce could be obtained through a private act of Parliament and at great expense, but in the year 1857 divorce was made an ordinary civil action, thus making it easier for the middle class. The Matrimonial Causes Act maintained the doubled standard because divorce was granted on the proof of the wife's adultery but husbands were not charged for adultery rather they were charged for their cruelty if divorce was to be granted to any wife.

Prohibitions to Marriage

- A widower could not marry his deceased wife's sister.
- A widow could not marry her deceased husband's brother.
- A widower could not marry his niece by marriage.
- A widower could not marry his stepdaughter.
- A widower could not marry his aunt by marriage.
- A lunatic could not lawfully contract a marriage, except during lunatic interval.
- Insanity after marriage did not invalidate it.

While these prohibitions existed legally, clandestine marriages still took place between two people who knowing full well that their marriage would not be legal, still wanted to go through with some sort of ceremony in order to solemnizing their vows. Perhaps the most infamous clandestine marriage was that between the Prince Regent and Maria Anne Fitzherbert. In this case, a clergyman was bribed to look the other way in the absence of a marriage license and in light of the fact that Fitzherbert was a catholic widow. The marriage was further invalidated by the fact that the Prince Regent as an heir to the throne under the age of twenty-one, hadn't gotten the King's permission.

PROFESSION

To take up profession during the England of 1800, was considered a low status. In traditional or aristocratic society, working for a living is held in lower esteem than in living on the proceeds of inherited wealth. But there were very few professions as compared with today. The modern bureaucratic industrial society created new professions and elevated old ones. The rise in status and number of the professions is a one of the characteristic of modernism. In America, professional are glorified but in an aristocratic country like Great Britain the rise of profession was more difficult and complex process. As George Orwell observed that the upper middle class acquired its strength and prestige in the late nineteenth century largely because powerful bourgeois professions absorbed aristocratic culture and values. Some of the Great Britain's economic problems today can be traced to this tendency among well off men of the previous century to avoid commercial activity. While their counterparts in America dove right into it. Profession explored in the early nineteenth century by the law of primogeniture, in which only the eldest son would inherit the family property, and so the younger sons were freed up for the professions. In many of the early nineteenth novels we find that, younger sons of the gentry and aristocracy usually enter Army or the Church because they had the money to purchase commissions in the Army.

Army was traditionally considered more gentlemanly than the Navy. Therefore, a young man of ability with neither blood nor wealth had a better chance of rising in the Navy than the Army. Until 1871, the infantry and cavalry were still almost entirely purchased that is, manned by the rich, who were in a far better position to buy commissions. In *Pride and Prejudice*, the lazy and dishonest Wickham too purchased a commission. Professional options for women of the gentry in Jane Austen's day did not exist. Marriage was the only honourable provision for a well-educated young woman. But a lady who found herself without support could become a governess.

In literature of the nineteenth century, professionalism is expressed in many genres in the great biographies and autobiographies of Carlyle, Mill and Darwin, in poetry about the vocation of art by Tennyson, Browning, and the pre-Raphaelites, and in many novels of the period- Austen's *Persuasion*, Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*, Dickens's *David Copperfield*, Eliot's *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda*. Jane Austen in her novel *Pride and Prejudice* didn't talk much about the profession of that period rather she made some of her characters to take up professions that were in vogue during that period. For instance, Mr. Wickham of

Pride and Prejudice is the part of military, Mr. Collins of *Pride and Prejudice* were in church, and Mr. Knightley's younger brother was a barrister.

Thus it can be concluded that English culture has often been guilty of exclusionary attitudes towards those of inferior social rank. Jane Austen continued the tradition of casting literature as a reflection of contemporary society's biases. The characters in *Pride and Prejudice*, seek economic security through marriage, and cast a critical eye on those who divert themselves with lesser, frivolous pursuits, resulting in their efforts to either maintain or contend with propriety.

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