

ISSN:0976-8165



# The Criterion

AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL IN ENGLISH

Bi-Monthly Peer-Reviewed eJournal

VOL. 15 ISSUE-1 FEB. 2024

15 YEARS OF OPEN ACCESS

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ISSN 2278-9529

**Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal**  
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## **Feminism in the Nineteenth Century: Elizabeth Bennet's Resilience in *Pride and Prejudice***

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<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10795664>

**Article History:** Submitted-30/01/2024, Revised-22/02/2024, Accepted-24/02/2024, Published-29/02/2024.

### **Abstract:**

Equal rights and assertion of individuality have always been key components of feminist movement. Literary works depict the cultural, social and political happenings of the period in which they were created. Many works attributing to the key features of feminism had also been written. Jane Austen, a well-known British author had written several works that portray the manners and society of Eighteenth and Nineteenth century England. *Pride and Prejudice* published in 1813 depict the female character of Elizabeth Bennet. She tends to assert her identity and defy societal conventions. This paper aims to study her character from a feminist perspective that further unleashes the layers of patriarchal society. Elizabeth emerges as an archetype for the assertion of individuality and strong female identity. By analysing her character, one traces the development of the feminist movement and the early women writers and characters that shaped it.

**Keywords:** Feminism, Jane Austen, Individuality, Elizabeth, Patriarchal Society.

### **Introduction**

Post 1960s, feminism had become a worldwide phenomenon, moving from Great Britain and France to other European nations and subsequently to the United States of America. However, the roots of the movement dates back to late eighteen and nineteen century. Writers such as Mary Wollstonecraft and Jeremy Bentham raised their voices against the patriarchal society and mooted for the equal rights for women. Although from the perspective of material feminism, the consideration of English playwright, poet and writer Aphra Behn (1640-1689) is fundamental. She undertook writing as a means to earn her living in an era where the responsibility of women was to be a good wife and bear children. Besides

them, the legacy of feminism was carried forward by J.S. Mill's essay 'The Subjection of Women' (1869), Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929) and Simon de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949). Beauvoir's famous lines from *The Second Sex* are still widely read: "One is not born, but rather becomes, woman" (ch. 1)

The sixties and seventies that popularised feminism as a movement was grounded in literary texts. The aim was to develop feminist literary criticism. It was primarily concerned with the portrayal of women in literature. The feminist critics considered it as a vital feature in conditioning the minds of the masses. The phenomenon of damsel in distress projects the fact that women needed a knight in the shining armour to save them. Most of the works written by men were subjugating women rather than empowering them. Furthermore, these works have a strong impact on the psyche of men and women because it defined the roles for both the genders. According to Peter Barry:

This movement was, in important ways, literary from the start, in the sense that it realised the significance of the images of women promulgated by literature, and saw it as vital to combat them and question their authority and their coherence. (Barry 116)

He further adds by saying:

The representation of women in literature, then, was felt to be one of the most important forms of 'socialisation', since it provided the role models which indicated to women, men, what constituted acceptable versions of the 'feminine' and legitimate feminine goals and aspirations. (Barry 117)

Critics such as Elaine Showalter raised the issue of misrepresentation of women in literary works. She emphasised on developing a female literary canon, which will serve as a framework for analysing women's writing. She called it 'gynocriticism'. Other feminist critics included Susan Gilbert, Susan Gubar, Julia Kristeva, Helen Cixous and Luce Irigaray.

However, Jane Austen was one such writer who tried to infuse some elements of women's movement in her heroines, most notably, Elizabeth Bennet. Although she lived in the era when the movement for equal women's rights was still establishing, yet she tried to incorporate the fearlessness and independence that she hoped women could achieve in the near future. Her writings were based on the society and culture, men and their manners, and matrimony. Even Elizabeth married Mr Darcy in the end, but the way she had presented her, in some manner justify the aim of women's movement in the 1960s.

Austen exposed the patriarchal conditions of her historical moment and the way romantic conventions coded for power and wealth, while simultaneously using the constraints of her provincial and domestic settings to her advantage, demonstrating the duplicitous aptitude of romantic narratives to make those conditions visible. (Moe 1079)

Jane Austen (1775-1817) would probably have been sixteen or seventeen years old when Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) was published. The rise of feminism was in the air and slowly this was intended to be visible in the writings of that time. Born in Hampshire, England, Austen grew up observing the nuances of men and manners prevalent in her society. She is worldwide known for her six exemplary novels, namely, *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), *Mansfield Park* (1814), *Emma* (1815), *Northanger Abbey* (1818) and *Persuasion* (1818).

Writer and critic David Daiches, in his *A Critical History of English Literature Volume II* (1960), says:

Jane Austen is an uncommon sort of novelist, a novelist of manners with a brilliant ironic wit, an affectionate understanding of the ordinariness of human life, a mastery of plot structures, a lively and often subtle sense of character and a moral universe within which to set and pattern all her novels. (Daiches 765)

Warwick James Price praises Jane Austen, saying:

Jane Austen told the tale of the better middle-class English life ; the comedy of manners. It is a restricted subject, but she covered it so perfectly that there can be no just question as to her genius. She was possessed of a style wholly unconscious and lucidly clear ; her power of satire was charming, gentle, and genteel, yet telling and true; her wit was as genuine as it was delicate, and she was gifted with a wonderfully clear penetration. (Price)

Daniel J. Kruger and others comment on Austen, saying:

Austen is a shrewd analyst of human behavior, and even her first, anonymously published novel was praised for its realism in the psychological portrayal of characters and social dynamics. (Kruger et al. A116)

However, many critics had attacked Austen saying that her novels lack moral purpose and were not written from the intention of bringing a positive change. But when we observe her works from a feminist perspective, she has represented some empowering women characters. David Daiches comments, "All of Jane Austen's heroines are thus educated by life" (Daiches 748). Of course, they are not as rebellious and full of misandry as most of the modern feminists appear to be. However, their contributions as empowering female characters were significant within their periphery of understanding.

### **Elizabeth Bennet: A Feminist Icon of the Regency Era**

Austen's Elizabeth Bennet from the celebrated novel *Pride and Prejudice* can be regarded as an empowering female character. However, many consider the eponymous character from Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) to be the first female character with self-respect and individuality. But much before her, it was Austen's Elizabeth who paved the way for other strong-willed female characters. This paper analyses Elizabeth Bennet as an archetype for feminism. Archetype refers to a symbol or representation of something. Feminism is a movement that volunteers for equal rights and opportunities for women and Austen's character Elizabeth Bennet become symbolic for it.

*Pride and Prejudice* revolves around the characters Elizabeth Bennet and Fitzwilliam Darcy where Elizabeth represents prejudice while Mr Darcy represents pride. Elizabeth also known as Lizzy or Eliza, lives in Longbourn with her parents and four sisters namely, Jane, Mary, Catherine and Lydia. Elizabeth is the second eldest and is witty, intelligent and clever, unlike her other sisters except Jane. Mrs Bennet is desperate to get her five daughters married in wealthy households. On the other hand Mr Bennet hardly cares of her rantings. The main plot is concerned with the relationship of Elizabeth and Mr Darcy that takes various twists and turns, such as Elizabeth judging Mr Darcy to be proud, Mr Wickham fooling her with a false tale about Darcy, Mr Darcy falling for Elizabeth and many more. It intermingles with Austen's realistic description of society and her ironic and humorous writing style.

The women's movement popularised the notion of working women in literature, which was clearly missing in the earlier writings. Elizabeth was also not a working woman and she does not fit within one of the parameters set up the feminists of the 1960s and 1970s. However she does stand for herself further making her own choices of life. She represents an empowering woman as she has the choice to make her own decisions. Susan C. Greenfield comments in her article "The Absent Minded Heroine: Or, Elizabeth Bennet has a Thought"

that “Elizabeth acquires both the freedom of interpretation and, more dubiously, the provocation to fall in love.” (Greenfield)

Elizabeth lived in an era where the goal of every young woman was to get married to a handsome and wealthy man. The book opens up with amusing yet realistic lines, saying: “It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife.” (ch. I) But Elizabeth had no such inclinations. To her, getting married was only with someone she dearly loved. She says:

I am determined that only the deepest love will induce me into matrimony. So, I shall end an old maid, and teach your ten children to embroider cushions and play their instruments very ill. (ch. II)

One of the primary reasons that she can be regarded as an archetypal feminist is her refusal to get married out of compulsion for economic stability. She never felt the need of a man to complete her. In a gathering, Mrs Bennet was always seeking a profitable match for her daughters. But Eliza was never that much interested in companionship. While other girls tried to grab the attention of young rich men, she used to enjoy and talk intelligently on worldly matters. Another interesting incident was the arrival of Mr Collins. He was the cousin of Mr Bennet and heir of the Longbourn estate. A boastful character, he is funny in his way and manner. He proposes his desire to marry Elizabeth who strongly declines his proposal. She does not love him and is determined not to marry him. Mr Bennet appears to be a rational character who cares for Elizabeth. He understands her and does not consider her a burden, unlike his wife. When Mrs Bennet is forcing Elizabeth to marry Mr Collins, his exceptional lines set a benchmark for great fathers:

An unhappy alternative is before you, Elizabeth. From this 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. (ch. XX)

On the other hand, her friend Charlotte Lucas accepts his proposal due to his wealthy status. This, in turn, describes the trend of that period and a general mind set of every girl. Elizabeth emerges as a rebel against the stereotypes and acts in the way as her heart desires. She takes the decision of getting engaged to Mr Darcy when she truly starts admiring him.

Another fundamental aspect is her spontaneous attitude towards everyone. She does not flaunt herself or boast anything she is not. Her indifference towards society's norms was

rare in the nineteenth century. Her focus was on her mind rather than her outer appearance. She is independent and does not carry the baggage of pleasing others or pretending to be someone else. Caroline Bingley is envious of her emancipation and naturalness. She condemns her by saying:

To walk three miles, or four miles, or five miles, or whatever it is, above her ankles in dirt, and alone, quite alone! what could she mean by it? It seems to me to shew an abominable sort of conceited independence, a most country-town indifference to decorum. (ch. VIII)

James Sherry also expresses his opinions, stating:

As we can see most explicitly in the quotation from Alistair Duckworth, there has been a tendency in such discussions of the "individual" and "society" to allegorize Elizabeth and Darcy into representatives of those respective terms. Elizabeth, then, reveals the energy, the impulsive-ness, the respect for personal merit which characterizes individualism, while Darcy, with his sense of propriety and his noble family connections, stands for "society" or the established social codes. (Sherry 611)

Unlike her younger sisters, especially Kitty and Lydia, who were simply after chasing young military officers, Elizabeth enjoyed reading. She read for her contentment and intellect. In fact, like most of the young girls of today's times, she was into books and mirth. Miss Bingley condescendingly comments saying: "Miss Eliza Bennet," said Miss Bingley, "despises cards. She is a great reader, and has no pleasure in anything else." (ch. VIII) Elizabeth's reply proves her modesty and humbleness. She says: "I deserve neither such praise nor such censure," cried Elizabeth; "I am not a great reader, and I have pleasure in many things." (ch. VIII). She therefore gives respect to others and stays modest. But this should not be considered her weakness, for she knows the way to take a stand for herself. She gives respect but cannot afford to take insult in return. This characteristic of her displays her dynamic spirit to stand strongly against the world.

She loved dancing, and laughed and revelled whenever there used to be some dance or ball. When Mr Bingley was asking her to join in the dance with Elizabeth, he says:

She is tolerable; but not handsome enough to tempt me; and I am in no humour 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. (ch. III)

This was heard by Elizabeth who found Mr Darcy to be extremely proud. And later she made her intelligence do the task which made Darcy understand that Elizabeth was different from others. It is essential in understanding her staunch character. She will not bow down to someone making absurd comments about her. This also illustrates another of her notable characteristics which is the courage to speak and stand up for her own self. She was argumentative enough even if she is talking to the highest civilian Lady Catherine de Bourgh where the lady confronts her about her engagement to her nephew, Mr Darcy, whom she initially thought for her daughter. Elizabeth is so rational in her conversation that the lady utters: "Obstinate, headstrong girl!" (ch. XIV) And when the lady is insulting her and her family, her speech is compelling and inspiring: "And I certainly never shall give it. I am not to be intimidated into anything so wholly unreasonable." (ch. XIV) She further makes her point of view clear saying:

You have widely mistaken my character, if you think I can be worked on by such persuasions as these. How far your nephew might approve of your interference in his affairs, I cannot tell; but you have certainly no right to concern yourself in mine. I must beg, therefore, to be importuned no farther on the subject. (ch. XIV )

One can understand that in that era no other girl would have the guts to declare her independent right of decision making in the manner Elizabeth does. She is fearless and stands confident on her decisions despite knowing the consequences of it. She is not intimidated with the fact that she is talking to a highborn lady of great reputation in the society. The element that struck her was that she was insulting her, her character, her family and her way of living. For instance, some girls could have felt offended but would never have had the courage to speak out. On the other hand, some would have felt nothing considering the lady to be correct. This is because of the social conditioning of the era. Women were doomed to be in the stereotypical models designed by the patriarchal society.

The ferociousness of Elizabeth is admirable. She was not for once dominated by someone's opinion. She spoke her heart with utmost dignity. Never was once she behaved like her mother and her younger sisters, who were a laughing stock in the society. Besides, she was well aware of the economic and social condition of her family and household, but she was contented at heart. Although she was embarrassed by the conduct of her mother and



younger sisters, but she realized that they were her family, unlike Lydia who selfishly eloped with Wickham. One can witness it in the dialogue between Lady Catherine de Bourgh and Elizabeth. The lady says:

Their fortune on both sides is splendid. They are destined for each other by the voice of every member of their respective houses; and what is to divide them? The upstart pretensions of a young woman without family, connections, or fortune. Is this to be endured! But it must not, shall not be. If you were sensible of your own good, you would not wish to quit the sphere in which you have been brought up. (ch. XIV)

Elizabeth's assertive reply depicts the level of regard she possessed about her family and herself. Her self-respect was her priority: "In marrying your nephew, I should not consider myself as quitting that sphere. He is a gentleman; I am a gentleman's daughter; so far we are equal." (ch. XIV) She will not consider herself inferior to somebody. This describes her strong determination towards not yielding and quitting. Here she is truly an inspiration to all the women. Nobody has the right to make anybody feel inferior. One should embrace herself and her very existence with open arms. Elizabeth precisely does that. In a manner, her lines are didactic in nature, which are quite practical in the contemporary world as well.

## Conclusion

Jane Austen's Elizabeth is a character with strong determination and self-respect. Her dignity is as much important, as it is to any young man. In an era that described women as seekers of charming rich men, Austen rendered an image of a courageous woman. Elizabeth stood against the societal norms that dictated the destiny of a woman. Marrying Mr Darcy was her decision, and not her family's or society's. And she married a person who truly understood her voice and opinions, the opinions which were lacking or perhaps suppressed in most of the women of that epoch.

The character becomes an archetype or symbol for headstrong women, who are unafraid to speak their mind and heart. Elizabeth does not wish to marry for financial stability in life rather she prefers to stay single if not marrying for love. Her societal defying ideas of livelihood in the eighteenth and nineteenth century are path-breaking. She can be regarded as a feminist icon for the women of twenty first century also as many suppress their voice and do not assert their individuality. Some marry for financial security, as it is a deeply rooted

notion in the psyche of the people. Elizabeth's actions are exemplary as she emerges as an independent woman who can make her own decisions against the traditional norms of the patriarchal society.

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