

Getting beyond Patriarchy in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*

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Abstract:

This paper examines the ways in which *Pride and Prejudice* gets beyond conventional patriarchal notions. Such a reading would also relate the novel's patriarchal ideology to the period in which it was written and is set in. This was a time when England's patriarchy strongly believed that "the (good) woman's place is in the home". It is important for students new to the field to recognize when a literary work depicts patriarchal ideology in order to criticize it or invites us to criticize it. Further, the paper attempts to promote our appreciation of women's value in today's world.

Keywords: patriarchy, ideology, conventional, women's experience, today's world.

In a sudden panic over her discovery that Elizabeth Bennet had walked a long distance all on her own, Miss Bingley remarked: '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 show an abominable sort of conceited independence, a most country town indifference to decorum'. (15, Ch 8). In addition to Miss Bingley's double standards for her own and Elizabeth's behavior, this statement reveals Miss Bingley's assumptions that the moral structure of society rests on the stability of the patriarchal family on the conformity of women to patriarchal gender roles. Of course the novel clearly ridicules Miss Bingley's position: "'Oh! certainly', cried his faithful servant, 'no one can be really esteemed accomplished, who does not greatly surpass what is usually met with. A woman must have a thorough knowledge of music, singing, drawing, dancing, and the modern languages, to deserve the word, and besides all this, she must possess a certain something in her air and manner of walking, the tone of her voice, her address and expressions, or the word will be but half deserved.'

'All this she must possess', added Darcy, 'and to all this she must yet add something more substantial, in the improvement of her mind by extensive reading'. (17, Ch. 8). Nevertheless, this paper makes an attempt to show that *Pride and Prejudice* gets beyond Miss Bingley's view of patriarchal gender roles.

Austen began writing this when she was twenty one. But the manuscript "went begging" for sixteen years at the doors of publishers before it was published in 1813. *Pride and Prejudice* is one of the most popular novels in English literature. She called this novel "her own darling child". Novel writing by a woman in the nineteenth century was not popular in the society of England. Her appearance in the literary scene of England evoked a good deal of negative reaction from conservative members of society, who pointed out the fundamental question of difference between the sexes. It was England's economic structure, which gave economic dominance to men, that depended upon the axiom "a woman's place is in the home". Women in the nineteenth century lived in a traditional patriarchal society which was still male-centered and male dominated. We are to

remember that another advantage of keeping women at home, modestly dressed and quietly behaved, was that it reaffirmed men's ownership of women's sexual and reproductive capacities.

Literary works often reflect the ideological conflicts of their culture, whether or not it is their intention to do so, because, like the rest of us, authors are influenced by the ideological tenor of the times. Even a writer like Jane Austen, who cut a dashing figure among the avant-garde social set of the nineteenth century England, was subject to ideological conflicts that characterized her age. This is already shown in the beginning of the novel, where Austen describes the unfairness of the idea of an entailment. "Mr Bennet's property consisted almost entirely in an estate of two thousand a year, which unfortunately for his daughters, was entailed in default of heirs male, on a distant relation: and their mother's fortune, though ample for her situation in life, could but ill supply the deficiency of his" (19, Ch. 7). Though Mr. Bennett has no less than five daughters, he is unable to leave them his property as his rightful children. Instead he is forced by law to hand it over to his closest male relative, a preposterous clergy man by the name of Mr. Collins. The girls' only hope for a financially secure future is to marry, and even this prospect is completely dependent on their father as the man of the house. The girls could not simply go out and find a man themselves as Mrs. Bennett states, as she bemoans to her husband that "[it] will be no use to us, if twenty such [men] should come, since you will not visit them" (4. Ch. 1). Thus, although most British men and women believed that the survival of England's moral structure depended on traditional gender roles, Austen is critical of this faulty system. The nineteenth century was one of progressive transience, especially for women who carved a new identity for themselves. Literature was a vital mouthpiece for their miseries. Jane Austen takes a jibe at the prevalent male hegemony which tried to subjugate women. Simon de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* (1949) observes that in a patriarchal society, men are considered contingent beings. Men can act upon the world, change it, give it meaning, while women have meaning only in relation to men. (6) Austen wrote *Pride and Prejudice* much prior to the time referred to as the age of New Woman Fiction and yet her writing is a potent satire on the position of women in society and how this position limited their viewpoint to trivial affairs. The novel is not only the love story of Elizabeth Bennett and her elder sister Jane, but it also shows the want for love experienced by Charlotte Lucas, who marries the ludicrous Mr. Collins for financial security. Austen vehemently protests against this kind of subjugation of women by patriarchal norms.

The protagonist Elizabeth is highlighted as a strong and independent woman, who is not afraid to hold out for love, and when Mr. Collins proposes to her, she rejects him despite parental pressure as well as the uncertainty of her future. She is proposed to for a second time later in the novel by Mr. Darcy, whom she also rejects despite his ten thousand pounds a year, which was considered a huge fortune back in 1813. Elizabeth's father, Mr. Bennett, who fully understands her daughter's mental make-up, tells her in the end of the novel that she will be miserable if she marries either for money or security – she can only be happy if she marries a man whom she can both respect and admire. He says, "I know that you could be neither happy nor respectable, unless you truly esteemed your husband; unless you looked up to him as a superior. Your lively talents would place you in the greatest danger in an unequal marriage. You could scarcely escape discredit and misery. My child, let me not have the grief of seeing you unable to respect your partner in life" (259. Ch. 54). In this century marriage for women was nothing better than slavery. A husband controlled his wife's children, her status and her position in life. Women had virtually no control of the family property. If a wife and husband worked together in a family business, it was considered his.

Later in the novel, we find Elizabeth saying to Mr. Darcy, "[m]y beauty you had early withstood, and as for my manners – my behaviour to you was at least always bordering on the uncivil, and I never spoke to you without rather wishing to give you pain than not. Now be sincere;

did you admire me for my impertinence" (256, Ch 60). Mr. Darcy answers her "[f]or the liveliness of your mind, I did" (256, Ch. 60), and it is clear that Austen will not expect any less from a true love story. Mr. Darcy falls in love with Elizabeth partly for her lively nature, while Elizabeth falls in love with Mr. Darcy because of his kindness. This is where Austen goes beyond the patriarchy. She sets a new tune. We are to see and value a woman not only for her beauty but for her brains. An impressive feat, especially considering Caroline Bingley's earlier description of an ideal or accomplished woman. "[N]o [woman] can be really esteemed accomplished who does not greatly surpass what is usually met with. A woman must have a thorough knowledge of music, singing, drawing, dancing, and the modern languages, to deserve the word; and besides all this, she must possess a certain something in her air and manner of walking, the tone of her voice, her address and expressions, or the word will be but half-deserved" (27, Ch 8). When going through this register, we can clearly see that everything that is supposed to make a woman esteemed, accomplished are exclusively ornamental talents, and there is no mention of the real humane talents--kindness, humour or intelligence.

It is Elizabeth's *liveliness* that Mr. Darcy falls in love with, rather than her musical talent or manner of walking, and Austen makes it crystal clear that Elizabeth's lively nature does not disappear just because she got married. She will undoubtedly continue to tease her husband for the rest of their life together as Austen writes that "[b]y Elizabeth's instructions, she [Georgiana Darcy] began to comprehend that a woman may take liberties with her husband" (261, Ch.61). Through all of these examples and numerous more it is clear for the readers that while *Pride and Prejudice* is a love story before everything else, it is also a denigration of the opinionated society of nineteenth century England. *Pride and Prejudice* highlights the feminine sensibility in the context of different facets of male dominance. The examination of marriage as an institution enables Austen to examine gender positions in her society. During Elizabeth's struggle, it is to be noted that she also emerges as a feminist character.

When Elizabeth meets with Lady Catherine de Bourgh at her home, she confronts Elizabeth about her relationship with Mr. Darcy during which Elizabeth says to Lady de Bourgh "he is a gentleman; I am a gentleman's daughter; so far we are equal." (239, Ch 56.) This is the first time in the novel that Elizabeth can truly be portrayed as a feminist character. Feminism is a doctrine that equates women and men, and this moment when Elizabeth declares herself equal to Mr. Darcy is when Elizabeth emerges as the feminist delicately hinted at in the previous chapters. From the beginning of the book Elizabeth was merely an outspoken woman with a certitude of opinions to express and unafraid of being subjugated by those around her. She never had the intention to equate herself with men or her oppressors, she never truly paved a true road for herself with her own virtues and talents, ideas for success for her future, unlike Charlotte Lucas did by marrying Mr. Collins with only intentions of living a comfortable life. Feminism during that time was much different from how it has evolved today and a perfect example of a feminist during the nineteenth century would be Charlotte Lucas. Charlotte can be seen as a feminist instead of Elizabeth during the first chapters of *Pride and Prejudice* because of her ability to make firm decisions for herself not based on wanting solely to live for her husband's every want and need. Charlotte bluntly states, "I ask only a comfortable home; and considering Mr. Collins' character, connections and situation in life, I am convinced that my chance of happiness with him is as fair as most people can boast on entering a marriage state." (87, Ch 22,) Elizabeth, during these first chapters of the novel, was much like a blithe and witty young lady, however by making such a strong statement against Lady de Bourgh, she proved her mettle. Equating herself with a man and that too of a much higher status than herself shows that she has not only grown as a feminist but also as a woman of substance, somebody who likes to call her own shots. Helene Cixous notes, "Traditionally, the question of sexual difference is

treated by coupling it with the opposition activity/passivity" (92). Thus, if a woman is not passive, she is not really a woman. Austen, through Elizabeth, subverts the traditional patriarchal notions.

During the late eighteenth century and nineteenth century, women were treated as commodities and were less valued. Women would normally vent out anger and frustrations on each other by mocking, taunting, belittling and backstabbing each other. Luce Irigaray suggests that in a patriarchal culture, much of women's subjugation occurs in the form of psychological repression through the medium of language. Elizabeth goes through various situations in which she can show this hostility against her fellow women through language. For example, Miss Bingley seems to have a keen interest in Mr. Darcy. However, when she notices his apparent curiosity of Elizabeth, she begins to dislike Elizabeth and is bent on proving her flaws to him. Through this hate shown towards Elizabeth, she can easily put her anger on another woman or back on Ms. Bingley. However, she chooses not to use filthy language, restrains herself and instead hits her oppressors directly. Instead of walking away from that situation with her head bent in defeat and expressing her anger out on her sisters or friends, Elizabeth promptly retaliates to Lady de Bourgh's comments. This type of standing up for oneself shows that she is a modern and liberated woman one who knows what exactly she wants from life.

The epiphanic moment occurs in the book when Elizabeth is described as having an active demeanor by Georgiana. "Georgiana had the highest opinion in the world of Elizabeth; though at first she often listened with astonishment bordering on alarm at her lively, sportive manner of talking to her brother" (261, Ch 61) unlike Charlotte Lucas who took on the traditional role of a woman after marrying Mr. Collins and caring for him and his house, Elizabeth actively retains her livelihood and freedom after marriage. Through Georgiana's surprise, it must be noted that women would conventionally change after being married, taking up the role of the plain homemaker, submissive to her husband's will. Describing Elizabeth as sporty gives her masculine qualities as it was the men that would play sports and be active. Mary Wollstonecraft states "I heard exclamation against masculine woman, but where are they to be found? If by this appellation men mean to inveigh against, their ardour in hunting, shooting, and gaming, I shall most cordially join in the cry; but if it be against the imitation of manly virtues or, more properly speaking, the attainment of those talents and virtues, the exercise of which ennobles the human character, and which raises females in the scale of animal being, when they are comprehensively termed mankind, all those who view them with a philosophic eye must, I think, wish with me, that they may everyday grow more and more masculine." (*A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, 1792) In this context, we are to remember that Wollstonecraft introduces that calling a woman masculine raises them to that pedestal of being a human being, having knowledge, talents and virtues - all attributes of males.

Throughout *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth Bennett has been a constant determined personality. She has been able to speak with a range of people from bourgeois to the aristocratic comfortably with a sense of wittiness. However, these qualities did not show her feminist character, but are merely the makings of a feminist character. Clearly, Austen believes that women are as intelligent and capable as men, and considers their inferior status in society to be unjust. She herself went against traditional convention by remaining single and earning a living through her novels. In her personal letters Austen advises friends to only marry for love. Through the plot of the novel it is clear that Austen wants to show how Elizabeth is able to be happy by refusing to marry for financial purposes only and marrying a man whom she truly loves and esteems. At the same time living her life after marriage, being respected by her husband and being given her due freedom. Through her courage and ease at diligently retorting back to Lady Catherine de Bourgh at her demeaning comments towards Elizabeth, her respect and empowerment for her womankind and by being

described as sporty by Georgiana, Elizabeth emerges as the feminist that she merely hinted to be. Austen reflects her courage and feminine beliefs through Elizabeth.

To conclude, there is no doubt an important connection between our ability to recognize patriarchal ideology as well as our wish to experience the pain such knowledge is liable to bring upon us. Maybe this could be a reason why feminism is still regarded with an eye of suspicion by women and men even today. It holds a mirror not just to our public lives but intrudes in our private lives too. It makes a demand to reassess our intimate personal experiences and our most ingrained and comfortable assumptions. It helps us learn to see how patriarchal ideology operates in literature. This is why *Pride and Prejudice* can be helpful to new students of feminist criticism. It also prepares us to direct our feminist vision on ourselves.

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