

Jane Austen's Elizabeth Bennet: An Emancipated Heroine of the Regency Period

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Abstract

Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, a 19th-century novel, is set in the world of Regency England and deals with the fortunes of the five daughters of the Bennet family. In Regency-era, a woman's only mission and ambition was to attract a husband to secure her future. Only a few middle-class women could dare not to marry, and marriage just for the sake of love was against conventional standards. The wedding for most of the women was a path to financial security because they had no property and legal rights. As there are no sons in the Bennet family, the inheritance is bound to go to Mr. Collins, the next male heir of the family. To secure the future of her daughters, Mrs. Bennet strives to see her daughters married to wealthy men. The marriageable female characters of the novel adopt the path suggested by society but Elizabeth, the second-eldest daughter, decides to go against social norms and rejects a marriage proposal from Mr. Collins. Elizabeth's rejection of societal conventions illustrates her behaviour as an emancipated woman. Elizabeth's freedom from social constraints becomes more evident if we compare her to the other female characters in the novel, namely Jane, Caroline and Charlotte. These three female figures are traditional in their thoughts and actions. They gladly accept the gender norms of society, whereas Elizabeth fights for her individuality and self-respect and, thus, becomes a symbol of women's emancipation and autonomy. Elizabeth is entirely different from her counterparts because the purpose of her life is not to find a husband by ignoring individual aspirations. Elizabeth's courage, independent behaviour and strong opinions set her apart from the traditional women of England. Lady Catherine De observes this strong feature of Elizabeth's character and says, "you [Elizabeth] give your opinion very decidedly." (181) Defying traditional gender norms, Elizabeth further affirms her emancipation by inspiring Mr. Darcy to set his pride aside to win her affection and take her hand in marriage. Later, she accepts Darcy's second marriage proposal, but only because he has changed his perceptions of society to match her worldview.

Keywords: Emancipation, regency, autonomy, gender norms, patriarchal, tradition.

Introduction

Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) takes place at a time known as the Regency period in England. The term 'regency' refers to George IV, Prince of Wales, who served as a regent or substitutes during the madness of his father George III and ruled from 1811 to 1820. The Regency period is characterized as the period of elegance because the industrial revolution had transformed the English society by this time. The use of new technology gave impetus to the manufacturing sector, and the middle-class businessmen and professionals became wealthy. The newly rich people started to display their wealth by adopting the lifestyle of England's traditional Landed aristocracy. The age of industrialization left many workers unemployed as the work previously done manually was now being done by machines. This created a wide gap between the rich and the poor that fuelled social unrest.

Aim of the Study

The objective of this paper is to study Elizabeth's role as an emancipated woman in comparison to some other female figures in *Pride and Prejudice*. To maintain her autonomy, she intelligently escapes from the trap of patriarchal society. Elizabeth establishes her unique position by

Demonstrating a reformatory purpose through her influence on the character of Darcy. The traits of Elizabeth make us to focus on her as an emancipated heroine of the Regency Period who fights for her individuality and self-respect and, thus, becomes a symbol of women's emancipation and autonomy. An

An Overview of Women's Position

The position of women was deplorable during the Regency period. The society was organized in such a way as to favour male dominance. A few middle-class women could dare not to marry, and marriage just for the sake of love was against societal norms. The wedding for most of the women was a path to financial security because a few women inherited wealth. The women were subservient to men as they nearly had no property and legal rights. A woman's children and her way of life were completely under her husband's legal control. If she were separated from her husband, she was disgraced in the public eye. A statute of 1770 passed by Parliament reveals the condition of women during the 18th and early 19th century period:

"All women of whatever age, rank, profession, or degree, whether virgin maid or widow, that shall from and after such Act impose upon, seduce, and betray into matrimony any of His Majesty's subjects by means of scent, paints, cosmetics, washes, artificial teeth, false hair, Spanish wool, iron stays, hoops, high-heeled shoes, or bolstered hips, shall incur the penalty of the law now in force against witchcraft and like misdemeanours, and that the marriage upon conviction shall stand null and void."(Swords)

Dr Samuel Johnson, expressed his opinion about women's legal rights when he said: "Nature has given women so much power that the law has very wisely given them little." Women had no control over their destinies, and their only mission and ambition was to attract a husband. They were supposed to be 'accomplished' by learning ladylike arts- singing, playing, embroidering and painting designs on tables.

A well-planned education was not considered essential for girls simply because they had to spend life in domestic affairs. The writers of this period were commonly bound by the strict societal rules. It was a challenging task to write about female protagonists who not only had a role in framing their destiny but also in modifying the lives of others. In the early 19th century feminism was in its infancy and most of the female characters of this period were not in a position to fight for their individuality. However, Jane Austen was ahead of her time in portraying Elizabeth Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice* who intelligently defies the societal conventions. Austen's criticism of the societal conventions through Elizabeth makes her a feminist writer, simultaneously Elizabeth Bennet becomes an emancipated heroine who not only writes her own destiny but modifies the character of Darcy. In Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, the word 'Emancipate' is defined as "to free sb., especially from legal, political and social restrictions...

an emancipated young woman[is] one with modern ideas about women's place in society."(Hornby 494) Austen departs from traditional

norms in presenting her heroine in *Pride and Prejudice*. Elizabeth's character is so stunning and powerful that the readers from Austen's day to the present have taken her as one of the most complex and appealing heroines. A critic noted:

"For the first time in English Literature, outside Shakespeare, We meet heroines who are credible, with minds, with the capacity to think for themselves, with ambition and wit."(Qt. in Study Guide for *Pride and Prejudice* 10)

In *Pride and Prejudice*, the reader steadily watches the steps of Elizabeth to know how she will preserve her individuality and freedom in a world of social pressures and restrictions. Jane Austen charts her path to self-discovery as she meets another complex character, Fitzwilliam Darcy.

Review of Literature

The literary critics noted that Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* has a feminist perspective and the heroine, Elizabeth Bennet, exhibits feminist qualities through her words and actions in the novel. Austen's feminist approach found resonance in the words of Deborah Kalpan (1992). He comments that an ideal woman of the Regency period had to engage herself in the activities that served her family but Austen defied the social norms and kept herself busy in composing poems and writing parodies and thus could be accused of putting herself in 'unfeminine' activities. Austen struggled to maintain a balance between individual aspirations and social constraints. The central character of her novel, Elizabeth also faced the same situation in her life. Susan Morgan (1980) argues that the critics agree that there is dualism in Elizabeth's character.

Her freedom constitutes one pole and some sort of social sense the other. Her progress can be understood as a movement from polarity to a merging or harmony represented by her marriage to Mr. Darcy. Alister Duckworth (1971) agreed that *Pride and Prejudice* achieves an ideal relation between the individual and society. Some prominent critics logically point out that Elizabeth fights against patriarchal society and is successful in persuading Mr. Darcy to change his perception. The critics have different views regarding Austen's feminism and some of them proclaim that she had just a critical view of the world and cannot be accepted as a true feminist. This paper, however, takes research one step further by focusing on Elizabeth's feminist traits in contrast to other female figures of the novel. The detailed analysis of the text will help us to prove that Elizabeth is an emancipated woman of the 19th century and Austen is a feminist who gave voice to the hidden thoughts of women through her female protagonists.

Textual Analysis

In *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen focuses on courtship and marriage. Christopher Brooke stated: "A fundamental theme of *Pride and prejudice* is the problem of how a man and a woman get to know each other before marriage."(74) By allowing the characters to know each other before marriage, Austen provides a realistic picture of the contemporary society. The novel opens with one of the most quoted lines of English Literature: "It is a truth universally

acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife.”(7) This line sets the tone for the whole novel. The reader quickly understands that the novel is going to be about marriage. When we read the sentence opposite of it- a single woman must be in want of a man with a good fortune- we notice the ironical attack of Austen. Thus, the truth was entirely different as a single woman, who didn't possess wealth, was in want of a husband.

A rich young man was “considered the rightful property of someone or the other of their daughters.”(7) In this way, at the outset, we see a connection between money and marriage, and there is also humour because Austen uses formal language to describe a crude fact of life. However, as we move forward, it becomes clear that Austen views on choice in marriage are a serious matter. Austen starts unfolding the true nature of her characters and attacks the societal conventions. That is why, among her works, *Pride and Prejudice* is more often cited by scholars as having a feminist perspective. The feminist overtones are prevalent in Austen's heroine Elizabeth who is presented as an emancipated heroine of the Regency period. This paper takes research on Elizabeth's emancipation one step further by providing evidence from contrasts between Elizabeth and three other female characters- Jane, Caroline and Charlotte.

The first example shows Elizabeth's distinct nature, highlighting her emancipated position, in comparison to her sister, Jane. They are deeply attached to each other and yet offer a sharp contrast in their temperaments and manners. Jane's physical beauty outshines most of the girls living in her neighbourhood. At a ball, she is referred to be the only handsome girl in the room. On the contrary, Elizabeth is considered by Darcy: “tolerable, but not handsome enough to tempt...”.(16) However, this test of physical appearance does not define the true nature of their characters. Elizabeth feels offended by the remarks of Darcy and makes him realize his mistake in the course of the novel. She has her own charm and proves it at many places in the novel. Elizabeth is a very self-assertive girl, and her feminine pride is deeply hurt, and after that, she begins to harbour a grievance and a prejudice against him. When Mr Darcy proposes her, she promptly rejects the proposal, and frankly states her reasons for doing so. Elizabeth shows no hesitation in telling Darcy about the grounds on which she rejected him. Darcy's remarks made Elizabeth to find faults in Darcy, and her mind involuntarily takes her away from him. Elizabeth, as far as possible, tries to avoid his presence. John Hardy points out: “The relationship of Elizabeth and Darcy begins in a haughty aloofness on his side and a readiness to oppose him on hers; yet her constant challenging of him fosters and holds his interest.”(62) Elizabeth is a dynamic person who is always ready to take initiatives. For example, She urges her father to stop Lydia from going to Brighton with Mrs Forster and tells her father of the perils to which Lydia would be exposed during her stay in that city. However, her father does not take any action to comply with the advice of Elizabeth. Jane, on the

contrary, is entirely a passive girl who represents a typical Regency-era woman. At the time of Jane Austen, it was a common practice for women to conceal their emotions from men. Jane's beauty, no doubt, attracts Mr Bingley but her emotionally reserved nature as dictated by social norms failed to convince Mr Bingley of her love. Ironically, Jane's cautious display of emotions nearly caused her to lose his affection. Her passive nature makes her a weak character in comparison to Elizabeth. It was her passivity that made Mr Darcy to believe that Jane had no feelings for Mr Bingley. He wrote in his letter to Elizabeth:

“Your sister, I also watched. Her look and manners were open, cheerful, and engaging as ever, but without any symptom of peculiar regard, and I remained convinced from the evening's scrutiny, that though she received his attentions with pleasure, she did not invite them by any participation of sentiment.”(212)

Jane's reserved behaviour is the result of her social upbringing, and she adopts it to maintain society's image of an ideal woman. In this regard, Jane typified a traditional woman who hides her real feelings to secure a husband. Through her compliance with the expected female act, Jane confirms to the conventional belief that women must modify themselves for men.

Elizabeth, on the contrary, is courageous and presents her thoughts as they come to her, as discussed earlier, whereas Jane is simple-minded, passive and cautious in expressing her true feelings. Jane is surprised by the bold and frank comment of Elizabeth about her temperament: “ You never see a fault in anybody. All the world are good and agreeable in your eyes.”(19) Jane is ready to sacrifice her individuality to find a suitable husband, whereas Elizabeth is bold and assertive in her nature and, thus, is representative of feminist qualities not found within a stereotypical Regency-era woman. She firmly believes that women should not be passive, as evidenced through her rejection of Darcy after overhearing her remarks about her. Elizabeth's qualities of an emancipated heroine are seen in her refusal to submit to the dictates of society. The social system expected women to be subservient to the wishes of men and those of a higher social status. Towards the end of the novel, Elizabeth frankly highlights the contrast between Jane and herself. Jane expresses her wish that Elizabeth should also get the kind of husband she is going to get, after which Elizabeth answers that even forty husbands of the kind Jane is going to get would not make her happy because she does not have Jane's disposition. She states and makes the difference clear: “Till I have your disposition and your goodness, I never can have your happiness.”(366) However, Elizabeth also gets a husband who is sure to make her as happy as Jane is going to be with Mr Bingley.

The next example of character contrast is that of Elizabeth and Caroline Bingley. These two characters are certainly used as foils in the novel. Caroline represents the women of Regency times who has been educated as per the societal expectations.

For her, intellectual achievements are of no use. On the other hand, Elizabeth is interested in intellectual pursuits though she did not get formal education and instructions administered by a governess. Caroline Bingley is wealthy but lacks the qualities of a strong character. She feels unsafe and is very subservient to Mr Darcy and tries not to speak her mind too much. She is agreeable to everything that Darcy says and does. Despite her best efforts to woo Mr Darcy, we see that he pays more attention to Elizabeth. Like a typical subservient woman, she tries to catch the attention of Mr Darcy by claiming that she enjoys reading though the truth is opposite to her claim:

“At length, quite exhausted by the attempt to be amused with her own book, which she had only chosen because it was the second volume of his, she gave a great yawn and said, ‘How pleasant it is to spend an evening in this way! I declare after all there is no enjoyment like reading! How much sooner one tires of anything than of a book! –When I have a house of my own, I shall be miserable if I have not an excellent library.’”(64)

Caroline wants to adopt those characteristics which she thinks Mr Darcy would like to appreciate and approve. This approach of Caroline makes her a weak character when we judge her from a feminist perspective. Feminists believe that a woman’s worth is not to be determined by a male-dominated society, but Caroline’s actions are against feminist ideals. It is clear that Caroline feels threatened by Elizabeth Bennet, and that is why she uses every means at her disposal to humiliate and downgrade her. An episode proves the point. We Know, Elizabeth goes to meet Jane at Bingley’s estate when she heard the news of her illness. She went there with “weary ankles, dirty stockings, and a face glowing with the warmth of exercise.”(39-40) After seeing Elizabeth, Ms Bingley puts on a reassuring smile but behind Elizabeth’s back talks of her lack of style, taste and beauty. She discusses with Mrs Hurst that Elizabeth’s long walk through the mud is “an abominable sort of conceited independence, a most country-town indifference to decorum.”(43) This conversation presents a contrast between Elizabeth and Caroline and highlights the superficiality and hypocrisy of society in general. For Caroline, self-praise is important whereas Elizabeth’s primary concern is to know about the health of her sister. This scene highlights the very essence of Elizabeth’s character. Almost all the characters are desperate to make a good impression on Bingley family, yet Elizabeth is seen standing in their doorway caked in mud, not caring about her appearance but only for the well-being of her sister.

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“Oh...I heard you before, but I could not immediately determine what to say in reply. You wanted me, I know, to say ‘Yes,’ that you might have the pleasure of despising my taste; but I always delight in overthrowing those kind of schemes, and cheating a person of their premeditated contempt. I have, therefore, made up my mind to tell you, that I do not want to dance a reel at all—and now despise me if you dare.” (60)

Mr Darcy’s response to Elizabeth’s rejection was surprising. He said that he would not despise her. Elizabeth’s refusal to dance with a male of higher class testifies her independence, illustrating that women can state their own minds. The comparison of these characters shows that Caroline is an “accomplished woman” from the social point of view but what finally happens is that Elizabeth catches the attention of Mr Darcy because of her directness, sincerity and good nature in contrast to Caroline’s duplicity.

The contrast between Elizabeth and Charlotte Lucas further supports the claim that Elizabeth fights for individuality and emerges out to be a free woman. Charlotte and Elizabeth are close friends and share their opinions with each other. However, they differ significantly in their approach to marriage. Ms Lucas is intelligent and worldly-wise in her thoughts and actions. She is a keen observer and knows what it means to marry well. Charlotte perfectly understands the nature of courtship and marriage. She tells that men need encouragement, and that women would be advised to show more than they actually feel to get affections of men. Somewhat like a typical Regency-era woman, she declares:

“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. They always continue to grow sufficiently unlike afterwards to have their share of vexation; and it is better to know as little as possible of the defects of the person with whom you are to pass your life.”(29)

Charlotte is seen desperate to find a husband and looks for an opportunity to attract Mr Collins immediately after Elizabeth rejects his marriage proposal. Elizabeth is disappointed to observe that Charlotte pretends to enjoy Mr Collins' stories because she wants him to be in good humour. she does not idealises marriage and believes that "it was the only honourable provision for well-educated women of small fortune."(137) Charlotte sacrifices her own opinion and gladly accepts social dictate that a woman must marry to secure her future. Her reflections on the engagement to Mr Collins illustrate her purpose:

"The stupidity with which he was favoured by nature must guard his courtship from any charm that could make a woman wish for its continuance; and Miss Lucas, who accepted him solely from the pure and disinterested desire of an establishment, cared not how soon that establishment were gained... Mr Collins, to be sure, was neither sensible nor agreeable; his society was irksome, and his attachment to her must be imaginary. But still, he would be her husband... This preservative she had now obtained; and at the age of twenty-seven, without having ever been handsome, she felt all the good luck of it."(136-37)

Charlotte's announcement of her decision to marry Mr Collins at the cost of independence made Elizabeth to react with astonishment and dismay. Elizabeth could not believe that Ms Lucas had decided to marry Mr Collins for economic reasons. The decision of Charlotte shows that these two close companions have opposing outlooks on marriage. The conflict between traditional and non-traditional views is seen on the issue of marriage. Charlotte marriage was the result of a deliberate scheme, and the whole family was overjoyed, but her close friend Elizabeth felt restless. We see a gap between these two close friends after this incident. Charlotte adopts the conventional role of a wife, and instead of fighting for women's emancipation and autonomy, she favours a traditional approach. Ursula Tidd argues, "Women have been traditionally prevented from working outside the home and, hence been obliged to attach themselves to ensure their survival and that of their children."(52) Feminists suggest that a woman should pursue economic independence, but Charlotte is not fit for this role. When Elizabeth paid a visit to her establishment and found Charlotte behaving like a traditional married woman she felt sad to see Charlotte and uttered, "it was melancholy to leave her to such society!- But she had chosen it with her eyes open."(232) Charlotte did not ask for compassion as she "had sacrificed every better feeling to worldly advantage"(140)

Elizabeth views on marriage are contrary to Charlotte. She refuses to accept that "happiness in marriage is entirely a matter of chance."(29) Elizabeth articulates that a good marriage is a union that must have an advantage for both. Elizabeth's understanding of worldly affairs and her critical approach put her above all other characters in the novel. Tony Tanner remarks that Elizabeth is an "isolated figure trapped in constricting web of small

number of simple people."(126) Elizabeth remains unmoved by economic considerations in marriage. Her rejection of Mr Collins and the first marriage proposal of Darcy supports the argument. In the beginning, Mr Darcy takes Elizabeth lightly and considers her of lower status. Elizabeth, like a feminist heroine, makes Mr Darcy realise her independence and anti-traditional approach towards marriage. Her commitment to fight for individual aspirations draws the interest of Mr Darcy. He admits that he is attracted to Elizabeth for her genuine personality, as she gives her valid opinions of society. Elizabeth's unconventional attitude and views had an indelible impact on Mr Darcy personality. He modifies himself and writes to Elizabeth to clear her mind. Elizabeth accepts second marriage proposal only after being convinced that Mr Darcy would not hamper her personal growth after marriage. She introspects thus:

"She began now to comprehend that he was exactly the man, who, in disposition and talents, would most suit her. His understanding and temper, though unlike her own, would have answered all her wishes. It was a union that must have been to the advantage of both."(327)

Hence, the disagreement between the two friends on the issue of marriage shows that Charlotte behaves like a traditional woman of Regency-era, whereas Elizabeth acts like an emancipated heroine fighting for individual fulfilment. For Charlotte, happiness in marriage is a matter of chance, on the other hand, Elizabeth takes marriage as a long process of betterment. For Elizabeth, marriage is not for dominance but for respecting the otherness of the other. Sartre acknowledges that we exist in a world of others, and the relationship is a battle for supremacy:

"While I attempt to free myself from the hold of the other, the other is trying to free himself from mine; while I seek to enslave the Other, the Other seeks to enslave me."(Tidd 32)

Elizabeth, no doubt, thinks beyond the general human nature and seems to be more interested in self-other relation based on cooperation and solidarity. In this way, the character of Elizabeth approaches near that of a completely emancipated figure among the Regency era heroines.

Conclusion

The comparison between Elizabeth and three female characters, namely Jane, Caroline and Charlotte shows that it was tough for a woman of Regency-era to preserve her self-respect and individuality. We notice that Jane's reserved behaviour is the result of her social upbringing, and she adopts it to maintain society's image of the ideal woman. In this regard, Jane typified a traditional woman who hides her real feelings to secure a husband. Through her compliance with the expected female act, Jane confirms to the conventional belief that women must modify themselves for men. Caroline wants to adopt those characteristics which she thinks Mr Darcy would like to appreciate and approve. This approach of Caroline makes her a weak character when we judge her from a feminist perspective. Charlotte sacrifices her own opinion and gladly accepts social dictate that a women must marry

to secure her future. For her, happiness in marriage is a matter of chance. However, Elizabeth is a dynamic person who is always ready to take initiatives and defies the societal norms set for a marriageable woman. She doesn't care about rank, position and money. Moreover she is independent in her thoughts and doesn't hesitate in expressing she is independent in her thoughts and doesn't hesitate in expressing her viewpoint or opinion. Elizabeth views on marriage make her an emancipated heroine in real sense. For her, marriage is to the advantage of both. She not only maintains her individuality but also modifies the character of Mr Darcy. Her courage, intelligence, and practical knowledge of worldly affairs make her a role model to be followed by those women who is fighting for their emancipation.

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