

# Jane Austen's Treatment of "Love and Marriage" In Pride and Prejudice That Becomes the Theme of "Gender Injustice": A Review

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**Abstract** – The objective of this research paper is to look at the ways in which the contemporary realities of women's life and their position in society inform the treatment of these aspects in the article. This article seems to hold mixed views about marriage, seeing it as a culmination of woman's development but also as a diminishment. Though the words identified in Jane Austen's work with the right marriage are affection and esteem, even where these were present in life, things were often different. The reality of marriage for most women in the eighteenth century also meant repeated childbirth with the attendant physical comfort, followed by years spent in child\_ rearing. The use of marriage as one of the two most common conventional endings in fiction provides a sense of closure, and makes it possible to bring together the themes and depiction of private and public life. Women were extremely dependent on marriage, and their education aimed at preparing them for this role alone by teaching them skills considered to make them more attractive to men.

**Key Words** – Contemporary, Culmination, Diminishment, Affection, Esteem, Childbirth, Child\_ Rearing, Skills etc.

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"Pride and Prejudice" follows the turbulent relationship between Elizabeth Bennet, the daughter of a country gentleman, and Fitzwilliam Darcy, a rich aristocratic landowner. They must overcome the titular sins of Pride and Prejudice in order to fall in love and marry. 'Pride' and 'Prejudice' are picked out as two of the text's main themes and are considered with reference to the humanist conception of character. These two themes are seen to open up several others, especially those of love and marriage. The themes are also considered in terms of the individual characters, in the portrayals of which they are constitutive factors.

Jane Austen's interest in pride could be seen as part of her concern with another theme, that of exploring whether the possibilities of a meaningful and durable love relationship (that ends in marriage) between a young man and a young women, do really exist in the society of her times. Marriage is analysed on two levels – is terms of external obstacles like patriarchy and property relations and in terms of the characters' personal attributes. Pride seems to be among the most harmful of such attributes since it has to be overcome by a process of self-education before love can culminate in marriage.

In all love comedies, and more generally, in literature that centres itself around the theme of romantic or sexual love, the man-woman relationship

is invested with an extraordinary significance and is considered an experience that transforms the lovers. The best example is the exalted notion of love in the medieval romances where it is considered at par with religious devotion. The novel had emerged in the eighteenth century in conscious opposition to the traditional romances. Most of the attitudes and conventions found in the earlier romances were discarded as outdated and irrelevant. An exception was, however, made in the case of love as a theme and the high value attached to it as an experience. The eighteenth century witnessed the emergence of a widely popular tradition of novels where love was a dominant theme, Richardson's *Pamela* being the prototype of this kind of novel. Love was treated here as a prized experience comparable to that in the romances, but there were important differences. For example, love was not shown in isolation from other emotions and urges, but had to grow and develop by countering their presence. The novel of sensibility which followed in the second half of the eighteenth century maintained, on the psychological and social realism achieved by Richardson in *Pamela* but the gap between the noble aspirations of the lovers and the crudely materialistic and manipulative social environment became much wider here.

Jane Austen discarded the indulgent subjectivity of the novel of sensibility and restored to love comedy the realism it had earlier possessed in the writings of Richardson and Fielding. In order to understand the distinctive features of Jane Austen's treatment of love in *Pride and Prejudice* we should perhaps go back, as A.N. Kaul has suggested in *The Action of English Comedy* to Shakespeare's comedy of love which represents the initial break with the medieval notions of romantic love.

The most important distinction between the courtly love of the medieval romances and love as portrayed in Shakespeare's comedies, however, lies in the latter's being a way of self-affirmation and expression for the individual, whereas courtly love had demanded a total surrender of the self. While giving priority to love as a theme, Shakespeare did not separate it from social activities since as mode of self-affirmation it formed an integral part of the larger agenda of general emancipation.

The blending of the personal and the social significance of love in Shakespeare's comedy made it quite natural that it should take the form of a durable union in marriage. In post-Renaissance society a space had been created for marriage to become simultaneously a union between two individuals which signified the sanctity, intensity and persistent strength of their love and an institution which fitted them appropriately into prevailing social hierarchies. In the comedy of love, marriage was presented as a culminating point in this twin process of self-affirmation and social adjustment. When the love comedy made its appearance in the eighteenth century novel, it was basically as a continuation of this tradition. However, we often find in these novels divergence between the significance of marriage as the culminating point of love between two individuals, and its meaning as a means of their incorporation into the prevailing social hierarchies. The novel at this time also explores the limits within which assertion of an individual autonomy could be accepted as valid. The pressure in this regard was particularly acute in the case of women who were neither accorded the full status of independent, sensitive and rational human beings nor given parity in property rights and economic opportunities.

The comedy of love, therefore, had to include as a necessary part of its structure a serious and sustained probing of the conditions under which the possibilities of a meaningful and intense love relationship could be actualized in contemporary social conditions. For a proper understanding of Jane Austen's handling of the theme of love and marriage, it will be helpful to take into consideration a significant change which took place in the social and cultural climate of English society at the specific juncture when she wrote her novels. The aftermath of the French Revolution and the protracted war between England and France made the social groups in the culturally dominant alliance extremely distrustful of

the radical politics implicit in the ideal of freedom and dignity of the individual they had accepted earlier as an integral part of their collective outlook and value system. The emphasis on an individual's right to think and choose for himself had by this time become so pronounced in the general outlook that when this conservative shift took place, it became virtually impossible to give up these rights completely. The dilemma was resolved by muting down the political dimension of the ideal of individual autonomy substantially but affirming at the same time with even greater intensity than before, its operative power in the private sphere of personal relationships. It is this intensified affirmation of the ideal in the restricted sphere of personal relationships that enabled Jane Austen to lend authenticity and force to her projection of love between Elizabeth and Darcy as a mode of affirmation of their autonomy as individuals and reinforce this impression through her depiction of love between Jane and Bingley.

It has, however, to be emphasized that in bringing this superior conception of love centre-stage, Jane Austen does not underestimate the presence of attitudes and impulsions in society which go against it. She recognizes the cynicism and disdain for women and the view of them as mere objects of pleasure or as the route to instant prosperity, which were prevalent among a section of the dominant social and cultural groups. Wickham represents this attitude in *Pride and Prejudice* though Jane Austen takes only a limited interest in the moral and psychological make-up of such superficially amiable rakes.

There is another negative attitude which Jane Austen takes more seriously – that of the materialism and economic individualism of the up-coming middle classes. Jane Austen deliberately shows the love relationship slowly gaining strength and maturing but contending against the pull of this negative force present everywhere. The varied forms it can take are brought out vividly before us through different characters in *Pride and Prejudice*. We can see it in its grosser forms in the dullness and pomposity of Mr. Collins or the obtrusively meddlesome and domineering behaviour of Lady Catherine. It is present in characters like Mrs. Philip who loves to collect and transmit idle gossip. We can also see it in the supercilious finickiness of the Bingley sisters. Mrs. Bennet, too, is governed by this spirit as her obsessive concern for the marriage of her daughters is based on the presumption that daughters are perishable commodities to be disposed of quickly before their market value goes down and the young man to whom they are to be married off are reluctant customers to be assiduously cultivated to make them agree to complete the transaction.

Jane Austen presents two pairs of lovers in the novel in order to show that the concept of individual autonomy she is invoking is quite

complex and a single pair of characters would not give us a fair idea of the full range of human qualities she wants to put into their love-relationship. While Elizabeth and Darcy represent an actively assertive form of independence and critical intelligence, the secondary emphasis falls on Jane's and Bingley's candour and goodwill. For characters like Elizabeth and Darcy or Jane and Bingley, marriage primarily means culmination of a love relationship which starts with mutual physical attraction but necessarily includes feelings of mutual respect, esteem and confidence" (II, XIX). Most marriages in the novel do not conform to this ideal, but the manner in which the story of the heroine's love has been built up demonstrates that such an ideal has sufficient social validity and is to be recognized as a real possibility that can materialize in the normal course of happening in the prevailing social environment. All the four characters who successfully achieve marriages of love are normal products of the middle-class way of life and have their distinctive space in the society. The structure of society with its class and gender inequities is not challenged politically, but substantive opportunities for fulfillment of love are located within its ambit.

This emphasis on the "self-education" of the hero and heroine and the insistence on discovering a vantage-point of compatibility between love and prudence, both indicate that Jane Austen's treatment of love and marriage is located in an exploration of the best possibilities available within the limits of the existing social order. Her challenges to class-based snobbery, patriarchal smugness and bourgeois philistinism has to be viewed in this perspective.

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