

# Victorian Consciousness and Social Realities in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*

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**ABSTRACT:** *This research paper explores the growing Victorian Consciousness and the dominating social realities in the famous novel Pride and Prejudice (1813) of Jane Austen. The main focus of Jane Austen is to depict the Victorian mannerism and social realities in this novel with an aim to reflect her sociological perspective. Walter Scott was a historical novelist who became a continental novelist and so long as he remained alive he eclipsed Jane Austen as Walter Allen observes in his book The English Novel. Scott wrote about the struggles and romances of the Scottish people in a traditional dialect. But Jane Austen depicted the social and moral evils of the Victorian Age infected by hypocrisy, snobbery and pedantry. She took up the social issues and all her novels convey a moral message. In Pride and Prejudice, Jane Austen reflects the social realities of the English society. In this novel, Austen took up the social theme of marriage, mirroring the mindset of the Victorians in an easy and flowing lyrical prose.*

**KEY WORDS:** *Consciousness, Realities, Dominating Perspective, Sociological, Cultural*

Jane Austen wrote six famous novels which are read even today because of their socialistic value. Jane Austen has emerged as the critic of her age and has classical significance. *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) is read and enjoyed even today as it showed the daily lives and values of the Middle Classes of England. The Victorian Age was male dominated patriarchal society as women were not given proper rights and they were considered as the "angel of homes." The novel *Pride and Prejudice* unfolds a love story commenting on the vices of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Jane Austen took up the theme of marriage in this novel in humorous and comic style. The plot of the novel reflected the role of money and the problems the parents face in finding suitable matches for their grown up daughters.

Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* was not well received by the critics during her life time. However, the novel sold well as the first edition sold out at about 1,500 copies. Critics highly praised Austen's characterization and her deep concern for the social realities. After Austen's death in 1817, her novels continued becoming popular among the middle classes. Richard Simpson discussed the complexity of Austen's work, including her use of irony to expose the evils of the Victorian Age. *Pride and Prejudice* is a very well-known novel. Innumerable critics have analyzed it and given their opinion of it. Everett Zimmerman is one of those critics; he states in his article "Pride and Prejudice that this novel is Jane Austen's best novel. He praises Austen for taking up the social and moral issues to correct the tastes of the Victorian middle classes who had grown greedy and corrupt. *Pride and Prejudice* is a great novel depicting the Victorian consciousness; men and their manners in the most original and simple style. The novel is interesting and popular because it has so many interesting components: an intriguing plot, comical language full of irony, and many well-described characters with original personality traits and common flaws. Jane Austen's characters are drawn from the common life and they exhibit all the oddities and whims and behave in a typical Victorian manner.

It is pertinent to note that when novel reading had become very popular with the rise of the middle class, women had started going to the offices to earn money and Fielding had given an eminent place to novel in the genre of literature with the publication of his *Joseph Andrews*. Jane Austen lived at a time when the historical novels of Walter Scott were very popular on the continent. No wonder Jane Austen remained buried so long as Walter Scott dominated the domain of fiction. Ann Radcliffe's popular 'Gothic' romances were also popular. Jane Austen wrote novels to woo the middle classes of the Victorian Age portraying the typical Victorian women with all the vices; snobbery, pedantry, hypocrisy and pretensions. Women of Jane Austen became very popular in the Victorian Age as she presented powerful and dominating women. Jane Austen was a keen observer of human nature as she collected the ideas and opinions of her friends and relatives and used all material in conceiving the plots of her novels. She gathered her material from the life and much depended on the life experiences of her relatives and friends. Jane Austen is powerful in her style in depicting the social realities. She takes a few sentences and is able to draw a life like character in the novel. Her characters belong to all sections of society and they mirror the moods and tastes of the Victorian people. It has been observed that the novels of Jane Austen have social and cultural significance as they document the real life of the Victorian Age. Most of the women belong to southern England and the places and landscapes are described vividly because Jane Austen had lived in these places. There are many scenes of dances; parties; picnics and drawing discussions conforming to the Victorian code. All her novels are family dramas and in each novel Jane Austen takes up a social problem. . Austen used fiction to describe social reality within her own time. The range of Jane Austen is limited as she concentrates on the problems and challenges of the middle classes. The important social themes are marriage, love, divorces and loss of property and snobbery of the upper classes. Emma for example is a big snob and Jane Austen has used the tool of irony to cut her to size in the novel.

Jane Austen has created life like characters that live by the Victorian standards. Each character of Jane Austen represents a section of society as his struggles are portrayed in a universal manner. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Jane Austen has taken up the problem of marriage. In the Victorian Age, it was very hard for women to find a suitable match. There were three social customs in the Victorian age; the parents of the girls had to pay huge dowry to the bridegroom and it was very difficult for the middle class father to arrange for the marriage of his daughter. Most of the girls would go to nunnery or would resort to prostitution. Mr. Bennet married Mrs. Bennet on the premise of her "youth and beauty" which inevitably faded and revealed a woman of "weak understanding and illiberal mind" that he simply put up with because he "was not of a disposition to seek comfort for the disappointment which his own imprudence had brought on" (Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* 137). The novel *Pride and*

*Prejudice* reveals the anxieties and tensions of Mrs. Bennet who is all the time worried about the future of her grown up daughters. Jane Austen is a master in creating characters. Each character has an individualistic personality but each is in the grip of a social or moral problem. Mr. Bennet is a typical Victorian with his own tastes and manners. Mrs. Bennet is a stressed Victorian woman burdened with the future of her grown up daughters. Mr. Bingley belongs to the elite class and has an amiable nature. His friend Mr. Darcy is the foil of Bingley; he is proud and full of evil intentions. He suffers from the superiority complex and Jane Austen uses her wit and irony to expose and ridicule his mannerism. All the five daughters of Mrs. Bennet have different nature. Jane is simple, innocent and never speaks evil of others. Elizabeth is a clever girl who always has her own opinion. Mary likes reading classic books who actually is a pedant. Kitty is also in the grip of depression since she is growing and it is difficult to find a suitable match. Lydia is a girl who follows exotic things, handsome man, and is somehow a little profligate.

Jane Austen created male characters to depict the moral and social dilemmas of the people. Some characters are weak and look mean and greedy. Some are intellectual and have strong mind. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Mr. Bingley is rich and intelligent; he is an acute judge of a character and his presence in the novel is always thrilling. On the contrary, Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy is the portrayal of a dehumanized individual who can go to any limit to oppress others. Mr. Darcy is a cultured Victorian gentleman; he is educated and is an artist and good in conversation but all his good qualities are unappealing since at heart he is mean and cruel. He is handsome, tall and has the qualities of a noble gentleman (7). Mr. Darcy has a charming personality and no wonder when he meets her at the ball in Netherfield she is spell bound. Mr. Darcy is the biggest attraction at the ball. However, he is hated by all because of his vain and mean nature:

He was looked at with great admiration for about half the evening, till his manners gave a disgust which turned the tide of his popularity; for he was discovered to be proud, to be above his company (8).

Matthew Arnold observes that art is a criticism of life; he praised William Wordsworth because his poetry teaches us how to live and is directed towards the problems of man. Carlyle and Ruskin were great social reformers. Jane Austen also took up the responsibility to correct the tastes of the Victorian people. Darcy is courageous, calm, intellectual and intelligent. He has all the virtues of a noble man but the vices of vanity, pride, meanness and malice dehumanized him. Jane Austen uses the weapons of wit to expose his malicious nature. Jane Austen is seriously concerned with the moral problems and the social realities of her times. He is the representative of all the upper class people who had grown rich and proud. The parents, the daughters, and even the young men are all representative personages of different groups.

The novel is a social document highlighting the moods and the temper of the Victorian Age. Throughout *Pride and Prejudice*, Jane Austen provides examples of the Bennett and Gardiner couples as a lens for the eventual future of the Wickham and Darcy couples, respectively.

Jane Austen exposes the social vices of the Victorian Age where dowry was very common and the parents of the grown up daughters suffered from anxieties and depression. Her bold argument that marriages cannot be successful unless they are founded upon attractions beyond physicality was unprecedented. However, it was Austen's boldness and shock value that endowed her novel with fame and attention. Austen was successful in crafting a story that entertained while simultaneously lashing at the vices of the age. Jane Austen's main focus was to expose the destructive nature of pedantry, hypocrisy, vanities and prejudices and pretensions of the Victorian middle class people.

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