

Plight of Women in the 18th century Britain: A case study of Elizabeth Bennet in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*

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Abstract

This paper examines the novel in light of feminism and investigates the inequality between the sexes in the 18th century. It aims to portray the societal standards such as patriarchy, domination and marginalization to women. In *Pride and Prejudice*, women have been shown as mere puppets who could not voice their opinions in the family affairs. It examines author's feministic perspective executed through a female character named Elizabeth Bennet, who represents feminism in the novel. Her strong-willed character, wittiness and firm opinions feature her as a feminist. I have done an in depth analysis of the novel focusing on the elements of feminism.

Keywords- Feminism, Victorian Plight, Inequality, Patriarchy, Domination.

Introduction

Jane Austen was born in 1775 in Hampshire, England. Her father was a wealthy clergyman. Jane had six siblings and she was the second eldest among them. As a juvenile, she was fond of writing short stories and used to read the works of many great novelists such as Henry Fielding, Samuel Richardson and Sir Walter Scott etcetera. She was sent to Oxford for her education in the earlier stage of her life. Then, she started writing parodies. Jane was a tall and fine-looking woman but she never got married despite the fact that she had quite a lot of suitors. In 1801, her family shifted to Bath and then to Southampton right after her father's demise. Later on, they got settled in Chawton in 1809. However, she spent her last few years in Hampshire. Being a female writer, she had to write under the pseudonym "A Lady" to get her first couple of novels published. She had written six novel in her lifespan which are as follows; *Sense and Sensibility*, *Mansfield Park*, *Emma*, *Northanger Abbey*, *Persuasion* and *Pride and prejudice*. She has depicted the English society of 18th century in her books. Her writings are based on romance, comedy, irony, sentiments and realism. The gothic and sentimental novels functioned as a source of inspiration for her. Also, she had a keen sense of observation. Most of her novels portray the significant role of women of her time. Her writings throw light on the biased nature of the British society, where men were considered superior than women.

Feminism is a belief that stands for the social equality of the genders. In other words, it is a belief that women should be having equal rights as men. The term feminism encourages women to move towards equality with men. It throws light on the issues such as discrimination, patriarchy and oppression to women. According to the Cambridge Dictionary, feminism is "the belief that women should be allowed the same rights, power and opportunities as men and be treated the same way, or the set of activities intended to achieve this state". However, According to George Ritzer, "Feminism is kind of critical social theory which included in social context, political, economic, and history that is facing by injustice people" (TSP, 448). Moreover, in *Sastra dan Cultural Studies*, Kutha Nyoman Ratna writes, "Feminism is the concept generalization of women. A critical of social theory which have the purpose to obtain women right" (588).

Jane Austen is not only a great novelist, but also a demonstrator of the "feminist tradition" in the English novels. In *Pride and Prejudice*, she explores the female identity and tries to eliminate the inequality between men and women. The character of Elizabeth represents the feminism in the novel. Jane Austen encourages the sense of freedom in women via the main character Elizabeth Bennet, who does not shy away to use her audacity throughout the novel.

Jane Austen makes a very strong remark in the opening line of the novel that puts forth her feministic perspective. She writes "It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune; must be in want of a wife" (Austen 1). This quote exhibits that 18th century women were told to marry rich men in order to advance socially. They had been brainwashed into thinking that they could survive and progress in their life only if they married well-off men. Hence, it posits that people gave no importance to their daughter's feelings and never took their consent into consideration. In chapter one, Mrs.

Bennet says, "Oh! Single, my dear, to be sure! A single man of large fortune; four or five thousand a year. What a fine thing for our girls!" (Austen 1). She uses these wordings to enlighten her husband about a rich gentleman named Mr. Bingley, who is about to buy a property in their neighborhood. This quotation shows the excitement of Mrs. Bennet while considering the idea of marrying off her daughter to Mr. Bingley, who belongs to the upper class. Moreover, she instructs her two elder daughters to impress Mr. Bingley to be in a relationship with one of them. Mrs. Bennet here represents the people who did not let women grow on their own as they made women entirely dependent on men.

Austen recognizes the pathetic condition of women of her time. Austen points out the fact that women's rights were quite limited as they were bound to follow certain restrictions. Consequently, women were having fewer privileges as compared to men. She describes that women did not have the right to claim the inheritance. We come across this fact when Mr. Bennet is found annoyed at the idea of giving away his property to his cousin; Mr. Collins after his death, just because he (Mr. Bennet) has no son. Actually, in case of having no son(s), the property was entailed to the brother or cousin of the owner after his (Mr. Bennet's) death. This evidence supports the argument that society was favorable for men. It is a clear instance of sex based discrimination.

Jane Austen's novel provides insights about the patriarchy culture which was quite prevalent in her time. The English society was male oriented as men had the complete supremacy over women. None of their opinions were taken into consideration. Women had been considered a weaker sex, whereas men were the stronger counterparts. In the novel, dominant nature of men overpowers women. For example, Mr. Bennet acts as the patriarch of the Bennet family. The females of his family, including his wife and daughters live under his influence. Then, Wickham influences Lydia and elopes with her. Apart from this, a female was treated as an inferior being in the family, who looked after the fancies of her husband or other males in the family, be it the father, husband or brother. In *Pride and Prejudice*, all women characters except Elizabeth seem to have accepted the culture of patriarchy, oppression and inequality. So, there was no sense of equality in the British society.

Elizabeth plays the role of a protagonist in the novel. She is the only female character who does not come under men's influence throughout the novel. She has the ability to take bold decisions on her own. Elizabeth confronts people with her sensible wit and strong arguments.

Jane Austen has used this character as her mouthpiece. Elizabeth is the one who embodies feminism in the course of the novel. At times, she gives very valuable advices to her father about certain issues. She even critiques his father's decision when he gives permission to Lydia for going to Brighton with Mrs. Fosters. She argues, "If you, my dear father, will not take the trouble of checking her exuberant spirits, and of teaching her that her present pursuits are not to be the business of her life, she will soon be beyond the reach of amendment" (Austen 223). This dialogue features her intellectual power. Also, it states that women are no less than men in terms of intellectualism.

Austen portrays the intelligence of Elizabeth Bennet at many stages in the novel. For example, in chapter 29, Lady Catherine gets surprised at how a young girl like Elizabeth could be so smart. It is proved when Lady Catherine asks Elizabeth, "you give your opinion very decidedly for so young a person.-Pray what is your age?" (Austen 144). Then, Austen writes, "Lady Catherine seemed quite astonished at not receiving a direct answer; and Elizabeth suspected herself to be the first creature who had ever dared to trifle with so much dignified impertinence" (Austen 144). It shows her self-confidence which enables her to tackle challenging situations.

She breaks away all the stereotypes that were enforced on women in the 18th century. She takes full advantage of her audacity and takes all her decisions on her own, be it the decision of her marriage or any other matter. When Lady Catherine de Bourgh tries to compare her lifestyle with that of Mr. Darcy, she gives her a befitting reply. She says "he is a gentleman; I am a gentleman's daughter; so far we are equal" (Austen 307). It states that she does not consider herself inferior in any way and that she cannot be cowed down easily.

Education asymmetry also forms the roots of feminism in the novel. Women of middle class or those belonging to the lower strata of the society were kept deprived of education.

Then, who taught you? Who attended to you? Without a governess, you must have been neglected. Compared with some families, I believe we were; but such of us as wished to learn never wanted the means. We were always encouraged to read, and had all the masters that were necessary. Those who chose to be idle certainly might. (Austen 207)

These excerpts have been taken from a long conversation between Lady Catherine and Elizabeth Bennet. It claims that no governess is hired for Elizabeth and her sisters. People never considered the idea of giving proper education to women as they thought women were not as capable as men.

Lastly, Charlotte Lucas serves as a foil to the character of Elizabeth Bennet. Charlotte is ever ready to compromise and be subservient to the patriarchal tradition. She accepts the proposal of Mr. Collins on the basis of rationality of thoughts rather than any emotional or romantic influence. She 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”(Austen 110). This statement depicts women’s obsession with materialistic possessions. It explores that women of Austen’s era were completely subservient to their male counterparts. Hence, this also counts as feminism in the novel.

Conclusion

The whole analysis deals with the problems such as domination, patriarchy, oppression and inequality etcetera. These issues have been discussed vis-a-vis feminism. The novel shows that Austen is critical of the gender discriminations prevailing in the 18th century British society. However, this novel reveals numerous problems that women were dealing with. In 18th century, women were bound to so many limitations as opposed to men. Austen did not shy away to expose those limitations and horrible aspects of her society. She depicts the materialistic nature of the people as she throws light on their obsession with money and position. Moreover, the position of women in terms of inheritance was quite weak. They did not have the right to claim inheritance. Austen reveals the inferior image of women in light of feminism. She talks about women’s subservient nature towards men and shows that how women were completely reliant on their counterparts. Also, she exposed the double standards of the British society. During 18th century, the society was favorable for men only while women were given little or no importance. The society was extremely unfair for women as sex based discrimination was at its peak. The character of Elizabeth sets an example for women that they need to know their value and that they are equally worthy as men are. It also turns spotlight on the notion that women must be given equal opportunities and proper space in the society as they are human beings too. It seems that Austen’s purpose was to bring about social change and equality in the society through this novel.

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