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Marriage as Survival: Exploring the Economics of Wealth and Gendered Expectation in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*

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Abstract: In nineteenth-century England, the dynamics between marriage and wealth were closely intertwined, significantly influencing who people married, controlling the flow of wealth among families, and reinforcing gender expectations for men and women. Among the upper and middle classes, marriage played two specific roles. First and foremost, marriage in the nineteenth century was an economic institution. It functioned as a means of transaction to ensure the flow of wealth. Second, it was a personal relationship held up in much sacred terms. Marriage was a means of exerting control over women's properties and was also a means of consolidating one's social status. The equation of love in marriages was totally out of the question. This aspect is widely explored in *Pride and Prejudice* through the marriage prospects of Mr. Collins, Charlotte Lucas, and Mrs. Bennet. An exception to this is the marriage between Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth Bennet, who were initially at odds due to their respective pride and prejudice. Although their marriage is found to have an element of love, it cannot be neglected that Mr. Darcy's fortune did play a role in securing this alliance. This article attempts to explore through the characters and their relationships, how wealth and social status influence the partners they choose in marriage, and how gender expectations are reinforced in society. Austen, having lived in an era where women were still fighting to claim their rights, paints the picture of the society that she inhabited and critiques its tendencies using the witty, sarcastic dialogues of her character, Elizabeth Bennet, thereby challenging the established conventions. Her novel continues to inspire generations of readers and is still relevant in the current scenario.

Keywords: Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, Marriage, Wealth, Gender Expectations, Social Status.

Jane Austen is a well-known writer of the Romantic era. She is a widely read novelist of English Literature whose works deal with issues of marriage, class, social status, women's expected societal roles, etc. Austen was born on 16th December 1775 in Hampshire, England, to Reverend George Austen and his wife Cassandra Austen. She was educated at home by her father and her brothers, Henry and James, using her father's library to broaden her knowledge, which inspired her to write short satirical sketches as a young girl. "In the words of Park Honan, a

biographer of Austen, the Austen household had an open, amused, easy intellectual atmosphere.” (Austen 3) Her novels explored the anxieties of women in securing a wealthy suitor to secure their livelihood, and how their wealth and property were, ironically, not theirs to claim; instead, they went into their husbands’ safe-deposit boxes. The lack of autonomy, power, and social mobility of women is highlighted in her works, which she critiques with witty dialogues. Austen is known for her domestic realism and social commentary. Some of her works include *Northanger Abbey*, *Emma*, *Sense and Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Mansfield Park*, *Persuasion*, etc. Most of her works were published anonymously. At the age of forty-one, Austen was diagnosed with Addison’s disease and died on 18th July 1817, which was a tragic loss to the literary landscape. Her identity as a writer was only revealed after her death. Her rise to fame as a renowned writer came only after her death. Her works are now held in high regard and have become part of popular culture. Many of her works are prescribed for study at various levels of education and have also been adapted into widely popular films, thus ensuring that her ideas and views are still alive through her masterpieces.

Pride and Prejudice, initially titled *First Impressions*, was published in 1813 when Austen was around twenty to twenty-one years old. The novel, much renowned for its plot and social commentary, reveals the institution of marriage as only based on securing wealth and social status, and the gender expectations imposed upon men and women. It also explores the marginalization of women as mere commodities to be exchanged for social gain. The plot involves Mr. and Mrs. Bennet and their beautiful daughters Jane, Elizabeth, Mary, Kitty, and Lydia. As a novel of manners, it traces the development of the relations between these daughters and their prospective suitors, especially the tumultuous relationship of the protagonists, Elizabeth and Darcy. The title alludes to how this couple is initially against one another because of one’s pride and one’s prejudice, eventually overcomes the obstacles.

Through their story, Austen also paints the nineteenth-century English society and its beliefs about marriage, especially through the characters of Mrs. Bennet and Ms. Charlotte Lucas, wherein both consider marriage as a means of securing their future lives. Mrs. Bennet is eager to get her daughters, Jane and Elizabeth, married because she believes that only marriage can protect her daughters and ensure their well-being. She is delighted with the prospect of marriage between Jane and the wealthy Mr. Bingley but is heartbroken when she learns that he is not returning to Netherfield for the winter. Her grandiose wishes for Jane were shattered. Similarly, Mr. Collins arrives at Longbourn estate with the prospect of marrying one of his Bennet cousins under the advice of his patroness, Lady Catherine de Bourgh, who is later revealed to be Mr. Darcy’s aunt, so that he could secure his hold on the

estate, which was to be inherited by him after the death of Mr. Bennet. This portrays the nineteenth-century laws on property inheritance, according to which the land or the property is to be only inherited by a male heir of the family. In the absence of a male heir, it will be transferred to the male cousins of the family. Austen reflects on the denial of inheritance for women, which was prevalent during that era.

Another character who marries for security is Charlotte Lucas. Upon being asked in hand for marriage by Mr. Collins, she willingly agrees to be Mrs. Collins to ensure that her future is secure. Although he proposes his love for her, we can see that she later confesses to her dear best friend, Eliza, that she had only agreed to marry him for his social standing and financial security and not out of love. Austen again reflects the nineteenth-century views on marriage as transactional in nature. The sacredness surrounding the marital bond is compensated for by its economic utility.

Later, Elizabeth's prejudice against Darcy's character is heightened upon her encounter with the militia officer, George Wickham, who claims that he was ill-treated by Mr. Darcy despite the promises of care given to him by the late Mr. Darcy. This furthers Elizabeth's disdain for Darcy, accompanied by his remark about her at their first ball that she was not "handsome" (Austen 16) enough for a man like him. "...She is tolerable, but not handsome enough to tempt me; I am in no humour at present to give consequence to young lady who are slighted by other men..." (16) She believed that Darcy was blinded by his pride without acknowledging that she was getting blinded by prejudice which leads her to misjudge his demeanour and temperament.

Darcy, upon overhearing Mrs. Bennet's boastful comments at a ball, urges Mr. Bingley to leave for London and never return to Netherfield. He prompts him to give up courting Jane Bennet, who later receives a letter from Miss Bingley explaining their sudden departure and hinting that her brother is now interested more in Miss Darcy than her. Christmas arrives, and so do Mrs. Bennet's brother and his wife, Mrs. Gardiner, who proposes to Elizabeth to let her sister stay with them for a while, as a change of scenery appears to be necessary for Jane in the present scenario. Thus, Jane goes to live with her aunt and uncle in London. Charlotte had asked her dear Eliza to visit her at her home after her marriage, along with Mr. Lucas and her sister Marie. The day of the proposed visit arrives, and in spring, the trio makes their way to Kent and reaches the Collin household. Charlotte, now Mrs. Collins, is quite relieved to see her dear friend. Elizabeth encounters Lady Catherine de Bourgh, who is astonished when she comes to know that the Bennet household never had a governess to look after and educate the girls. She urges Elizabeth to practice her piano forte. Elizabeth, on the other hand, I was shocked to see a pale and sickly Miss

Bourgh, who is taken care of by Mrs. Jenkinson. She also encounters Mr. Darcy during her stay, wherein she enquires about their sudden departure from Netherfield and the whereabouts of Mr. Bingley. One day, she encounters Mr. Darcy's friend Colonel Fitzwilliam, who reveals to her that Mr. Darcy has saved his friend, probably Mr. Bingley, from an unsuitable romance. Her suspicions about Darcy deepen, and she firmly believes it was Darcy who was the reason that her beloved Jane and Mr. Bingley had drifted apart. This fuels her disregard for him.

Astonishingly, Darcy proposes to Elizabeth, who rejects him with disdain and anger, accusing him of hurting Jane and wronging Mr. Wickham. Later, Darcy responds to her accusations through a letter explaining Wickham's true nature and why he had rejected Jane and Bingley's marriage, making Elizabeth embarrassed by her outburst, naive accusations, and misjudgments, which were influenced by others' opinions of Mr. Darcy. Months later, she visits Darcy's estate, Pemberley, during her tour with the Gardiners. Darcy returns unexpectedly and treats her with warmth and care, which makes her soften towards him. Later, news arrives that Lydia had eloped with Mr. Wickham. Darcy secretly intervenes, bearing the costs to secure their marriage and protect the Bennet family's reputation.

Soon, Mr. Bingley and Mr. Darcy return to Netherfield, where Bingley proposes to Jane. Lady Catherine de Bourgh confronts Elizabeth, asking her to never take Darcy's hand in marriage, which she refutes. Fueled by this, Darcy again made his proposal to Elizabeth, which she gladly and readily accepted. After seeking Mr. Bennet's blessings, she reveals Darcy's generosity in securing Lydia's marriage, protecting the Bennet family's reputation, and clearing the way for their future together. Thus, Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* is a telling commentary on nineteenth-century England, reflecting on its societal views with witty dialogues and inspiring characterization.

Marriage in nineteenth-century England remained an economic institution for securing estates, ensuring financial flow, forming strong alliances, and retaining social hierarchy. "...In a society where lineage and inheritance were of paramount importance, marriage was not only an individual concern but one that affected entire family estates and reputations..." (Dalal 45) It was bound by strict legal and societal frameworks. Dowries were a common practice, especially among families who possessed vast inherited wealth and estates. They functioned as financial inducements to secure an advantageous match. The notion of love was out of question. Young men and women were conditioned to believe that there can be no love in marriage. For women, marriage was a means of ensuring their future stability, and for men, it was a question of social standing and wealth. As Sariwulandari states,

...One of the most significant of these was the tendency to marry for money. In this basic equation, a person sought a spouse based on the dowry receivable and their allowance [1]. This process went both ways; a beautiful woman might be able to snag a rich husband, or a charring handsome man could woo a rich young girl. In this marriage, money was only the consideration. Love was left out, with a feeling that it would develop, as the years went by. (Sariwulandari 186)

This notion is reflected in *Pride and Prejudice* through the anxiety of Mrs. Bennet for her daughters regarding their marriage. She believes that marriage is the only way of securing her daughter's lives. "...The business of her life was to get her daughters married..." (Austen 9) She was conditioned to believe the patriarchal ideology that only a man can save a woman from her misery. "...the girl seems absolutely passive; she is married, given in marriage by her parents. Boys get married, they take a wife. They look to marriage for an enlargement, a confirmation of their existence, but not the mere right to exist; it is a charge they assume voluntarily..." (Beauvoir 418) This also foregrounds another notion of women's identity by Simone de Beauvoir that a woman's identity is not hers to be formed; it is dependent on that of men. Her existence, her body, and her life are to be controlled by men. It also reinforces the belief that women are prone to doom in the absence of male security.

...but she becomes his vassal. He is the economic head of the joint enterprise, and hence he represents it in the view of society. She takes his name; she belongs to his religion, his class, his circle; she joins his family, she becomes his 'half'. She follows wherever his work calls him and determines their place of residence; she breaks more or less decisively with her past, becoming attached to her husband's universe; she gives him her person, virginity and a rigorous fidelity being required. She loses some of the rights legally belonging to an unmarried woman.... (Beauvoir 418-419)

Mrs. Bennet's anxiety for her daughters is repeatedly emphasized in the novel. It can be seen as Austen's way of painting the nineteenth-century society, and a witty remark on their beliefs about marriage. Women were commodified as objects to be delivered to men when they were of age. This reflects that marriage was seen as transactional in nature during that era. The feelings of love and sacredness surrounding the marital institution were stripped away as Charlotte Lucas remarks, "...Happiness in marriage is entirely a matter of chance..." (Austen 29) Charlotte believed that love could occur once the marriage had been secured. This reflects the general tendency of women during that era. "...When she is secure of him, there will be more leisure for falling in love as much as she

chooses..." (28). The issue of objectification of women and dowry problems is prevalent even in the present world. There are many cases of abuse against women because men receive less dowry than promised.

The extent of marriage pressure on women can be seen through Mrs. Bennet persuading Jane and Elizabeth to stay in Netherfield despite Jane's recovery from illness. Ironically, Jane's sickness is caused by Mrs. Bennet's decision to send her away to stay with the Bingley's on horseback rather than in a carriage. Mrs. Bennet concluded that the day would be rainy, so Jane should make her way on horseback. She had already thought that Jane would fall ill, thereby making her stay at Netherfield for days. During her stay, Mr. Bingley's affections for Jane would increase, and Mrs. Bennet hoped for a marriage proposal, thereby seeing victory in her efforts to secure an alliance for her favourite child. Mrs. Bennet, in this sense, can be considered quite ignorant and foolish of the fact that it is her child who is going to be sick because of her persistence. She even went to the extent of not sending a carriage to pick up her daughters upon receiving a letter that Jane had fully recovered, as she had schemed their return only by Tuesday. This shows the lengths to which a mother would go to secure a marriage prospect for their daughters in the nineteenth century.

For men, marriage brings the prospects of securing new wealth, land, resources, and social status. As stated in the famous opening lines of *Pride and Prejudice*, "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife...he is considered the rightful property of someone or other of their daughters." (Austen 7) The use of the term "property" (7) indicates that men were also commodified as transactional objects in the institution of marriage. Man needs a woman for his survival and sustenance. The dowry received in marriage serves for his prospects. Marrying rich secures social standing for both parties. This can be seen in Mr. Collins' arrival at Longbourn with prospects of marrying one of the Bennet sisters and thereby securing his inheritance of the estate as the male heir of the family. He also counted on the dowry he would receive in marriage, which would prove to be a solid foundation for his livelihood. Men not in possession of a wife are seen in a negative light, and vice versa. Throughout centuries, this societal pressure continues to haunt both genders. As Kiran Dalal states,

Men, on the other hand, often sought marriages that would either consolidate their existing wealth or bring new resources, such as land or dowries. A marriage could strengthen alliances, expand property holdings, and produce heirs to carry on the family name and wealth. In a society where lineage and inheritance were

of paramount importance, marriage was not only an individual concern but one that affected entire family estates and reputations. (Dalal 45)

Another aspect discussed in the novel is the question of inheritance. In the nineteenth century, the estates were meant to be inherited only by the male heir of the family. Women were denied these rights. In the absence of a male heir in the family, the inheritance goes to the male cousin of the family. In the novel, the Longbourn estate is bound to be inherited by Mr. Collins as the Bennet family consists only of daughters. It is with this prospect in mind that Mr. Collins approached the family with marriage deals. Later, Charlotte Lucas agrees to marry him because of his social standing, his probable inheritance of Longbourn estate, and his financial assets.

Pride and Prejudice also reflect on the gender roles imposed on women during the nineteenth century, which are societal constructions. As Glennon Doyle states,

Gender is not wild, it's prescribed. When we say, "Girls are nurturing and boys are ambitious. Girls are soft and boys are tough. Girls are emotional and boys are stoic," we are not telling truths, we are sharing beliefs-beliefs that have become mandates..." (Doyle 164-165)

The idea of the ideal woman during that time revolved around women's proficiency in dancing, pianoforte, needlework, singing, etc. We see that Jane Bennet is an embodiment of all these aspects that make the perfect wife material. She is held in high regard by her mother. Whereas Elizabeth is against such hypocrisies of society. Women of that century were supposed to be educated by a governess. When Elizabeth reveals that all the Bennet sisters were schooled by their father and his extensive library, it was a shocking fact to Lady Catherine de Bourgh, who believed that they should have been taken care of by a governess just like her daughter, Miss Bourgh, who is in the care of her governess, Mrs. Jenkinson. Another shock came when Elizabeth states she does know how to play a pianoforte but is not very proficient at it. Young women of her age were expected to be skilled at such an art for securing a marriage. Interestingly, Lady Catherine was even shocked to hear that all five sisters were out in the marriage market before they even came of age, as it was believed that until the elder ones got married, the younger ones were to be kept off the market. But what is the role played by all these skills when it comes to the reality of marriage is the question that remains. Through Elizabeth, Austen expresses her disdain for such societal customs.

Parallels can be drawn between *Pride and Prejudice* and *The Bridgerton* series streaming on Netflix. Both are set in the Regency era. Despite the surface-level love story plot, both works reflect and expose the restrictions faced by women during the era. They shed light on the marriage beliefs that existed during that period. Every woman

character in the series, be it Daphne, Kate, Eloise, Penelope, etc., all seem to embody the rebellious spirit of Elizabeth Bennet from *Pride and Prejudice*. Both works can be seen as a witty response to the strict norms and regulations of the Regency. The women protagonists in both strive to seek and pave a path of freedom for themselves. Thus, *Pride and Prejudice* stand as a testimony to the oppression faced by men and women in the Regency era and in the present world.

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