

**THE CONFLICT BETWEEN SOCIAL CONFORMITY AND INDIVIDUAL FREEDOM
IN *PRIDE AND PREJUDICE***

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt at dealing with social conformity and individual freedom reflected in the novels by Jane Austen and particularly in *Pride and Prejudice*. Ideas by Simone de Beauvoir and Mary Wollstonecraft are useful to analyze how social conformity gets reflected in literature and in the representation of female characters.

Key words: *Simone de Beauvoir, Pride and Prejudice, Social Conformity, Individual Freedom.*

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In Jane Austen's novels Georgian society is on the background of her work, it is the world in which all her characters are set. The novels are set in the reign of George III, describing their routine lives, their pleasures and distresses, as well as their loves and provide in the process a unique insight into the period. Restricted social circles are depicted in her novels: ambitious middle classes, provincial gentry, minor clerical families, foolish snobs, marriage obsessed women, eligible matches. She criticizes the social organization of her country on a personal level and never leads to revolt. However, the point of view from which Austen describes England is that of a woman of the English aristocracy. She belonged to a reasonably affluent family, well associated and remarkably well educated for the time, and lived in a very small village of rural England around the late 1790s or early 19th century. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's remark in their book *The Mad Woman in the Attic* (1979) is significant here:

Like the 20th century American poet H.D, who declared her aesthetic strategy by entitling one of her novels "Palimpsest", women from Jane Austen and Mary Shelly to Emily Bronte and Emily Dickinson produced literary works that are in some sense palimpsest, works whose surface designs conceal or obscure deeper, less accessible levels of meaning. Thus these authors managed the difficult task of achieving true female literary authority by simultaneously conforming to and subverting patriarchal standards.¹

Some of the crucial aspects of the Georgian era are almost absent from her novels, such as the American Revolutionary War, and the loss of the Thirteen colonies, the French Revolution, the beginning of the Industrial Revolution and the birth of the British Empire. Instead of depicting the history of English society at large Jane Austen's novels provide an understanding of everyday life in rural England and undermine the patriarchal ideals of English society at the turn of the 19th century. *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), one of her remarkable

THE CONFLICT BETWEEN SOCIAL CONFORMITY AND INDIVIDUAL FREEDOM IN PRIDE AND PREJUDICE

novels, deals with the issues like manners, upbringing, morality, education and marriage in the society of the landed gentry of early 19th century England.

The main plot of the story of the novel follows the main character Elizabeth Bennet, the second of five daughters of a country gentleman, living near the fictional town of Meryton in Hertfordshire near London and her relationship with eligible bachelor Mr. Darcy. However, it is a very complex novel, with many different sub-plots going on. One of the important subplots is of Elizabeth's older sister Jane, and Bingley, Darcy's friend. There are many misunderstandings between them which have an important role in the plot. In the story, Eliza hates Darcy at first, thinking him proud, but overwhelms her prejudice and starts loving him in the end, and the two marry, as do Jane and Bingley. Another marriage is between Lydia, Elizabeth's younger sister and Wickham, a man who Eliza was initially interested in. Nevertheless, his true character comes to light, and his marriage proves to be far from monotonous.

Miss Elizabeth Bennet is one of the most notable female characters of English fiction. She is a popular heroine partly because of her pleasing wittiness, her perfectly formed arguments, quips and rebuttals are as unattainable to the ordinary person. She lacks an extraordinary physical beauty which makes her both an aspirational character and also a kind of girl with whom everyone can identify. Her spirit is one of the main reasons she is attractive to Mr. Darcy. Submissiveness in her dealings with him showed him, as he says: "How insufficient were all my pretensions to please a woman worthy of being pleased."² She is also straightforward in her rebuttals to the influential and dominating Lady Catherine de Bourgh.

Elizabeth's independent spirit of course has its limits. She is deeply aware of her society's moral norms and expectations, and treats them with no great sense of injustice. Here, lies Elizabeth's moral conflict between social conformity and individual freedom in which individual freedom overcomes on social conformity as Elizabeth finally decides to marry Darcy as she realizes that she loves him.

Plot is a literary component that describes the structure of the story including a sequence of events or incidents within a story. A plot of a story comprises some factors such as conflicts, artistic unity and story ending. Conflict is a clash of actions, ideas, desires or wills. Conflict helps the story to be more interesting and dramatic because when the conflicts reach to the climax, the characters show their personalities most clearly and it also displays the

THE CONFLICT BETWEEN SOCIAL CONFORMITY AND INDIVIDUAL FREEDOM IN PRIDE AND PREJUDICE

writer's talent in building the story. Usually, the more there are conflicts and the cleverer they solved the more success that the story can achieve. There are three types of conflicts: person against person, person against environment- external force, physical nature, society; and person against herself/himself -conflict with some element in her/his own nature; maybe personal, emotional, mental or moral.

In *Pride and Prejudice* Elizabeth Bennet faces the second type of conflict that is person against environment- society. From a literary and cultural point of view, Jane Austen clearly stands between Enlightenment and Romanticism. Her art consists mainly in trying to achieve a subtle balance between the two. She is very much attached to reason, common sense, good taste and social organization. But she was clever enough to realize that this could lead to orthodoxy and absence of perspectives. Therefore, she paid close attention to individual freedom, personal feelings, intuition, imagination and the ability for an individual to follow her/his nature. An American novelist, Kathleen Thompson argues that in any free society, the conflict between social conformity and individual liberty is permanent, unresolvable, and necessary.

Social conformity is behavioral or attitudinal compliance with recognized social patterns or standards. Social conformity can be viewed as an important concept in social psychology. Matching attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours to what individuals perceive is normal of their society or social group. Freedom refers in a very general sense to the state of being free (unrestricted, unconfined, or unfettered). Individualism makes the individual its focus and so it starts with the fundamental promise that the human individual is of primary importance in the struggle for liberation.

Jane Austen lived in a historical time of changes in politics and society all over the world but she focused on the middle-class provincial life in England in which women's social status was mainly determined by marrying to a wealthy man who could provide them and their family a good security for life. Simone de Beauvoir argues in *The Second Sex* (1949): "She is defined and differentiated with reference to a man and not he with her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the subject, he is the Absolute - she is the Other."³ However, most of the main female characters in Austen's works are strong-natured and they stand for women's freedom in marriage. Elizabeth in *Pride and Prejudice* is a typical model of such kind of women.

THE CONFLICT BETWEEN SOCIAL CONFORMITY AND INDIVIDUAL FREEDOM IN PRIDE AND PREJUDICE

Elizabeth's mother represents a typical mother worrying about the marriages of her five daughters. When Mr. Collins comes to Longbourn with the aim of finding a wife, her mother desperately attempts to get her to marry him. Nevertheless Elizabeth realizes that her mother's concern is not her feelings but she looks at Mr. Collins as a mean that helps her to remain at Longbourn after her husband passes away or brings fortune into the family. However, although Elizabeth does not completely agree with her parents' behaviour, she never shows disapproval for them but endeavours to accept the family's faults. She always worries and takes care of each family member, particularly when of Lydia's elopement incident happens.

Elizabeth Bennet has a strong character living in a conventional set of society but she still dares to fight against the conventions as well looking for happiness for her. The strength of her mind is expressed not only in her actions but also through her words. She is not a passive female character as well as not afraid about speaking her opinions out whether or not they fit the hearer's ears or social restrictions placed upon her.

She is the only lady who receives proposals from two men, Mr. Collins and Darcy but she rejects both of the two first ones with the same reason that the men are not suitable to her. According to her Mr. Collins is too silly and rude to become an ideal husband. However, Darcy is quite different. He is very handsome, intelligent and wealthy but he still cannot win Elizabeth's heart. When Darcy confesses his love for her, she holds no bars condemning him for his reproachable behaviours to Wickham and his unacceptable interference in the relationship between her most beloved sister with Mr. Bingley resulting in their breakup and the breakdown of her sister Jane. She rejects Darcy's proposal to decidedly: "Do you think consideration would tempt me to accept the man who has been the means of ruining, perhaps forever, the happiness of a beloved sister?"⁴ And: "I felt that you were the last man in the world whom I could ever be prevailed on to marry."⁵ But still she decides to marry him as she has to perform social conformity. She affirms that no one else besides herself can make influence on her decisions of her own life and happiness: "I am only resolved to act in that manner, which will, in my own opinion, constitute my happiness, without reference to you, or to any person so wholly unconnected with me."⁶

Elizabeth's rejection of wedding Mr. Collins is quite unorthodox. She can get a lot of benefits from this marriage as Mr. Collins would provide her with a comfortable life and a financial security. Mary Wollstonecraft criticizes this tendency in her *A Vindication of the Rights*

THE CONFLICT BETWEEN SOCIAL CONFORMITY AND INDIVIDUAL FREEDOM IN PRIDE AND PREJUDICE

of Woman (1792): "...the only way women can rise in this world by marriage."⁷ However, she knows that Mr. Collins is intolerable, arrogant, self-centered, and close-minded so she could never love such a man. Elizabeth prefers love and happiness above the financial standing. That is the reason she rejects Mr. Collins' proposal.

The opening line of the novel: "It is truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife."⁸ implies that the only way for women to ensure themselves a stable life is through marriage. Marriage to some extent is like a business transaction. In the novel, Jane Austen uses the character Charlotte Lucas to describe this point and contrast to Elizabeth's views on love and marriage. Charlotte is also a smart and well educated woman like Elizabeth. So, Elizabeth gets surprised when she hears her friend's decision to wed Mr. Collins. Charlotte marries Mr. Collins even if she does not love him because it is the only way to avoid financial insecurity, homelessness and poverty and that is why Charlotte's action is understandable.

Compared with Elizabeth's, Charlotte is older, plainer and more desperate to find a husband, So, Mr. Collins' proposal is the rare opportunity to save her from the unpleasant reality: "I am not romantic, you know. I never was. 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 the marriage state."⁹ Charlotte is constrained by the fact that all she desires is wealth and stability and it can be achieved just through marrying to Mr. Collins. For her love is not a real concern in marriage. It is also true in the case of the autobiographical book *Out Of Africa* written by Isak Dinesen. Karen the heroine of the novel after being divorced by the first husband wants to marry another man. It is as if she cannot live without a man. She also wants social status and security through marriage. Simone de Beauvoir's remark is significant here: "Man can think of himself without woman. She cannot think of herself without a man."¹⁰

With realization of her pride and prejudice, Elizabeth begins the process of change that will eventually bring herself and Darcy together. She always sparkles with her wit, youthful high spirits and bold personality.

Austen uses Elizabeth Bennet as a literary device to represent her values and attitudes on the importance of marrying for love. The heroine dares to go against the social conventions

THE CONFLICT BETWEEN SOCIAL CONFORMITY AND INDIVIDUAL FREEDOM IN PRIDE AND PREJUDICE

that women should marry for their benefits. She only weds the man she really loves and respects. This makes the difference between young free-spirited woman like Elizabeth from the other female characters of the novel. Thus, her individual freedom overcomes on her social conformity. Similarly with Henrik Ibsen's play *A Doll's House* (1879) where Nora leaves her husband to educate herself. As she says to her husband: "...you and father have done me a great wrong. It's your fault that my life has been wasted..."¹¹ Here Nora too, in the end gives importance to her individual freedom over social conformity.

It is perhaps Elizabeth's decision of getting married with Mr. Darcy is ambiguous. She seems to be willing to prefer love over financial security when she rejects Mr. Collins' proposal and is shocked that anyone - even her pragmatic friend Charlotte - could accept. Similarly, she refuses to rule out marriage to the penniless Wickham. She is able to make her decision based on love, but it happily transpires that her love is one of England's richest men! Her rebelliousness comes at no cost; indeed it helps to advance her further in status and wealth.

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**THE CONFLICT BETWEEN SOCIAL CONFORMITY AND INDIVIDUAL FREEDOM IN
PRIDE AND PREJUDICE**

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