

Social class and wealth in Jane Austen's "Pride and Prejudice"

***Dr.R.V.Sheela, Associate Professor, Dept. of English, MES College of Arts, Commerce and Science, Bangalore.**

Abstract

This paper attempts to study significance of **class** is portrayed in **Pride and Prejudice**; by the **wealth** and standing one were in at this time there were the high class and the **middle class** standings. In Jane Austen's "Pride and Prejudice," social class and wealth play a significant role in the lives and relationships of the characters. The novel is set in early 19th century England, a time when class distinctions were rigid and marriage was primarily an economic transaction.

The Bennet family, which serves as the central focus of the novel, is a family of modest means. Mr. Bennet is a gentleman of small property, which means that he does not have much wealth or land. This puts the Bennet daughters in a difficult position, as they will not have much dowry to attract wealthy suitors. Mrs. Bennet, the mother, is determined to marry off her daughters to wealthy men in order to secure their future.

The novel's protagonist, Elizabeth Bennet, is portrayed as an independent and intelligent woman who is not impressed by wealth or social status. She is critical of the wealthy and arrogant Mr. Darcy, but eventually comes to appreciate his good qualities and falls in love with him. However, their relationship is initially hindered by Mr. Darcy's pride and Elizabeth's prejudice.

On the other hand, Mr. Darcy comes from one of the wealthiest and most prominent families in the area. He is initially disdainful of the Bennet family, whom he considers to be beneath him in social status. However, as he gets to know Elizabeth, he begins to realize that there is more to a person than their wealth or class.

Another important aspect of the novel is the theme of marriage and its role in society. In early 19th century England, marriage was seen as a means of securing financial stability and social status. Many of the characters in the novel, including Mr. and Mrs. Bennet, are motivated by the desire to marry off their children to wealthy partners. This theme is exemplified by the characters of Mr. and Mrs. Bennet, who are portrayed as shallow and materialistic, driven by the desire to secure their daughters' futures through advantageous marriages

Keywords: Pride and Prejudice, Austen, societal pressure, wealth, classs, society

Introduction

One of the main leitmotifs in "Pride and Prejudice" is the societal pressure for marriage and the importance placed on it for women in particular. The Bennett family's primary concern is finding suitable husbands for their daughters, as their financial security is dependent on the girls making advantageous marriages. This pressure is demonstrated through the characters of Mr. and Mrs. Bennett, who are constantly pressuring their daughters to marry well, and through the characters of the Bennett sisters themselves, who are all eager to marry and secure their futures.

Austen also explores the societal expectations of marriage and the idea that love should not be a primary factor in choosing a spouse. The novel's characters often marry for financial security, social status, or even for the sake of convenience rather than for love. This is exemplified in the characters of Mr. and Mrs. Bennett, who married for love but now find themselves in a loveless and unhappy marriage, and in the characters of Mr. Bingley and Jane Bennett, who initially fall in love but are separated by societal expectations and pressures.

Another theme in "Pride and Prejudice" is the impact of class on society and relationships. The novel's setting in early 19th century England is a society that is highly class-conscious, and the characters' social status plays a significant role in their interactions and relationships. The characters of Mr. Darcy and Mr. Bingley, for example, are wealthy and aristocratic, and their social status sets them apart from the Bennett family and other characters of lower social status. This is demonstrated through the characters' interactions, as the wealthy and aristocratic characters often look down on and dismiss those of lower social status.

Austen also explores the concept of pride and prejudice and how it affects the characters and their relationships. The novel's title itself is a reference to this theme, as pride and prejudice are two of the main obstacles that the characters must overcome in order to find happiness. Mr. Darcy, for example, is initially proud and dismissive of those of lower social status, including the Bennett family, and his prejudice towards them prevents him from seeing their true worth. Similarly, Elizabeth Bennett's initial prejudice against Mr. Darcy prevents her from seeing his true character and the love he has for her.

In "Pride and Prejudice," Austen also explores the theme of societal expectations and the pressure to conform to them. The characters are all expected to conform to the societal norms and expectations of their time, including the expectation that women should be submissive and obedient. This is demonstrated through the characters of Elizabeth Bennett and Mr. Darcy, who both struggle with societal expectations and ultimately reject them in order to follow their hearts and pursue their true desires.

Finally, "Pride and Prejudice" explores the theme of self-discovery and personal growth. Through the characters' experiences and interactions, Austen illustrates the importance of self-discovery and personal growth in order to find happiness and fulfillment. The characters of Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth Bennett, for example, both go through significant personal growth and self-discovery throughout the novel, ultimately leading to their realization of their love for each other.

Objective:

This paper intends to explore and analyze "Pride and Prejudice" novel; Jane Austen established the impact of how social class and gender roles are influenced by the expectations of the society. Also investigate Jane Austen's critique of class-based snobbery as the main themes of Pride and Prejudice

Analysing major themes of Pride and Prejudice

Many critics take the title as the start when analysing the themes of Pride and Prejudice but Robert Fox cautions against reading too much into the title (which was initially First Impressions), because commercial factors may have played a role in its selection. "After the success of Sense and Sensibility, nothing would have seemed more natural than to bring out another novel of the same author using again the formula of antithesis and alliteration for the title. The qualities of the title are not exclusively assigned to one or the other of the protagonists; both Elizabeth and Darcy display pride and prejudice."

The phrase "pride and prejudice" had been used over the preceding two centuries by Joseph Hall, Jeremy Taylor, Joseph Addison and Samuel Johnson. Austen probably took her title from a passage in Fanny Burney's *Cecilia* (1782), a popular novel she is known to have admired:

'The whole of this unfortunate business, said Dr Lyster, has been the result of PRIDE and PREJUDICE. if to PRIDE and PREJUDICE you owe your miseries, so wonderfully is good and evil balanced, that to PRIDE and PREJUDICE you will also owe their termination.' (capitalisation as in the original)

A theme in much of Austen's work is the importance of environment and upbringing in developing young people's character and morality. Social standing and wealth are not necessarily advantages in her world and a further theme common to Austen's work is ineffectual parents. In *Pride and Prejudice*, the failure of Mr and Mrs Bennet as parents is blamed for Lydia's lack of moral judgment. Darcy has been taught to be principled and scrupulously honourable but he is also proud and overbearing. Kitty, rescued from Lydia's bad influence and spending more time with her older sisters after they marry, is said to improve greatly in their superior society. The American novelist Anna Quindlen observed in an introduction to an edition of Austen's novel in 1995:

Pride and Prejudice is also about that thing that all great novels consider, the search for self. And it is the first great novel that teaches us this search is as surely undertaken in the drawing room making small talk as in the pursuit of a great white whale or the public punishment of adultery.

Marriage as social activity

The opening line of the novel famously announces: "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife." This sets marriage as a motif and a problem in the novel. Readers are poised to question whether or not these single men need a wife, or if the need is dictated by the "neighbourhood" families and their daughters who require a "good fortune".

Marriage is a complex social activity that takes political and financial economy into account. In the case of Charlotte Lucas, the seeming success of her marriage lies in the comfortable financial circumstances of their household, while the relationship between Mr and Mrs Bennet serves to illustrate bad marriages based on an initial attraction and surface over substance (economic and psychological). The Bennets' marriage is an example that the youngest Bennet, Lydia, re-enacts with Wickham and the results are far from felicitous. Although the central characters, Elizabeth and Darcy, begin the novel as hostile acquaintances and unlikely friends, they eventually work toward a better understanding of themselves and each other, which frees them to truly fall in love. This does not eliminate the challenges of the real differences in their technically-equivalent social status as gentry and their female relations. It does however provide them with a better understanding of each other's point of view from the different ends of the rather wide scale of differences within that category.

When Elizabeth rejects Darcy's first proposal, the argument of marrying for love is introduced. Elizabeth only accepts Darcy's proposal when she is certain she loves him and her feelings are reciprocated. Austen's complex sketching of different marriages ultimately allows readers to question what forms of alliance are desirable especially when it comes to privileging economic, sexual, companionate attraction.

Wealth : restricted by entailment

Money plays a fundamental role in the marriage market, for the young ladies seeking a well-off husband and for men who wish to marry a woman of means. George Wickham tries to elope with Georgiana Darcy, and Colonel Fitzwilliam states that he will marry someone with wealth. Marrying a woman of a rich family also ensured a linkage to a higher-class family, as is visible in the desires of Bingley's sisters to have their brother married to Georgiana Darcy. Mrs Bennet is frequently seen encouraging her daughters to marry a wealthy man of high social class. In chapter 1, when Mr Bingley arrives, she declares "I am thinking of his marrying one of them".

Inheritance was by descent but could be further restricted by entailment, which in the case of the Longbourn estate restricted inheritance to male heirs only. In the case of the Bennet family, Mr Collins was to inherit the family estate upon Mr Bennet's death in the absence of any closer male heirs, and his proposal to Elizabeth would have ensured her security; but she refuses his offer. Inheritance laws benefited males because married women did not have independent legal rights until the second half of the 19th century. For the upper-middle and aristocratic classes, marriage to a man with a reliable income was almost the only route to security for the woman and the children she was to have. The irony of the opening line is that generally within this society it would be a woman who would be looking for a wealthy husband to have a prosperous life.

Particular problem for navigating class

Austen might be known now for her "romances" but the marriages in her novels engage with economics and class distinction. *Pride and Prejudice* is hardly the exception. When Darcy proposes to Elizabeth, he cites their economic and social differences as an obstacle his excessive love has had to overcome, though he still anxiously harps on the problems it poses for him within his social circle. His aunt, Lady Catherine, later characterises these differences in particularly harsh terms when she conveys what Elizabeth's marriage to Darcy will become, "Will the shades of Pemberley be thus polluted?" Although Elizabeth responds to Lady Catherine's accusations that hers is a potentially contaminating economic and social position (Elizabeth even insists she and Darcy, as gentleman's daughter and gentleman, are "equals"), Lady Catherine refuses to accept the possibility of Darcy's marriage to Elizabeth. However, as the novel closes, "...through curiosity to see how his wife conducted herself", Lady Catherine condescends to visit them at Pemberley.

The Bingleys present a particular problem for navigating class. Though Caroline Bingley and Mrs Hurst behave and speak of others as if they have always belonged in the upper echelons of society, Austen makes it clear that the Bingley fortunes stem from trade. The fact that Bingley rents Netherfield Hall – it is, after all, "to let" – distinguishes him significantly from Darcy, whose estate belonged to his father's family and through his mother, is the grandson and nephew of an earl. Bingley, unlike Darcy, does not own his property but has portable and growing wealth that makes him a good catch on the marriage market for poorer daughters of the gentry, like Jane Bennet, or of ambitious merchants. Class plays a central role in the evolution of the characters and Jane Austen's radical approach to class is seen as the plot unfolds.

An undercurrent of the old Anglo-Norman upper class is hinted at in the story, as suggested by the names of Fitzwilliam Darcy and his aunt, Lady Catherine de Bourgh; Fitzwilliam, D'Arcy, de Bourgh (Burke), and even Bennet, are traditional Norman surnames.

Self-knowledge

Through their interactions and their critiques of each other, Darcy and Elizabeth come to recognise their faults and work to correct them. Elizabeth meditates on her own mistakes thoroughly in chapter 36:

"How despicably have I acted!" she cried; "I, who have prided myself on my discernment! I, who have valued myself on my abilities! who have often disdained the generous candour of my sister, and gratified my vanity in useless or blameable distrust. How humiliating is this discovery! yet, how just a humiliation! Had I been in love, I could not have been more wretchedly blind. But vanity, not love, has been my folly. Pleased with the preference of one, and offended by the neglect of the other, on the very beginning of our acquaintance, I have courted prepossession and ignorance, and driven reason away, where either were concerned. Till this moment I never knew myself."

Other characters rarely exhibit this depth of understanding or at least are not given the space within the novel for this sort of development. Tanner writes that Mrs Bennet in particular, "has a very limited view of the requirements of that performance; lacking any introspective tendencies she is incapable of appreciating the feelings of others and is only aware of material objects". Mrs Bennet's behaviour reflects the society in which she lives, as she knows that her daughters will not succeed if they do not get married. "The business of her life was to get her daughters married: its solace was visiting and news." This shows that Mrs Bennet is only aware of "material objects" and not of her feelings and emotions. A notable exception is Charlotte Lucas, Elizabeth Bennet's close friend and confidant. She accepts Mr Collins's proposal of marriage once Lizzie rejects him, not out of sentiment but acute awareness of her circumstances as "one of a large family". Charlotte's decision is reflective of her prudent nature and awareness.

Conclusion

In conclusion, "Pride and Prejudice" highlights the role of social class and wealth in the lives of the characters. Austen uses the novel to critique the societal expectations of the time, and to show that true love and happiness cannot be bought with wealth or social status. Through the characters of Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy, the novel also suggests that individuals should not be judged solely based on their wealth or class, but rather on their character and personal qualities.

"Pride and Prejudice" by Jane Austen is a classic novel that explores themes of love, marriage, class, and societal expectations in early 19th century England. The novel centers around the Bennett family, a respectable but financially struggling family with five daughters, and their interactions with the wealthy and aristocratic Darcy family. Through the characters' experiences and relationships, Austen delves into the societal pressures and expectations of the time, and the consequences of pride and prejudice in both individuals and society as a whole.

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