

MORALITY AND ACCOMPLISHMENT OF WOMEN IN JANE AUSTEN'S *PRIDE AND PREJUDICE*

Dr. X. Princess Carmel Mary Assistant professor Department of English Sri Krishna Arts and Science College, Tamilnadu India

Ms. Adhira.V.S III BA English Student Sri Krishna Arts and Science College, Tamilnadu India

Abstract:

Lookism destines the cause of living on in the society. It reshapes the human identity and thinking to fulfill the model image created by the society. The aim of the study is to analyze the social customs present in the novel *Pride and Prejudice* and how they impact women during the era of Regency. It deals with subjects like “lookism” and “classicism” and it focuses on the plight of young women trying to meet society's high expectations. The demands of society on women are present throughout the survival of humankind. Women are exploited both sociologically and psychologically.

Key Words: Lookism, Classicism, Regency, survival, humankind, role of women, transformation

The paper deals with the requirements that women in early nineteenth century were expected to possess in order to secure a suitable husband. The positions of women did not change though the role of women have undergone big transformation in the society. It further talks about young women coming out into society at a certain marriageable age to exhibit their talents, thereby impressing their suitors and society. It connects the fictional characters with the reality of the time period in the form of a social commentary by a twenty-one-year-old Jane Austen. In an era where matrimony was used as a tool for socio-economic upliftment, stiff competition was being held among young women as they entered into the marriage market. A spark of hypocrisy and jealousy ignites in the minds of women as they compete with each other to capture the attention of wealthy and attractive gentlemen. In the present world too women face severe criticisms against the societal compulsion to their marriages. Finding the suitable matches for woman reduces from morality to task-oriented. Therefore, this study highlights the significance of prioritizing morality and values over certificates of accomplishment.

The Regency epoch (1795-1837) marked the period when women earned their reputation in society based on their accomplishments. A woman was considered “accomplished” if she was in possession of a wide variety of knowledge in the way she sang and played her piano, her captivating style of dancing, her calm demeanor and how well she handled her paintbrush. However, in Jane Austen's “*Pride and Prejudice*,” the characters in the novel have varying opinions on the same. Austen criticizes society's stereotypical notion of the necessity of women to fulfil the expectations placed on them. Through her characters, Austen communicates with the readers by bringing out the different perspectives of the requirements that are necessary to become an accomplished woman.

In chapter VIII of the novel, a thorough discussion is being held on what it means to be an “accomplished woman”. The conversation takes place between Caroline, Darcy, Elizabeth and Bingley at Netherfield Park. Caroline Bingley remarks on the conventional ideal that:

“No one can be really esteemed accomplished who does not greatly surpass what is usually met with. A woman must have a thorough knowledge of music, singing, drawing, dancing, and the modern languages, to deserve the word; and besides all this, she must possess a certain something in her air and manner of walking, the tone of her voice, her address and expressions, or the word will be but half-deserved.” (33)

Austen, through Caroline Bingley, elucidates society's way of judging women based on these qualities. A woman was well respected in Regency society for two primary reasons: 1) if she had an aristocratic pedigree and 2) if she had excelled in everything that was expected of her. It is necessary that one must realize the infeasibility of achieving all the above-mentioned requirements without any financial stability. There are only quite a few chances for a woman from a poor or middle class background to attain all these necessities, which is utterly unfair.

After the discourse of his faithful assistant, Darcy expresses his opinion on his behalf:

"All this she must possess, and to all this she must yet add something more substantial, in the improvement of her mind by extensive reading." (34)

Though the above statement of Darcy favors Elizabeth, it is ironically contradictory to Caroline Bingley. In chapter XI, Caroline's hypocrisy is revealed when she finds herself unable to choose a book and ends up choosing Darcy's second volume ultimately feeling exhausted. She claims to be a good reader and tries so hard to meet society's standards, in order to get a good impression from Darcy. Her increasing jealousy of Elizabeth being the apple of Darcy's eye makes her desperate enough to prove that she is better in comparison.

"At length, quite exhausted by the attempt to be amused with her own book, which she had only chosen because it was the second volume of his, she gave a great yawn and said, 'How pleasant it is to spend an evening in this way! I declare after all there is no enjoyment like reading! How much sooner one tires of anything than of a book! How much sooner one tires of anything than of a book! When I have a house of my own, I shall be miserable if I have not an excellent library.'" (47)

Austen mocks at the sanctimonious behavior of people attempting to create a good impression with something they are not capable of. Expecting a woman to be proficient in all the arts is impractical, as not many are gifted at painting, singing, and dancing simultaneously. A woman was considered worthy if she could exhibit her talents; otherwise, she was more prone to be despised by the public, particularly by the upper-class society. She concomitantly ridicules the tendency of women, willing to become "accomplished", not for their own personal benefit but for their marital eligibility. This stereotypical mindset has been an obstacle to utilizing their accomplishments for the welfare of society. In fact, her only significant achievement would be her ability of procuring an appropriate suitor for herself. That is when a woman "comes out" in society.

"Coming out" in the era of Regency signifies the time when a woman enters the business of matrimony and gets herself equipped with her status of accomplishments to serve as a quintessential wife. Women were expected to attend balls and other public gatherings after being out in society, usually around 16 to 18 years of age. It was through these social gatherings that young girls courted handsome gentlemen and wooed them into marriage. Women ought to be well-dressed and maintain a calm composure. A tradition where elder siblings are supposed to be wedded before the younger siblings, which is also most common in Indian culture, was observed during the period of the Regency. The Bennets, on the other hand, were unconcerned about societal norms and treated all of their daughters equally by letting them all out at once, believing it would be unjust for their younger daughters to not do so. A hint of this type of tradition is observed in the conversation between Lady Catherine De Bourgh and Elizabeth Bennet:

All! What, all five out at once? Very odd! And you only the second. The younger ones out before the elder ones are married! Your younger sisters must be very young?"

'Yes, my youngest is not sixteen. Perhaps she is full young to be much in company. But really, ma'am, I think it would be very hard upon younger sisters, that they should not have their share of society and amusement, because the elder may not have the means or inclination to marry early. The last-born has as good a right to the pleasures of youth at

the first. And to be kept back on such a motive! I think it would not be very likely to promote sisterly affection or delicacy of mind. (137)

Moreover, it is also essential for a woman to be "beautiful" in order to impress the suitor. Austen remarks on the fact how society's beauty standards can impact a woman's life. Charlotte Lucas is portrayed as a victim of such social stereotype. The criticism she faced from Mrs. Bennet about how inferior she is to Jane Bennet according to the norms of beauty, and that she isn't a perfect match for Mr. Bingley because of it, leads to another prevailing issue – Class Discrimination. Through the portrayal of Charlotte Lucas, Austen voices out the prejudices faced by all women who were unable to impress the society with the faces they were born with. Charlotte ends up marrying Mr. Collins, in spite of her indifference to him, for the purpose of saving her family from financial crisis and also as a tool for her own survival as well. Similarly, Mary Bennet was also judged on the basis of her looks and had gone through a lot of criticism, obtaining the most from her own father, though she was a good reader. She is given very little importance in the novel, in view of the fact that she has only a few lines of dialogue. She was also an underrated victim of the novel as she ends up marrying her Uncle Philip's clerk, unlike her other sisters, who married rich gentlemen, totally making her an underestimated character indeed.

The plight of unaccomplished women is so severe that they ought to do something to sustain their lives. Women who are born with an enticing face despite being unaccomplished, tend to surpass the obstacles as they have the advantage of captivating men effortlessly. The Bennet daughters are known for their beauty, notably the eldest daughter, much to the admiration of the whole neighborhood and the pride of Mrs. Bennet. Such an irrational outlook on the less privileged, questions the ability of a woman to survive independently without the support of her husband and to find someone who loves her for her heart rather than her face, social class, or her accomplishments.

There might arise a question about whether the female protagonist, Elizabeth Bennet, can be considered "accomplished" as she is a voracious reader who plays the piano and also indulges herself in dancing at a ball. However, her playful disposition and her family lineage is holding her back. She was looked down upon by the Bingley sisters when she arrived at their house, Netherfield Park, with muddy legs and dirty stockings, making her less appealing to upper class society. She also admits that, while she knows how to play the piano, she has not mastered it, making her feel less "accomplished."

"My fingers," said Elizabeth, "do not move over this instrument in the masterly manner which I see so many women's do. They have not the same force or rapidity, and do not produce the same expression. But then I have always supposed it to be my own fault—because I will not take the trouble of practicing. It is not that I do not believe my fingers as capable as any other woman's of superior execution." (144)

However, Bingley's idealistic view of the whole concept and his emphasis on the equality of women make it completely different from the general perception. He believes that all women are accomplished in some way or another. Austen observes the alternative approach of perceiving something that the people during the era did not. Every individual has unique capabilities, no matter how petty or huge they may be, yet society always expects something that is beyond ordinary. But Austen put forth her vision of treating every woman as "accomplished" instead of judging them based on their abilities and depriving them of their marriageable eligibility if they were unable to meet these nonsensical standards. Her character, Charles Bingley, stands up against the norms and expectations of what an ideal, accomplished, and well-respected woman should be as he doesn't expect anything peculiar from them. His courtesy towards socially inferior communities reveals his gentleman qualities, making him highly agreeable among his neighbors at Netherfield Park.

When Caroline Bingley questions her brother about his belief in the accomplishment of all women, he acknowledges her statement by responding that:

“Yes, all of them, I think. They all paint tables, cover screens, and net purses. I scarcely know anyone who cannot do all this, and I am sure I never heard a young lady spoken of for the first time, without being informed that she was very accomplished.” (33)

This response from Bingley gives an insight to the readers that women needn't necessarily have to master all the skills to be well respected. Every individual, irrespective of their social status, deserves basic respect as a human being. But Darcy, however, doesn't seem to be much satisfied on his companion's reply and responds that:

Your list of the common extent of accomplishments has too much truth. The word is applied to many a woman who deserves it no otherwise than by netting a purse or covering a screen. But I am very far from agreeing with you in your estimation of ladies in general. I cannot boast of knowing more than half-a-dozen, in the whole range of my acquaintance, that are really accomplished. (33)

Darcy's opinion of knowing only six accomplished women makes Elizabeth wonder about her knowing any, to which Darcy comments on her being severe on her own gender. She admits that she had never met a woman of such capacity, taste, application, and elegance, which Caroline claims to be a "paltry device" she uses to attract Darcy's attention by lowering her own standards. In reality, there are only a few extremely talented people who are capable of excelling in all the requirements that are needed for a person to become accomplished. People either cultivate their ability through constant practice, attempting to match society's expectations, or it becomes simply impossible in spite of constant practice. It all depends upon a person's ability, making this entire notion totally ridiculous.

Austen criticizes how certain women during the era were deemed "accomplished" for their capabilities yet lacked morality and compassion. Elizabeth Bennet and Caroline Bingley serve as characters with contrasting qualities. Though Caroline Bingley claims herself to be well accomplished, she demands perfection rather than humanity. Her accusation of Elizabeth for showing up at her house with muddy stockings hints at her concern for Elizabeth's indecent attire rather than being proud of her for risking too much just to visit and take care of her sick sister. Elizabeth's modest way of preferring to walk instead of using a carriage and her attitude of not caring about her clothes and the opinions of others make her strong-willed and an intelligent woman with clarity of mind.

The fact that Elizabeth does not have a pure pedigree is a factor that restrains her from reaching a reputable status in the eyes of the public. Contrarily, Caroline Bingley, in spite of being highly regarded, failed to grab the attention of Darcy, which Elizabeth Bennet easily did. Her lack of argumentative ability and her agreement with Darcy in several instances makes her unrecognizable in Darcy's eyes, unlike Elizabeth, who always holds on to a contrasting opinion. Elizabeth's way of attracting men based on her argumentative style and her unique persona invokes jealousy in Caroline for not being able to pull Darcy under her control in a way that a socially backward young woman was able to do it effortlessly. Elizabeth's intelligence, strong morality, and independent nature assist her in reinvigorating herself and her family as well. Caroline Bingley is simply a reputable figure based on social hierarchy, which doesn't label her special as her imposture reveals it all. Her snobbish attitude and her connotative mistreatment of lower social classes are the reasons that make her less agreeable, though she is wealthy and well respected.

In the nineteenth century, society expected both men and women to meet certain standard criteria for the functioning of an ideal family. In order to find a suitable life partner, men were also expected to be wealthy and agreeable, just like young girls were expected to be pretty, well-behaved, neatly dressed and highly accomplished. Through her characters, Austen explores the various perspectives regarding the concept of "accomplishment." While Darcy and Caroline observed the onerous and fundamental side of

the concept, Bingley fixated on the ideal view that a woman who does simple household chores can also be titled as an accomplished woman, inevitably making almost every woman accomplished.

Morality instills that love dominates everything. Social class and family lineage ultimately cease to exist in the face of love. Darcy and Bingley married Elizabeth and Jane, respectively, irrespective of their socio-economic background, only because of the fact that they fell uncontrollably in love. Indeed, "We are all fools in love." Humans impart love as the only way to solve the troubles of societal pressures.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Austen, Jane. *Pride and Prejudice*. Konzept Books, Dehradun (Uttarakhand). Maple Press. Print. 2011.
- Fricke, C., The challenges of pride and prejudice: Adam Smith and Jane Austen on moral education. *Revue internationale de philosophie*, (3), 2014, pp.343-372.
- Chang, H.C., The impact of the feminist heroine: Elizabeth in *Pride and Prejudice*. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics and English Literature*, 3(3), 2014, pp.76-82.
- Madaki, R.K. and Zeng, L., A Woman's Puritism, And the Politics of Dominance in Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*, *Pride and Prejudice*, And *Emma*. *International Journal of English Language and Literature Studies*, 2(4), 2013, pp.188-199.
- YU, S.F. and WANG, C.P., A Pragmatic-Cognitive Analysis of Irony in *Pride and Prejudice*. *Journal of Anhui Agricultural University (Social Sciences Edition)*, 2012, p.01.
- Moe, M., 2016. Charlotte and Elizabeth: Multiple Modernities in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. *ELH*, 83(4), pp.1075-1103.
- <https://www.google.com/amp/s/samtariqblog.wordpress.com/2017/09/27/pride-and-prejudice-accomplished-woman/amp/>
- <https://www.bartleby.com/essay/Female-Accomplishment-In-Pride-And-Prejudice-By-PZJ5RF3BNQ6>
- <https://jasna.org/publications-2/essay-contest-winning-entries/2021-essay-contest/turk/>
- <https://www.cliffsnotes.com/literature/p/pride-and-prejudice/critical-essays/womens-roles-in-early-nineteenthcentury-britain>