

PRIDE AND PREJUDICE, THE NOVEL AND THE MOVIE: A FEMINIST APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

The present research paper endeavours to bring forth feminist characteristics in the works of one of the foremost novelists Jane Austen with special emphasis on one of her most renowned work *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), which has been adapted into movie many times, thus an analysis of feminist strain as depicted in the in the movie, the one by Focus Pictures starring Matthew Macfadyen and Keira Knightley has been added. The feminist movement with emphasis on the concept of gyno-criticism (by the American feminist Elaine Showalter) is summarized to put Jane Austen as a prominent advocate of the stands of women all across the globe.

KEYWORDS: Feminism, Feminist Criticism, Gyno-Criticism, Marriage, Rational Feminism

INTRODUCTION

Feminism is a serious attempt to formulate the issues and find solutions to gender problems. (Krishnaswamy and Varghese 74).

Originating from the suffrage movement of the 18th century more particularly with the publication of Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792) feminism lately called womanism seeks to define and defend the political, social, economic and cultural rights of women. In other words, feminism can be defined as a movement seeking to establish the identity of women as an individual, more so as a human being capable of making their decisions and exercise their rights independent from the claimed superior male gender. It voices the views and woes of women, their needs and aspirations distinguished from men. Feminist criticism which was well under way by the late 1960s "attempt to describe and interpret women's experiences as depicted in various kinds of literature" (Cuddon 315) Simon de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) addresses the problem of representation of women by male writers she makes a biting remark:

Legislators, priests, philosophers, writers and scientists have striven to show that the subordinate position of women was willed in heaven and is advantageous on earth. (Krishnaswamy and Varghese 74-75).

Similarly Elaine Showalter an American literary critic, and one of the founders of the feminist literary criticism in USA in her famous essay "Toward the Feminist Poetics" has divided feminist criticism into two broad categories: one was- Women as Reader which is concerned with "woman as the consumer of male produce literature." (Showalter) she calls this as feminist critique, however rejects it as being male dominated and preaching on masculine conception of the nature, feelings and experiences of women. Second category was women as writer. concerned with "women as the producer of textual meaning with the history, themes, genres and structure of literature by woman" (Showalter). Thus upholding this concept as gyno-criticism derived from the French word *la gynocritique*, it can be defined as the literature produced by the women, of the women and for the women. It aims to shift the focus of feminine criticism to world of

female culture rather to try fit in male tradition. Showalter, further, analyses the works produced by the female writers from mid nineteenth to mid twentieth century to analyze the evolution of female tradition in literature.

Jane Austen(1775-1815), who emerged on the scene much before the feminist criticism gained importance, can be included in the tradition for her voicing of feelings, dreams, aspirations, follies of women of the contemporary society and representing the suppressing economic conditions which makes them subversive to men. As in 1973, Edna Steeves wrote that Jane Austen was not a bold woman, that she never closely examined the social situation. The year was also 1973 when Lloyd Brown found Jane Austen's themes "comparable with the eighteenth-century feminism of Mary Wollstonecraft" because they question "certain masculine assumptions in society" (324). While Steeves concluded that Austen's time had not been "ripe for rational and meaningful discussion of women's rights," Brown gave more than a dozen examples of Wollstonecraft arguments dramatized by Austen females. Elizabeth Bennet, for example, is "Mary Wollstonecraft's ideal woman," with what Wollstonecraft calls "precisely the kind of 'wildness that indicates a healthy and independent mind'"(Marshal 39). Known for her realism, irony and social commentary she can be called one who created such female protagonists like Marianne, Elizabeth and Emma through whom "enact her rebellious dissent from her culture"(Marshal 40). Susan Gilbert and Sandra Gilbert in their work *Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) justify "For all her ladylike discretion... Austen is rigorous in her revolt against the conventions she inherited" (Marshal 40). „Jane Austen is subversive, they find, covering her "discomfort", her "dissatisfaction," and her "rebellious dissent" with conservative, conventional plot strategies, thereby attaining "a woman's language that is magnificently duplicitous" (Marshal 41)

Jane Austen can be put into the category of gynocritics as though being criticized for depicting a narrow range of characters confining herself to the landed gentry she actually presented how in her society women need to marry a man with fortune in order to keep her future secured, she raises this point in all her novels be it *Pride & Prejudice*, the unsuitable match of Lucy Charlotte and Mr. Collins as to keep her future secure, also depicted through Mrs. Bennet's anxiety for getting a rich man for all her daughters as they cannot inherit their father's land after his death, thus a question of economic rights of women has been raised by Austen. 'Feminist critics also focus on the role of the female artist in Austen's fiction. For example, Claudia Johnson views Emma as a powerful heroine, an artist who controls her home, her marriage choice, her community and her money. Emma composes stories for people's lives and thereby represents the figure of the female artist.'"(Johnson 124-5). Margaret Kirkham's *Jane Austen, Feminism and Fiction* places Austen as an Enlightenment feminist or rational feminist which means that because Austen believed that reason is a better guide than feeling, it was imperative that she "show that women were no less capable of rational judgment than men". The essential claim of Enlightenment feminism was that women, not having been denied powers of reason, must have the moral status appropriate to 'rational beings,' formed in the image of a rational God. Heroines such as Elizabeth and Emma demonstrate that they are: capable of learning morals through experience and the exercise of their own judgment, while rational Elinor assists emotional Marianne in her moral education. (Marshal 42).

Thus it can be seen that Jane Austen though belonging to an age much before the wave of rational feminism gained momentum she is an important writer of rational feminism.

THE NOVEL

Pride & Prejudice, the second novel by Jane Austen, published in 1813, like her other comedy of manners, deals with the world of provincial world of women and their delicate business of finding a suitable life partner. Elizabeth Bennet the protagonist of the novel is depicted as a self-contained, fiercely independent being rather than traditional admiring and

captivating heroines, thus Austen rejects the conventional image of the beautiful young woman waiting for her lover and gives us a rational, bold and perceptive heroine. Throughout the novel she is presented as a headstrong personality expressive of her feelings and not getting mitigated for belonging to the fairer sex or for her lower social or economic status. Lizzy rejects Collins's marriage proposal, he simply cannot believe she is serious, ascribing her refusal to the "wish of increasing my love by suspense, according to the usual practice of elegant females." (Austen 15) In reply she says, "Do not consider me now as an elegant female... but as a rational creature" (Austen 15). Most critics agree that the phrase "rational creature" intentionally employs terminology Mary Wollstonecraft introduced in her seminal feminist tract *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*. The exchange would then explicitly reject the conventional view of women as nothing more than contestants in the marriage lottery, armed only with studied coquettishness and the ability to "knit purses." Second example can be that of her confrontation with Lady Catherine deBourgh about her and Mr. Darcy's relationship her assertion of equality as "He is a gentleman; I am a gentleman's daughter; so far we are equal" (Austen 306). Feminism is a doctrine that equates women and men equal, and this moment when Elizabeth declares herself equal to Mr. Darcy she truly emerges as a feminist character. Her rejection of Darcy's first proposal to dance again asserts her sense of equality and individual identity because this rejection was more like a revenge on Darcy's comment on her to his friend Mr. Bingley as: "She is tolerable but not handsome enough to tempt me" (Austen 22).

Through this remark Austen raises the point that woman should not be judged by her looks as is done mostly by men but her sensibility and intelligence as it is later Elizabeth's rationality and perceptive nature that Darcy falls in love with. The theme of marriage as introduced in the very first few lines of the novel said by Mrs. Bennet:

It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife. However little known the feelings or views of such a man may be on his first entering the neighbourhood, this truth is so well fixed in the minds of the surrounding families that he is considered as the rightful property of someone or other of their daughters. (Austen 5)

Thus implied that a man has choice and freedom to choose a life partner while women are desperate as depicted in the character of Lydia and Kitty and fight for the best man they can get thus representing subordination of women to men on the contemporary society where all they think about is marrying a man with a fortune rather than being intellectual and free, they prefer going to Meryton to see men in uniform as shown in the and were much encouraged to do so by their mother who was always anxious to get all her daughters married to men of fortune. Here the question of economic power of the women can be emphasized as they need to be married to be economically secure as they could not inherit their father's property. If Jane Austen had written a book simply about English society, these sentiments would not have showed up. The fact that they are introduced and expressed again and again in *Pride and Prejudice* means that Jane Austen held feminist ideals and expressed them in this piece of writing.

Known for writing domestic comedies with ironical stance Jane Austen presents the manners and conventions to be followed by women and various standards set by the society for the women to conform to, confining and restricting them to follow these traditions to be accepted in the sophisticated society, and most surprisingly it is actually the women imposing the norms upon another women as to how they should act and be qualified in various arts like knitting, drawing and playing piano to be called a well bred women, this aspect is depicted through the characters like Lady Catherine de Bourgh and Miss Bingley.

A woman must have a thorough knowledge of music, singing, drawing, dancing, all the modern languages, to deserve the word; and besides all this, she must possess a certain something in her air and manner or walking, the tone of her voice, her address and expressions, or the word will be but half deserved (Austen 35).

A woman herself, Miss Bingley, made this statement. Another example of Lady Catherine snubbing Elizabeth of not being able to play piano which so prevents her from being a perfect lady and she and her sisters being bought up without any governess. Thus being a lady herself she gives emphasis to these standards which repress the women to be herself while men need no qualification except for being handsome, rich and polite to be worthy of having any lady they like. Thus it can be said that it is women who suppress women to a greater extent. 'Jane Austen juxtaposes the perfect lady and Miss Bingley in order to show that the perfect lady is really a shallow-minded conformist. With characters like Miss Bingley, Austen creates resentment for the accomplished lady generalization in the reader's head. This makes the reader dislike the highlight of English society, realize it's sexism in restricting women's free will, and favour characters that are vessels for feminist notions, such as Elizabeth.' (anonymous)

THE MOVIE

The movie presented by the Focus Pictures directed by Joe Wright can be regarded as the closest adaptation of the novel by Jane Austen. The character of the independent and free willed woman perfectly presented by Keira Knightley bring the most charming heroine created by Austen in front of her eyes, we can closely examine her ways and reactions so different from that of her sisters, her capacity to laugh at the artificial behaviour of women, her mother's anxiety for the marriage of her daughters presents to us an ideal independent woman In the opening scene Keira Knightley's character, Elizabeth Bennett can be seen wearing a plain, brown dress (which is symbolic of Elizabeth's class-status, and her love of nature). We can also notice her reading a book as she is walking along the field. The movie depicts the class differences in quite an impressive manner like the sophisticated ball at Netherfields where Bennets were looked down upon for their crude behaviour for their lower status. The difference in the dresses of claimed perfect lady like Miss Bingley of upper society commented by Elizabeth as "painted peacocks" and ordinary dress and bold and country manners of Elizabeth or her sisters. The gentlemen in the movie were made to follow conventions like they always used to keep standing in the presence of women especially in Lady Catherine's house meetings, as a gesture of respect or gentle attitude towards the weaker points to the restrictions imposed by the society for men and women to comfortably sit and talk on equal levels. The development of the fascinating love story of Elizabeth and Darcy find an excellent depiction in the movie, the kind of love Jane Austen profess essential for a successful marriage, the passion and the understanding required are enhanced in the movie.

CONCLUSIONS

Thus it can be concluded that Jane Austen though belonging to an age when feminist movement with the women suffrage movement had just started, through her novels like *Pride and Prejudice* presents to us a realistic image of the society and how it repress and confine women along with her view of how a woman can shed off these restrictions and emerge as an independent women like Elizabeth. Thus Austen can be included in the category of gynocritics i.e. women writing about women voicing their sense of good judgment and reason rather depicting them as gullible emotional beings.

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