

The Social Environment of Women's Reputation in Pride and Prejudice by Jane Austen

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ABSTRACT: This study focuses on the social acceptance and sense of identity of women in nineteenth-century English society, dependent on their reputation. The article takes an exploratory approach to major female characters like Elizabeth Bennet, Jane Bennet, Lydia Bennet and Charlotte Lucas, through qualitative secondary sources and textual analysis. According to the mode of research, the reputation can be considered as a social device that is used to regulate the behavior and moral of women in the realm of patriarchy (Gilbert & Gubar, 1979). In Austen's world, men and women are evaluated on different sets of social criteria: moderation, submission and purity for women; and freedom for men (Poovey, 1984). The article also examines the link between the role of marriage, social class, and the status of reputation, as Austen ridicules the inequalities between the sexes and the social hypocrisy (Butler, 1987). Austen demonstrates the constraints placed on women by the limiting nature of the male patronizing society and class structure through irony, characterization, and realistic social observation (Mudrick, 1952). The study finds that Pride and Prejudice still makes for a highly effective literary reflection on women's quest for dignity, individuality and social respect in a highly confining society.

Introduction

The first half of the nineteenth century was a time that had significant social values and expectations on the women's life. Women had to keep to modesty, obedience, morality and social respectability in English society to maintain their personal integrity and family honor. A woman's reputation was one of her most valuable social assets as it affected her marriage prospects, social acceptance and economic security (Poovey, 1984). Women were not as free and as financially secure as men, this having an impact on what their future would be like and social identity (Wollstonecraft, 1792/2004); Reputation was one important factor, when compared with men. This social reality is described vividly, as is Darcy and Elizabeth in Pride and Prejudice, by Jane Austen. The novel, which was published in 1813, examines

the female lives within a strict social environment that is ruled by public opinion, class and moral expectations (Butler, 1987). Austen shows the difficulty for women balancing personal wishes and social pressure in a society where the personal reputation is the social value (Todd, 2006). The novel focuses on the Bennet family, most notably Elizabeth Bennet, whose intelligence; confidence and moral independent thinking defy the stereotypical female character of the day (Johnson, 1988). Austen explores relationships to marriage, reputation and social duty through the various ladies in the novel, including Elizabeth, and other alternative female types like Jane Bennet, Lydia Bennet and Charlotte Lucas. The characters represent separate reactions to the societal pressures that exist (Brownstein, 1997). Women's reputation in the novel is tied to that of the married woman, since marriage is regarded as the major way for women to be financially secure and socially respected (Tanner, 1986). Women were more marginalized in society with less opportunities actually provided for them in education and work, marriage came in as a necessity of society rather than a mere choice of the heart of the two parties (Armstrong 1987). The ideas, which Mrs Bennet continually imagines in order to find husbands for each of her daughters, is imbued with economic sensibilities characteristic of the patriarchal male dominated society (Watt, 1957). Austen also reveals the double standards of the 19th century society. Female behavior is judged much more strictly than male behavior. Wickham is comparatively spared of criticism while Lydia Bennet faces public disgrace and threatens the prospects of her sisters, due to her elopement with Wickham (Duckworth, 1971). An unequal treatment reveals the patriarchal culture in which women are supposed to uphold morality and family honor (Kirkham, 1983). Nineteenth century literature was often a women's world characterized by "domesticity and obedience" rather than individuality (Gilbert and Gubar 1979). Austen challenges this in her portrayal of female characters that are thinking for themselves and challenging the norms of society (Johnson, 1988). In fact, Elizabeth Bennet is a woman who wears a wedding ring with dignity and for love only, rejecting marriage solely because of financial and social considerations (Lascelles, 1939). *Pride and Prejudice's* social setting is contemporary because issues in the social environments including gender expectation and social judgment, and female reputation still exist in many societies today (Wiltshire, 2001). The novel's message goes beyond historical reality, though, and it evokes questions related to women's identity, women's rights and freedom in patriarchal cultures that do not go away (Copeland & McMaster, 1997). In order to draw conclusions about the social environment of women's reputation in *Pride and Prejudice*, this study used qualitative secondary research and textual analysis. The article examines the role of social context on women's lives, the nature of reputation as a social control and

Austen's characterization of female experiences as critiques on gender and social hypocrisy.

Research Objectives

1. To analyze how women's reputation and social expectations are dealt with in *Pride and Prejudice*.
2. To examine the interference of a patriarchal society in the novels in the process of marriage, women's behavior, and social identity faced by women (Gilbert & Gubar, 1979).
3. To investigate the sexist (gender), class, and social hypocrisy of Jane Austen by characters from the Bennet family, notably Elizabeth Bennet and Lydia Bennet (Butler, 1987).

Literature Review

According to Gilbert and Gubar (1979), women in the nineteenth century were restricted in “patriarchal” literature where submission and virtue were the predominant themes. In their words, women's reputation was a means of preserving the social control and authority of men. Across the text, women were evaluated based on their capacity to live up to the expectations of society. Austen is said to show women as intelligent and rational people who can make their own judgment (Johnson 1988). Elizabeth Bennet is unconventional woman who does not agree to marry for economic purposes. Johnson also believes that the female protagonist in Austen's novels performs a “moral independence which is rare in nineteenth-century novels.” Female virtue and social respectability were central values in the nineteenth society, according to Poovey (1984). Social exclusion and criticism were harsh for women who didn't behave the right way. Reputation in turn was a social institution for regulating female conduct. Butler makes emphasis on Austen's criticism of class hierarchy and social prejudice (1987). She believes that Austen illustrates the paradoxes found in the world of the upper class where money and looks are more important than decent conduct. Butler goes on to say that Austen is satirizing a bond between 'rank' and 'hypocrisy'. According to Duckworth (1971), Austen uses irony and satirical sarcasm to examine the issue of social hypocrisy and gender inequality. Women, who commit the same crimes, are harsher judged than men. Social condemnation of Lydia Bennet's scandalous behavior and excused irresponsibility of the men reveal how quickly social condemnation can descend upon misbehaving women. Tanner (1986) also argues that in the Austen novels, marriage is beyond just its emotional aspects and is also a reflection of economics. Self-fulfillment is often sacrificed for social security by women. Marriage is not just a romantic institution but

one that has also become a social necessity because of class and condition of economy. Harding (1998) discusses Austen's nuanced commentary on the behavior of "respectable" society, and his insight into the tensions in the respectability of the prevailing order. In the same way, Mudrick (1952) gives the reason of Austen's irony that it is a protection and a means of criticism of society. As Said (1994) claims, the novels of the English are frequently representative of some larger configuration of power and social organization. *Pride and Prejudice* is a domestic novel but it also encompasses some socio-economic issues related to class privilege and patriarchy.

Methodology

Qualitative and secondary research method is used in this study. Jane Austen's novel, *Pride and Prejudice* is the focus of primary sources. Nineteenth-century history and feminist literary criticism are among the secondary sources, along with scholarly books and journal articles. The data collecting process consisted of reading academic treatises on women's reputation, marriage, social rank, morality and gender discrimination. The research is closed with textual and thematically reading which supports in identifying the characters of women and their relationship to the society involved in the reading of the novel. This analysis of social reality during Austen's time was also found through historical analysis.

Result and Discussion

Women's Reputation as Social Value: reputation is a social value that is important in *Pride and Prejudice*. Women's marriage ability and social acceptance is dependent on their respectability. It is expected that women must be modest, moral and behave properly at all times (Poovey, 1984). The daughters' behavior is crucial to the social status of the Bennet family. Mrs. Bennett is always worried about the daughters getting married, there's so much uncertainty when they are not married, and they are not economically secured. Then there are the two lines at the opening of the novel, which were quite ironic given Austen's assertion: "A single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife" (Austen 1813/2003, p.1). This is due to the society's obsession with marriage and social status (Watt, 1957). Ideal feminine virtue is given by the personage of Jane Bennet. Her beauty, kindness and modesty make her socially admired and accepted. By contrast, Lydia Bennet's misconduct brings not only discredit to herself, but to her family as well (Duckworth, 1971). Lydia is eloping with Wickham, which puts her sisters at risk of losing their chance of marriage as there is a sense of guilt by association to female morality in the society. Gilbert and Gubar (1979) state that women's reputations were tied to their families' honor and the authority of their fathers. Woman's behavior was thus considered as a social danger,

not just a private one. Patriarchal Society and Female Dependence: women are restricted from their freedom and independence throughout the novel in patriarchy. Women are in a weak economic position and are greatly reliant on marriage for social and financial safety (Tanner, 1986). Charlotte Lucas is married to Mr. Collins because this is what was considered practical to women. She doesn't really want to marry Collins, but she feels that marriage is a safe and secure option. Charlotte only wanted "a comfortable home" (Austen, 1813/2003, p. 120). Armstrong's (1987) analysis of domestic fiction shows women were frequently represented as dependent on men, due to the lack of social power for them by the patriarchal systems. The decision of Charlotte highlights the pressures often put on women to do what is considered "right. Elizabeth Bennet bucks the trend by rejecting Mr. Collins and Darcy at first. She cherishes emotional compatibility, respect and dignity over money and social convenience (Johnson, 1988). Her independence is a criticism of social systems that constrict women's choices, as Austin states. Marriage and Women's Social Identity: in the novel marriage has a great impact on women's social identity and reputation. Women's judgment is based on the persons they marry and their conduct in the relationships (Tanner, 1986). In the novel, the various marriages reflect various social conditions with Charlotte and Collins as a reflection of practical marriage, Lydia and Wickham as a reflection of irresponsible passion and Elizabeth and Darcy as a reflection of mutual respect and emotional maturity. Austen's criticism of love marriages is founded on a practical basis and her approval of love marriages is on the principle of understanding and equality. However, Darcy and Elizabeth are constantly developing throughout the novel, which is why they get along when they marry (Brownstein, 1997). Lascelles (1939) suggests that Austen's heroines do not simply want to marry but also intellectual companionship and emotional respect. Marriage assumes, then, the role of a mirror of social values and social morality. Gender Double Standards: Austen reveals the disparity of treatment of men and women in society. Females are heavily punished for being immoral; males are not as much punished (Duckworth, 1971). Lydia Bennet runs off with her fiancé and causes a scandal and threatens the reputation of her sisters. But Wickham is not nearly as condemned as he deserves to be, being equally to blame. This double standard is the result of a patriarchy's ideology of female purity and morality (Kirkham, 1983). Poovey (1984) states that during the nineteenth century society made a connection between women and moral goodness and domestic order. Hence, women had more rigid social demands than men. Harding (1998) also claims that Austen reveals the underlying viciousness of acceptable social graces. Social Class and Reputation: the novel is strictly dependent on a strong sense of reputation and the relationships between people and their class. The position and wealth of an individual impact

society's judgment of that individual (Butler, 1987). Lady Catherine de Bourgh embodies the spirit of the aristocracy and the class. She thinks that marriage and social interaction should be based on social class. She is prejudiced against Elizabeth and discriminatory towards her for her communication with Darcy. Austen criticizes the society which places more importance on wealth and status than upon intellectual attainment and moral rectitude (Butler 1987). Darcy's eventual marriage to Elizabeth challenges the rigid class boundaries, and showcases Austen's sentimentality that personal merit transcends social class. There are structures of authority and privilege in English literature, as Said (1994) points out. Austen's depiction of class divisions shows the social power was distributed unequally in nineteenth century society. Austen's Feminist Perspective: Austen was a novelist before the concept of modern feminist, but his novel has a lot of feminist thoughts. Elizabeth Bennet embodies female intelligence, independence and moral courage (Johnson, 1988). Johnson (1988) claims that Austen's female characters defy the "passive" stereotype of femininity as they "judge rationally" and make choices of their own. Elizabeth does not bow down and bend to social comfort. Women's opportunities are not the best either, Austen notes. In fact female dependence on marriage is not natural but social, and is the outcome of inequality, not of inferiority (Wollstonecraft, 1792/2004). Austen's witty and trenchant social commentaries and irony challenge the male dominated systems that restrict women's freedom and identity (Todd, 2006). Wiltshire 2001 also states that Austen's fiction is always relevant since it deals with universal issues of identity, gender and social pressure.

Conclusion

An example of the social background of the 19th century English society- a patriarchal society- is seen in women's reputation in *Pride and Prejudice*. Public opinion and moral expectations had an important impact on the social acceptance of women, marriage opportunities and their personal identities (Poovey, 1984). Austen shows us how a reputation works as a safeguard and as a constraint on women. The novel explores different forms of response to social pressure and patriarchy in terms of its characters; Elizabeth Bennet, Jane Bennet, Lydia Bennet and Charlotte Lucas. The study also brings to the fore the inequalities of women in the society. Patriarchy culture disapproves of female behaviors more harshly than male behaviors, thus showing double standards (Duckworth, 1971). Austen is critical of a society that values the accumulation of money, looks, social rank over actual virtue and emotion (Butler, 1987). To conclude, *Pride and Prejudice* is an important literature as it portrays the struggle of women for dignity, individuality and social acceptance in a realistic manner. The message of Austen's criticism on the lack of equality between

the sexes and the social prejudice remains as pertinent as ever, today, as it did during his lifetime (Johnson, 1988).

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