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## Gender and Class in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*

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### ABSTRACT:

This research paper discusses about the theme of Gender and Class in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, it has its focus attention on how the society have its expectations, restrictions as well as limitations around women during the Regency era of England which was the early 19th century. During that time women had limited resources their status was seen and judged by their marital life, though marriage itself was nothing but a means of economic transaction often driven by the societal rules after the marriage the woman is expected to be fully dependant on the their husband, education during that era was nothing but to be an expert in household things like cooking, sewing.

Jane Austen portrayed a hierarchy set by the society in order to restrict lower class women, how the society made a barrier between the wealthy and the poor, in the novel *Pride and Prejudice* Austen used characters like Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth Bennet to show the limited part are available to women and how Marriage for finance is better than marriage for love. Austen wrote this novel presenting how women often chose to fit under societal expectations rather than living by their own personal life choices, how the society shaped women and their behaviour about their gender and roles, Austen challenges it all the rules norms and expectations ending up highlighting the role of women solely driven by class and gender.

**Keywords:** gender roles, class, hierarchy, marriage, social mobility

### INTRODUCTION:

*Pride and Prejudice* remains the most influential and popular novel in the world of English Literature, it was set between 1813 which was the Regency Era. This novel strongly challenges the societal expectations from women and also social norms, it also speaks about gender and class in a society driven by rigid hierarchy. With this novel Austen presents the characters who are shaped by all of these aspects.

The central quarrel of this novel is about a character named Elizabeth Bennet and her relationship with Mr. Darcy where their story goes beyond romantic presumptions, many people just see this as a romantic story between them but there is so much more beyond the romantic feelings but it also studies about early society during the 19th century. The two main forces in this novel are Gender and Class, how women are not treated equally as men and how they are expected to behave and how they're expected to be presented in the society. Women in that era specifically have life full of limitations like they could not inherit land and even work in any profession so marriage was the only option to gain financial dependability. Austen highlights these issues in her novel by presenting the Bennet family who are very well respected among the society but are affluent and she introduces characters like Mr. Darcy, Mr. Wickham, Mr. Collins and Lady Catherine de Bourgh and how all of them represents different classes in the society.

While focusing on the main character like Elizabeth Bennet, a lady who questions these societal beliefs and actually insists on marrying for love instead of financial reasons. This paper will explore two prominent forces Gender and Class how these two factors can change a person's opinion shape their personality and also shape their thinking, Austen also criticises how the society's treatment and how there's a flicker of hope that all these may change through wit and personal integrity.

### HISTORICAL AND SOCIAL CONTEXT:

To know more about Austen's work, we have to look over the historical records of the Regency era (1813), during that era there was a strong class hierarchy and male dominated society how marriage was seen as a mean of wealth and reputation. Women were seen as puppets in the hand of their husband and all the land revenue would directly go to the male heirs instead of female even if they are more worthy of it, leading to positional discrimination and marriage was just a ritual and not a responsibility. Women's desires were not prioritised and how they were back pulled from fulfilling their dreams.

Bennet family's situation was strange itself how the estate of Mr. Bennet's was entitled to Mr. Collins and one of his daughter could inherit the land. This situation lets us know how society saw women and vulnerable women were and how women could never have their own economic independence even if they're much more capable of doing so. At that time England was also facing social and economical shifts through the means of wealth from trade and industrial development, the unequal distribution of wealth, at that time land was one of the important fountainhead of wealth as well as social reputation and Mr. Darcy's families owned large estates like Pemberley. Their main income came from the land which was usually used for rents and many other

things it was not just about wealth but also where it came from, for Mr. Darcy his wealth came from land and Mr. Bingley his wealth came from the business means rather than land.

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### **GENDER IN PRIDE AND PREJUDICE:**

Gender places a huge role in this novel, since women were seen as merely an object and men to lead the family and to earn for it. Even if women were capable of working, they were not allowed to chase out their dreams and live fully independently. They have to be dependent on their husbands or their father to live in this rigid hierarchy society, and women who cannot inherit any land which might be rightfully their people often choose male heirs to inherit all the lands and the revenue from it women during that era often marries not out of love but out of wealth and their social reputation. This novel has a character named Charlotte who married just because of the financial freedom, she would get by marrying a wealthy man instead of actually marrying someone whom she truly loved, the character of Charlotte that shows how rigid the society is, and how one would choose wealth over their own personal choices of life.

But another character, Elizabeth Bennett chose to marry out of love and not for wealth she even refuse the proposal of Mr Darcy and Mr Collins showing a very strong spirit of leading a life of her own personal choices instead of blindly following what the society expects from her. Though we could since the parable tension between what women are expected to do, and what actually chooses it also highlights the barriers which were put on women's autonomy.

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### **CLASS IN PRIDE AND PREJUDICE:**

Class is one of the most important themes in *pride and Prejudices*, that how your wealth, background and property gets to decide your place in the society and how respected you are, and how your wealth also plays the vital role in marriage. During the Regency era class shapes you as a person, Austen also shows how strongly it shapes you she showed these traits from characters like Mr. Darcy, Mr. Collins, Mr. Bingley and lady Catherine.

There is another theme apart this which is the new commercial money, how Darcy represented old money and how Bingley represented new money by because all his income comes from trade and Darcy gets his wealth from land by this logic Austen shows how the economic system is changing in England how it's just not the 'land' which is a source of income and social benefits but now it's also the trade and commerce arising giving people new opportunities to earn wealth and get their place in the social hierarchy.

The prejudice people hold cause of the class differences also shaped their mindset, at first Darcy agreed to his marriage with Elizabeth claiming he loves her but he also says how her status and class is beneath him and that made Elizabeth believe Darcy's personality is sharply shaped by class in the society and this almost certainly destroyed their relationship.

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### **FEMALE AUTONOMY AND RESISTANCE IN MALE DOMINATED SOCIETY:**

In the novel *Pride and Prejudice*, it is shown that the society is male dominated how males have all the power and are expected to follow rules to be presentable in the society this system is called patriarchy. During that time, males are given almost all of the opportunities, whether it should be related to politics, economics or even decision-making, well, women had little to no resources and how society often would look at women and just them by their looks, their behaviour or if she married a wealthy man. Austen also shows how women were not given opportunities to earn their own or to make their own decisions without having to ask for permission from their husband or their father. It also shows how Mr Bennett's land will directly be inherited to Mr Collins because Mr Bennett's daughter and the wife could not inherit the land which was rightfully because their women and they would be left with little to no money to survive. Their only option would be to marry of a wealthy man who could financially support them, this system shows how women were forced to be dependent on even the smallest things in the novel Austen also shows how Elizabeth refused Mr Darcy's proposal and that sparked a new idea for female agency and class authority.

How Elizabeth, a young woman who refused to marry Mr Darcy because of his wealth, she chose to marry whom she truly love without caring for any financial freedom. Austen portrait, Elizabeth is such an intelligent and she shows how women should not be dependent, and they can express themselves freely as they want how women can also have sharp features and the right of their own lives. This novel shows the era of women are pressed down because of their gender some women to submit some rebel and some like Elizabeth, who shows women should not stay quiet and can live their life in their world.

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### **INTERSECTION OF CLASS AND GENDER:**

#### **Marriage as more than just a convergence of gender and class: -**

In *Pride and Prejudice* Austen illustrates that marriage is not simply just about love but largely about acquiring social status and financial security the society held biased views on marriages where women's reputation and role depended entirely on whom she will marry. This rigid social structure highlights how limited women's opportunities were for women how they were treated and how they will act it all revolved around her marriage.

Even the Bennet sisters' future and image solely depended on their marital status, as it has been going on that woman can not go out and earn can not inherit land even if they are more capable of maintaining it but when Elizabeth received Darcy's proposal instead of accepting it like everyone else and seeing marriage as a means to gain social power she challenges the class boundaries.

**Elizabeth Bennet vs. Lady Catherine: defiance and authority: -**

The conflict between Lady Catherine and Elizabeth encapsulated the tension between individualism and socioculture expectations in the context of 19th century England.

Where lady Catherine represents strong and powerful combination of socio culture structures when she attempted to assert her dominant over Elizabeth's choice, Elizabeth stood by her words, Elizabeth's refusal sparked defiant and progressive exercise of individual sovereignty. Her resistance however expresses a bold exercise of her autonomy demonstrating a rejection of both gendered subordination and class based condescension.

**From Prejudice to partnership: Elizabeth and Mr Darcy's transcendence of societal expectations: -**

The relationship between Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth in *Pride and Prejudice* serves as a central element of the novel which addresses the convolution of gender and class dynamics in the Regency era of England. At first Mr. Darcy whose pride was much bigger dismissed Elizabeth because he believed she was beneath him, he even insulted her family these comments made Elizabeth reject his proposal saying she would have respect and dignity over wealth and status. After this incident both the character reflects on their actions, where Mr. Darcy gave his contributions to resolve Lydia's situation, and for Elizabeth she started reflecting on her words, and she thought she may have judged him very soon. In the very end, their reunion was more than just any romantic ending it also represented a settlement between mutual respect can overcome class division which was applied.

**AUSTEN'S SOCIAL CRITIQUE:**

Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* uses social criticism to write how she truly felt about women in that era, she uses a character called Elizabeth Bennett who believes that marriage should be based on love and not for wealth and social status then she shows another character named Charlotte Lucas, who just wanted to secure her life with wealth and money and social reputation without caring if she loves that man or not.

Jane Austen represented Elizabeth as a woman who is witty and intelligent, she shows how Elizabeth believes that respect and equality is more than wealth or social status and characters like Charlotte, she represented have people would choose wealth over their personal choices. Austen display the society in the 19th century, England, how it was a male driven society and how little to no opportunities women used to have even at this date, some women are forced to marry without their own consent, and the sole reason for the marriage would be either money or fame, and no one would actually ask for their own personal choices. Austen presented a rigid but melancholic truth of society and how women were treated, and at some point, women are still treated this way with no one, caring for their actual self and everyone, just pressuring them into something they might not want.

**CONCLUSION:**

In *Pride and Prejudice* Jane Austen carefully weaves the complexity of gender in class into the fabric of narrative, exploring the limitations and possibilities of early 19th century English Society. The novel demonstrates how women's roles were largely defined by marriage and social expectations yet through Elizabeth Bennett Austen challenges the rigid boundaries of both gender in class. Elizabeth's insistence on marriage for love, rather than wealth or status unsettled the conventional hierarchy and redefines what it means for a woman to exercise autonomy.

At the same time, Darcy's transformation illustrates that how privilege is not an absolute master of superiority, but one that can be tempered by humility and moral growth. By criticising the patriarchal structure that confined women and highlighted the tension between social mobility and inherited rank Austen reviews, the interdependence of gender and class in shaping human relationships ultimately, the novel affirms that genuine respect, equality, and personal integrity and not rigid social codes should found the foundation of marriage and society. In doing so, *Pride and Prejudice* remains a timeless exploration of how individual can resist and reform system of power making it as relevant today as it was in Austen's time.

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