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The Social Condition of England's Women in 18th Century Reflected in Pride and Prejudice by Jane Austen

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to: (1) know what the intrinsic aspects of Pride and Prejudice, (2) describe how the social condition of England's women is in 18th century reflected in "Pride and Prejudice" and (3) analyze what the economical influence towards England's women in "Pride and Prejudice". This study employs a qualitative research method with a literary analysis approach. The analysis of this thesis uses genetic structuralism. It is conducted by analyzing the intrinsic elements which consists of plot, characters, setting, and theme. Besides, the writer also analyzes the extrinsic elements by observing from the sociology, history and other aspects outside the literary work. The genetic structuralism analysis used to find the intrinsic elements in this novel, the social condition of England's women in 18th century reflected in "Pride and Prejudice" and also the economical influence towards England's women in "Pride and Prejudice". This analysis shows that in the 18th century, England's women get inequality gender in the society. Education, politic, and occupation are not allowed to them. Economical matter pushed them to marry with a rich and high-status men to lead a secure life.

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1. Introduction

Literature is a body of written works that expresses human experiences, emotions, and ideas through storytelling, often reflecting societal values, historical contexts, and individual struggles (Weda et al., 2022; Rahman, 2024; Abbas et al., 2024; Junaid et al., 2024). According to Damrosch (2019), literature is a means of interpreting the world, offering insights into human nature and societal structures. Austen's works, for example, have been analyzed through feminist perspectives, as seen in Harman's (2021) study, which critiques gender roles in her novels. The expert's insights help us understand how literary works both shape and reflect the ideologies of their time, making them essential for studying historical, social, and gender dynamics (Abbas et al., 2022.; Irmayani et al., 2024; Suma et al., 2023).

Pride and Prejudice describes about the social structure of nineteenth century England where the property laws of the time had dictated that certain properties must be under male control and if the owner was not lucky to have a son, it would pass on to the nearest male relative. Ownership at the beginning of 19th century was denied to women. The property, personality, and rights of the wife, are more strictly protected.

Pride and Prejudice illuminates the patriarchal framework of early 19th-century England, where property laws systematically excluded women from ownership. Estates were reserved for male descendants or male kin, leaving women economically dependent. Upon marriage, a woman's pre-marital assets were automatically transferred to her husband, unrestrictive of conditions her family might impose for approval. Legally, husbands assumed guardianship over their wives, yet this "protection" came at the cost of women's autonomy: they relinquished rights to property brought into the marriage, even after separation. Wives' financial agency was further erased, as men wielded absolute authority over their income, reflecting a legal system that codified female subordination. If the family head dies without sons, then by operation of common law, the estate would be inherited equally by all the man's daughters.

In this novel, women get their rights, but their rights are just considered from the social control of society. Since the end of World War II up to now, having equal rights between man and female are still being issues in which several ways out have been taken to give the same equal rights for women. Women have a limited position and are framed into narrow atmosphere. Female freedom in choosing and determining her own life is based on the situation and condition around her. This situation can be found in customs, citizen, law, norms, religion, and every single dimension of life.

The selection of Jane Austen's Pride and Prejudice for this research is motivated by its thematic foregrounding of 18th-century England's gendered sociocultural constraints. The novel's narrative centrality on female characters who grapple with systemic barriers to equality in education, economic agency, and sociopolitical participation reflects a historical reality where marriage functioned as women's sole institutionalized pathway to stability. Denied autonomy, women were relegated to matrimony as a means of escaping familial precarity or securing financial survival, reducing their societal role to spousal and reproductive duties.

This study is significant because it provides a deeper understanding of how literature reflects historical gender inequalities, offering insight into the intersection of literature, history, and feminism. By employing genetic structuralism, this research also highlights the ways in which Austen's work critiques and engages with the sociocultural norms of her time, making it relevant for contemporary discussions on gender roles and women's rights. Therefore, the writer determines the title of this thesis is The Social Condition of England's Women in the 18th Century Reflected in Pride and Prejudice. Therefore, the writer determines the title of this thesis is The Social Condition of England's Women in 18th Century reflected in Pride and Prejudice.

2. Methodology

This research employs genetic structuralism, as discussed by Damrosch (2019) and Eagleton (2022), to examine both intrinsic and extrinsic elements of the novel. The intrinsic analysis includes narrative structure, character development, and thematic exploration (Parker, 2020; Tyson, 2023), while the extrinsic analysis investigates the socio-economic conditions of 18th-century England (Bolton, 2021). By integrating literary theory with historical context, this study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how Pride and Prejudice reflects women's realities during Austen's time.

3. Result and Discussion

3.1 Intrinsic Elements

As already been mentioned previously, the writer starts to analyze this novel by using intrinsic elements in which comprehend of plot, character, theme, and setting in Pride and Prejudice.

3.1.1 Plot

The plot serves as a foundational pillar of fictional narrative, functioning as the structural framework that organizes events within a story into a causally connected sequence. Its significance lies in guiding readers through the narrative's progression, ensuring coherence and engagement. A well-constructed plot establishes harmony between character motivations and their consequential actions, thereby deepening thematic resonance. Traditional literary analysis categorizes plot into four critical phases: exposition (introduction of setting and characters), conflict (central tension), complication (escalating obstacles), and climax (narrative turning point) each contributing to the story's dynamic unfolding. The plot of Pride and Prejudice follows Parker's (2020) standard narrative structure of exposition, conflict, climax, and resolution. The novel's exposition reveals the Bennet family and their social ambitions, while the conflict stems from Elizabeth Bennet's prejudice against Mr. Darcy and his arrogant demeanour.

According to Parker (2020), Pride and Prejudice's story is structured according to a traditional narrative framework, which includes exposition, conflict, climax, and resolution. Elizabeth Bennet's poor assessment of Mr. Darcy's personality leads to the main conflict, while the exposition presents the Bennet family's social goals. Character-driven stories, like Austen's, depend on interpersonal interactions and psychological depth to advance the plot, as Tyson (2023) points out. Austen's deliberate use of internal conflict in Elizabeth's character, according to Fergus (2019), functions as a prolonged metaphor for the larger difficulties that women of the day faced. The resolution, which questions social norms around marriage and status, is the culmination of Elizabeth's re-evaluation of her preconception.

a. Exposition

Exposition, the foundational segment of a narrative, establishes the initial context and character dynamics central to the story. In Pride and Prejudice, this structural element emerges in the opening scenes at the Bennet household, where Mrs. Bennet learns of Mr. Bingley's arrival at Netherfield Park—a wealthy bachelor accompanied by his sister and Mr. Darcy. This moment not only introduces the Bennet family's social aspirations but also delineates their domestic milieu, characterized by Mr. and Mrs. Bennet's contrasting temperaments and their five unmarried daughters: Jane, Elizabeth, Mary, Kitty, and Lydia. The exposition thus lays the groundwork for the novel's exploration of marriage, class, and familial obligation.

b. Raising action

Austen's Pride and Prejudice constructs its dramatic tension through the dual failings of its protagonists. Elizabeth's quick intellect and moral confidence lead her to misinterpret Darcy's reserved demeanor as haughtiness, while his ingrained class prejudice prevents him from recognizing her worth beyond her modest background. Darcy's pride in his social rank and education manifests as condescension toward provincial society, whereas Elizabeth's pride in her perceptiveness turns to resentment when he insults her at the Meryton ball. The pivotal moment occurs when Elizabeth overhears Darcy's dismissive assessment of her, which she deems unworthy of a gentleman. This exchange crystallizes their mutual biases: her injured pride fuels animosity, while his snobbery blinds him to her virtues, establishing the fraught dynamic that propels the plot.

c. Conflict

Conflict, defined as the friction between competing interests or values, heightens narrative stakes by introducing drama and complexity. The central conflict in this narrative originates with Mr. Bingley's swift attraction to Jane Bennet, whose beauty and gentleness captivate him during social gatherings in Maryton and at his estate. His sisters, particularly Caroline Bingley, and Mr. Darcy resist the match, citing the Bennets' perceived lack of social standing. Caroline's disdain for Jane's family viewing them as unrefined and motivated by financial opportunism drives her to manipulate Bingley's choices. She enlists Darcy's aid in persuading Bingley that Jane's affections are insincere, then engineers their sudden departure to London to "protect" Bingley from the Bennets' alleged greed. Caroline's calculated letter to Jane, which omits the truth of their motives, inadvertently alerts Elizabeth and Jane to its manipulative subtext, fostering doubt and intrigue.

d. Climax

The climax, the narrative's pivotal and emotionally charged turning point, unfolds as Jane falls ill during a visit to Netherfield, compelling Elizabeth to care for her. Elizabeth's arrival sparks a shift in Darcy's perception of her, as he increasingly admires her determination and compassion. Caroline Bingley, threatened by Darcy's growing interest in Elizabeth, attempts to undermine her by criticizing the impropriety of Elizabeth's family. Meanwhile, Elizabeth's preexisting prejudice against Darcy intensifies after her encounter with Wickham, a manipulative officer who fabricates a damning account of Darcy's past. This deception, combined with Darcy's role in persuading Bingley to abandon his courtship of Jane, solidifies Elizabeth's disdain. However, Darcy, grappling with his own pride and societal reservations, confesses his love for her. Elizabeth, still resentful of his interference in Jane's romance, rejects his proposal, creating a rupture that drives the narrative toward resolution.

e. Resolution

The narrative resolution unfolds in the novel's final chapters as Elizabeth Bennet's perception of Mr. Darcy undergoes a profound transformation. During a visit to Pemberley, Darcy's estate, accompanied by her aunt and uncle, the Gardiners, Elizabeth encounters testimonies of Darcy's integrity from his housekeeper, who praises his generosity and moral character. This revelation sparks Elizabeth's growing curiosity about Darcy, further amplified when he introduces her to his younger sister, Georgiana, whose warmth contrasts with Elizabeth's earlier assumptions about the family. However, the resolution is complicated by a sudden crisis: Elizabeth receives a letter from Jane disclosing Lydia's reckless elopement with Wickham, casting uncertainty over the family's reputation and Wickham's intentions. This twist intertwines personal reckoning with familial turmoil, propelling the story toward its ultimate reconciliation.

3.1.2 Character

Character is one of important aspects in a fictional work because through character the story can be written or constructed. Character is the figure in the story who shares their experiences by creating or developing the conflict of the story. In a literary work, character is an important one for a good writer to construct their works.

The analysis below expounds some characters of the novel that have a huge contribution and some important influence in making problem in Pride and Prejudice of Austen's. The main characters are Elizabeth Bennet, Fitzwilliam Darcy, Jane Bennet, Charles Bingley, Mr. Bennet and Mrs. Bennet. Austen creates interesting female characters that question standard gender roles. Elizabeth Bennet, for example, represents a progressive view of marriage and liberty, whereas Charlotte Lucas marries for security rather than love. Bolton (2021) sees Austen's portrayal as a blend of realism and comedy, illustrating the limits imposed on women by marriage.

In order to address gender and class inequalities, Austen's portrayal is essential. When it comes to marriage and independence, Elizabeth Bennet represents a progressive viewpoint, while Charlotte Lucas follows social norms by

marrying for stability rather than love. Austen's character development, according to Bolton (2021), strikes a balance between social realism and satire, exposing the limitations placed on women by expectations of marriage. Harman (2021) goes on to say that Austen's own life experiences gave her female characters depth and enabled them to deftly and resolutely negotiate social norms

3.1.3 Theme

Through an analysis of Jane Austen's Pride and Prejudice, this research identifies pride and prejudice as central themes, though the novel simultaneously interrogates intersecting issues of class, gender, familial duty, and the socio-economic imperative of marriage in Regency-era England. A critical focus lies in Austen's critique of 18th-century gender norms, particularly women's limited agency, which confined them to securing financial stability through advantageous marriages rather than pursuing independent livelihoods. Characters like Mrs. Bennet and Mrs. Phillips epitomize this societal fixation, as their obsessive matchmaking for their daughters and nieces disregards personal compatibility, prioritizing wealth and social standing above all else. Social hierarchy and gender-based economic restrictions are criticized in the book. Austen uses irony to criticize the selling of women in the marriage market, according to Damrosch (2019). Austen highlights how women's decisions were influenced by economic survival, which restricted their autonomy and strengthened patriarchal systems, by looking at these interactions (Jones, 2023).

According to Spencer (2022), the way that class and gender interact in Austen's writing is still pertinent to conversations about women's rights today. Austen underscores how marriage functioned as both a survival strategy and a suffocating social expectation, reducing women's value to their marital prospects and reproductive roles. The novel criticises social hierarchy and gender inequalities. Damrosch (2019) contends that language research of literature can reveal underlying societal critiques, as evidenced by Austen's use of irony to emphasize the absurdity of the marriage market. The tale also delves on economic survival, as many female characters must marry to ensure their financial prospects.

3.1.4 Setting

The novel's setting is integral to its exploration of social dynamics, with the early 1800s Regency period serving as both backdrop and thematic catalyst. Against the rapid changes wrought by the Industrial Revolution expanding commerce, technological innovation, and a rising middle-class Austen contrasts the rural gentry's insular world. Locations like Longbourn, the Bennet family's countryside home, reflect the era's preoccupation with status, as newly wealthy industrialists adopted the lifestyles of the landed aristocracy. The proliferation of grand estates and material excess symbolizes the era's social aspirations, while the narrative's focus on domestic spaces critiques the limited agency of women confined to these spheres. By anchoring the story in this transformative historical moment, Austen interrogates the interplay of tradition and progress.

3.2 Extrinsic Elements

3.2.1 The Social Condition of England's Women in 18th Century

During the early 19th century, Regency-era society enforced rigid gender and class hierarchies that disproportionately marginalized women. Men derived social legitimacy through financial independence whether via inheritance or profession, while women were confined to domestic roles, expected to marry young and prioritize childbearing.

Bolton (2021) adds that Austen's novels challenge traditional conventions by depicting heroines who question their roles. Intellectual and political pursuits were deemed masculine domains, with women discouraged from overt displays of intelligence or ambition. This patriarchal structure positioned women as legal and economic dependents; their identities subsumed under male authority. While similar constraints persisted into the Victorian period, the Regency era's emphasis on social performance uniquely shaped women's subjugation, as depicted in Austen's exploration of matrimony as both survival strategy and social bondage.

> "A woman's education was intended only as a preparation for her social life and her marriage solely for financial security. Women were expected to marry single, wealthy men, showing both joy and gratitude. While the men were expected to be in possession of wealth in order to attract a wife" (Nardin, 1987:16).

Women were subject to significant economic and legal constraints throughout this time. According to Bolton (2021), Austen's stories subvert these conventions by showcasing heroines who defy social standards and support individual

autonomy. According to Jones (2023), a lack of legal rights during this time period made economic restrictions on women even more severe, making marriage one of the few practical routes to financial security.

Patriarchal systems remained entrenched in Regency-era society, centering male authority and relegating women to subordinate roles. Marriage functioned as both a social necessity and a form of systemic oppression for women, who forfeited legal autonomy and property rights under coverture laws. Upon marriage, a woman's assets became her husband's sole possession, reducing her to economic dependency. Primogeniture customs further solidified this disparity, as inheritance flowed exclusively through male lineages, leaving unmarried women financially vulnerable. Consequently, middle-class women cultivated "accomplishments" like music, art, and etiquette to enhance their marital prospects skills that prioritized ornamental value over practical agency. With few legal protections or occupational opportunities, women faced immense pressure to wed, often sacrificing personal choice for economic survival, as romantic unions remained a rare privilege rather than a societal expectation.

> "The status of women in the 18th century of Victorian era is often seen as an illustration of the striking discrepancy between the United Kingdom's national power and wealth and what many, then and now, consider its appalling social conditions. During the era symbolized by the reign of British monarch Queen Victoria, women did not have suffrage rights, the right to sue, or the right to own property" (Johnson, 1988:57).

Under 19th-century British common law, married women faced near-total legal erasure. Coverture statutes rendered wives economically and juridically subservient to their husbands, who controlled all marital property including pre-marital assets and post-divorce settlements. Women could not independently open bank accounts, sign contracts, or retain earnings, as spouses were legally deemed a single entity. Unmarried women, unless inheriting significant wealth as orphaned heiresses, were similarly constrained, requiring male guardianship. Social norms further marginalized women by excluding them from intellectual or political discourse, as exemplified by the gendered segregation of post-dinner conversations. This exclusion was rationalized as preserving a feminine "paradise" of ignorance, shielding women from the corrupting influence of public affairs.

4.2.2 The England's Women in 18th century reflected in Pride and Prejudice

The late 18th century marked a pivotal shift in British society as industrialization and ideological upheavals spurred by the American and French Revolutions reshaped economic and political landscapes. Social hierarchies remained entrenched, with wealth dictating status: the middle and upper classes enjoyed opulent lifestyles in secure, well-appointed homes, adorned in high-quality attire and insulated from food insecurity. In stark contrast, the laboring classes endured deprivation, often lacking basic necessities. Gendered roles reinforced this stratification: men were primary income earners, while women, particularly in middle- and upper-class households, were confined to domestic duties, their labor unrecognized in formal economies. This division entrenched socioeconomic disparities, as industrial capitalism began redefining notions of work and value.

In 18th- and early 19th-century Britain, women were confined to rigid societal roles that emphasized submissiveness, domesticity, and moral purity. As scholar Marilyn Butler notes, middle- and upper-class women were expected to transition seamlessly from paternal dependence to marital subservience, their identities tethered to male guardianship (Butler, 1990, p. 50). Jane Austen's Pride and Prejudice (1813), set in the Regency period, critiques these norms by portraying women navigating limited choices: marrying for security (Charlotte Lucas), resisting societal pressure (Elizabeth Bennet), or embodying frivolous femininity (Lydia Bennet). The novel juxtaposes didactic expectations—such as Mr. Darcy's infamous list of "accomplishments" for an "eligible" woman, including mastery of music, art, and genteel manners (Austen, 1992, p. 158)—with subtle rebellions that expose the contradictions of a system reducing women to ornamental "trophies."

Regency-era women of the gentry were trapped in a legal and economic straitjacket. Denied access to professions, academia, and civic engagement, their survival strategies were limited to marriage or rare inheritance. Elizabeth Bennet's character, while defying stereotypes through her wit, still confronts the era's harsh realities: without a dowry or male heir, her family's estate is entailed to a distant cousin, Mr. Collins. Common law occasionally permitted daughters to inherit, but entailments legal mechanisms prioritizing male lineage often overrode these rights, as Austen critiques through the Bennets' precarious situation. Even when women inherited, coverture laws transferred control to their husbands, ensuring wealth remained within patriarchal structures. Thus, women's "independence" was illusory, contingent on male approval at every stage.

4.2.3 The Economical Influence towards English Women in Pride and Prejudice

The Industrial Revolution's socioeconomic transformations profoundly influenced Regency-era societal norms, shaping characters' motivations in novels like Pride and Prejudice. Industrial capitalism intensified class divisions, with the upper gentry prioritizing material wealth and exclusivity. Access to quality education a privilege largely reserved for affluent families—further entrenched these hierarchies. For genteel women, barred from professions, academia, and civic participation, marriage became a transactional necessity. Characters like Charlotte Lucas, who marries the insufferable Mr. Collins, epitomize this reality: matrimony offered financial stability or escape from oppressive domestic environments, as women lacked legal or economic alternatives to secure autonomy. Economic constraints significantly influenced women's decisions. The Industrial Revolution increased class divisions, making financial stability the number one priority for gentry women (Bolton, 2021).

Many women married for stability rather than love, as Austen's characters like Charlotte Lucas demonstrate, reflecting the economic demands of the time. The novel's incisive opening line establishes marriage as a socioeconomic imperative, inextricably tied to patriarchal capitalism. By asserting that a wealthy man "must be in want of a wife" (Austen, 1992, p. 1), Austen parodies the collective delusion of women like Mrs. Bennet, who equate financial security with romantic destiny. The phrase "good fortune" underscores how male wealth dictates marital prospects, rendering women's agency secondary to economic survival. Marriage, as depicted, operates as a socially sanctioned transaction where men's "elegant manners" and material assets eclipse substantive virtues like integrity or wisdom.

Through this framing, Austen lampoons a society that rewards performative gentility while trivializing emotional or intellectual compatibility. Regency-era property laws systematically excluded women, with estates like Lady Catherine's Rosings Park entailed to male heirs. Gentry women, lacking secure inheritance, were forced into marital transactions for economic stability—a reality Austen critiques through the Bennet family's vulnerability. Lady Catherine, a beneficiary of aristocratic privilege, weaponizes class prejudice to condemn Elizabeth's match with Darcy, deriding her as "of inferior birth, of no importance in the world" (Austen, 1813, p. 335). Her outrage stems not from genuine concern for Darcy but from a desire to maintain the status quo that secures her own wealth. Austen juxtaposes Lady Catherine's entitled arrogance with Elizabeth's moral integrity, challenging the notion that social rank reflects personal worth.

Lady Chaterine does not want to lose the property, so she tried intimidation with Elisabeth said that her family is low class family which filled of wedding scandals of their children with Wickham.

> "Do you pay no regard to the wishes of his friend? To antacit engagement with Miss lady de Brough? Are you lost to every feeling of propriety and delicacy? Have you not heard me say that from his earliest hours he was destined for his cousin" (PP, 1992:364)"

Lady Catherine opposition to Elizabeth Bennet's potential marriage to Mr. Darcy stems from her desire to preserve familial wealth and social status, which are threatened by Elizabeth's "inferior" class. During their confrontation, Lady Catherine weaponizes the Bennet family's scandals—notably Lydia's elopement with Wickham—to demean Elizabeth, declaring, "Your sister's ruin must be a disgrace to you all. Who will connect themselves with such a family?" (Austen, 1813, p. 336). Her fear, however, is less about morality than about safeguarding her daughter Anne's prospects. Though Anne is Darcy's cousin and Lady Catherine's intended match for him, Regency-era entailment laws (not Victorian-era norms) would not strip Anne of property rights; rather, her inheritance is secure due to aristocratic privilege.

The Bennet sisters' urgency to marry, by contrast, arises from the entailment of Longbourn to Mr. Collins, a male relative, under primogeniture—a legal mechanism that bypasses daughters in favour of distant male heirs. This system, not "common law," forces women like the Bennet's into marital dependency. As unmarried gentry women, they face destitution unless they wed, since coverture laws transfer a wife's property and legal identity to her husband. Thus, Lady Catherine's hypocrisy is laid bare: she benefits from patriarchal inheritance structures while denying Elizabeth the agency to challenge them through her union with Darcy. Austen juxtaposes seven marital unions in the novel, with five central pairings—excluding the Gardiners and Lucases—serving as a microcosm of Regency-era matrimonial norms. The Bennet parents' dysfunctional marriage, marked by Mr. Bennet's apathy and Mrs. Bennet's imprudence, epitomizes familial neglect, leaving their daughters vulnerable to societal censure (e.g., Lydia's reckless elopement). In contrast, Elizabeth and Darcy's union emerges as Austen's ideal, challenging superficial courtship rituals. Their relationship evolves from mutual disdain to profound understanding, dismantling initial prejudices rooted in class and appearance. Unlike Lydia's impulsive marriage or Charlotte's pragmatic alliance, their bond is forged through introspection and empathy, underscoring Austen's belief that enduring partnerships demand emotional and intellectual reciprocity. The marriage between Jane Bennet and Bingley is also an example of successful marriage. Austen expresses her opinion of this in the novel:

> "....really believed all his [Bingley] expectations of felicity, to be rationally founded, because they had for basis the excellent understanding, and super-excellent disposition of Jane, and a general similarity of feeling and taste between her and himself (PP,1992:55).

However, unlike Darcy and Elizabeth, there is a flaw in their relationship. The flaw is that both characters are too gullible and too good-hearted to ever act strongly against external forces that may attempt to separate them.

Austen's Pride and Prejudice dissects flawed marital models through three contrasting unions, each emblematic of societal failings. Lydia and Wickham's marriage, founded on fleeting infatuation and aesthetic allure, collapses into mutual dissatisfaction as their initial passion wanes. Their union deteriorates into financial dependency and emotional neglect, with Lydia—now "a regular visitor" at her sisters' homes (Austen, 1813, p. 312)—embodying the fallout of impulsive choices. This pairing critiques Regency-era romantic recklessness, where youth and charm mask irreparable incompatibility.

The Bennet's' marriage exemplifies the perils of superficial attraction devoid of intellectual or emotional alignment. Mr. Bennet, lured by Mrs. Bennet's "youth and beauty" (Austen, 1813, p. 236), soon retreats into sardonic detachment, mocking his wife's frivolity from the isolation of his library. His belated remorse— "I am ashamed of not having done more for my daughters" (p. 308)—underscores Austen's indictment of paternal negligence. Their fractured dynamic illustrates how mismatched spouses perpetuate familial dysfunction, leaving daughters vulnerable to societal censure. In stark contrast, Charlotte Lucas's pragmatic marriage to Mr. Collins reflects the grim realism of women's economic precarity. Charlotte, acknowledging that "happiness in marriage is entirely a matter of chance" (p. 23), trades autonomy for security, embodying Austen's critique of a system that reduces matrimony to transactional survival. While devoid of affection, their union starkly contrasts with Lydia's chaos, revealing the limited agency of women compelled to prioritize material stability over emotional fulfilment.

Austen's Pride and Prejudice critiques systemic gender inequality by exposing the suffocating compromises women endure in patriarchal marriages. Charlotte Lucas embodies this silent suffering, her union with Mr. Collins a pragmatic surrender to economic necessity. Though she assures Elizabeth, "I am not romantic, you know. I never was" (Austen, 1813, p. 125), her resignation to a loveless marriage underscores the dearth of alternatives for genteel women. Charlotte's "tormenting silence" manifests in her strategic tolerance of Mr. Collins' obsequiousness, her agency reduced to managing domestic trivialities while suppressing intellectual and emotional needs. Austen juxtaposes Charlotte's stoic compliance with Elizabeth's defiant autonomy, illustrating how patriarchal systems punish women who reject matrimonial pragmatism—yet also condemning those who submit to it. Through Charlotte, Austen reveals the corrosive toll of societal coercion were women's survival hinges on self-erasure.

> "When Mr. Collins said anything of which his wife might reasonably be ashamed, which certainly was not uncledom, she [Elizabeth] would involuntarily turn her eye on Charlotte. Once or twice, she could discern a faint blush; but in general Charlotte wisely did not hear." (PP, 1992:28)

Charlotte Lucas and Mr. Collins' marriage epitomizes the transactional unions prevalent in Austen's era, where economic necessity eclipsed romantic or aesthetic considerations. Facing the stigma of spinsterhood and financial precarity, Charlotte like many genteel women chooses security over affection, confessing to Elizabeth, "I ask only a comfortable home" (Austen, 1813, p. 125). Her pragmatic acceptance contrasts sharply with Jane and Mr. Bingley's idealized romance, which Charlotte cites not as a model of passion, but as a strategic blueprint: she advises Jane to "secure [Bingley's] interest" through calculated affection (p. 21), revealing her belief that even "romantic" courtships demand deliberate maneuvering within patriarchal constraints.

Austen thus critiques a system that reduces marriage to a survival tactic, where women's agency lies not in choosing love, but in navigating limited options with grim pragmatism.:

> ".. . though Bingley and Jane meet tolerably often, it is never for many hours together; and as they always see each other in large mixed parties, it is impossible that every moment should be employed in conversing together. Jane should therefore make the most of every half hour in which she can command his attention. When she is secure of him, there will be leisure for falling in love as much as she chooses." (PP, 1992:20).

Some women were willing to marry just because marriage was the only allowed route to financial security, or to escape an uncongenial family situation. The dilemma is expressed most clearly by the character Charlotte Lucas, whose pragmatic views on marrying are voiced several times in the novel.

> " Without thinking highly either of men or of matrimony, marriage had always been her object; it was the only honorable provision for well-educated young women of small fortune, and however uncertain of giving happiness, must be their pleasantest preservative from want" (PP, 1992: 28).

Charlotte Lucas's marriage to Mr. Collins secures a socially advantageous union that grants her material stability and a semblance of autonomy within patriarchal constraints. As mistress of Hunsford Parsonage, she navigates her limited agency by subtly directing Mr. Collins's attention toward trivial matters, "arranging her domestic comforts" (Austen, 1813, p. 128) while tolerating his obsequiousness. Though her pragmatic match offers dignity and economic refuge, it starkly contrasts with Elizabeth and Darcy's evolving partnership, which Austen positions as the novel's ideal. Financial limitations had a major role in women's marital decisions. Class differences were made worse by the Industrial Revolution, which made gentry women's financial security a top priority (Bolton, 2021). Characters like Charlotte Lucas, who puts stability before romantic fulfilment, are examples of Austen's depiction of this economic reality and the limited options available to women. Bohls (2020) goes on to say that as a critique of the strict social institutions that were forced on them, women's narratives of the era frequently included themes of economic reliance.

The five marriages collectively argue that enduring unions demand mutual respect, emotional maturity, and time—qualities absent in Lydia and Wickham's impulsive infatuation or the Bennet's' fractured complacency. Lydia's reckless elopement, driven by superficial attraction, deteriorates into financial dependency and mutual neglect, while Charlotte's transactional compromise sacrifices emotional fulfilment for security. Austen's narrative thus condemns Regency-era pressures that reduce marriage to economic calculus or fleeting passion, advocating instead for partnerships rooted in intellectual and moral alignment.

4. Conclusion

Jane Austen's Pride and Prejudice offers a searing critique of the patriarchal systems that confined 19th-century women to matrimony as their sole avenue for financial stability and social legitimacy. Through characters like Charlotte Lucas and Lydia Bennet, Austen exposes how Regency-era women were reduced to marital strategists, compelled to prioritize economic survival over personal fulfilment. The novel underscores that marriage, far from a romantic ideal, functioned as a transactional institution under coverture laws, which erased women's legal autonomy and property rights.

Austen contrasts these constrained realities with her vision of an equitable union, exemplified by Elizabeth and Darcy's relationship. Their marriage evolves through mutual vulnerability and moral growth, challenging the era's superficial courtship rituals. Unlike Lydia's impulsive elopement or the Bennet's' complacent partnership, their bond underscores Austen's thesis: enduring marriages demand intellectual reciprocity, self-awareness, and respect qualities stifled by a society obsessed with wealth and status.

The novel further posits marriage as a social act with communal repercussions. Unions like Darcy and Elizabeth's or Jane and Bingley's recalibrate familial and societal dynamics, exposing the interconnectedness of private choices and public norms. Austen condemns the commodification of relationships under patriarchal capitalism, where love is subordinated to material gain, yet she also envisions a world where individual integrity can subtly reshape oppressive systems. Ultimately, Pride and Prejudice is both a mirror and a manifesto: it reflects the gendered injustices of its time while advocating for marriages and a society rooted in empathy rather than expediency.

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