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WEALTH AND WOMANHOOD: A FEMINIST MARXIST READING OF PROPERTY, INHERITANCE, AND CLASS MOBILITY IN *PRIDE AND PREJUDICE*

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Abstract

This research reveals how the way female characters perform social roles, express their desires, and make their decisions in Jane Austen's Pride and Prejudice (1813), is influenced by their economic status, which was a common motive for marriage in the contemporary society of the nineteenth century. By using feminist Marxist theory, the analysis in this article shows how mobility in class, property, and inheritance interacted in Regency-era England and affected women in the novel. By exploring the textual nuances, dialogues, and characters' interactions, the study brings to light how ownership and inheritance influenced the level of agency and autonomy for women. Importantly, the study underscores the fact that Elizabeth Bennet's journey towards independence and self-awareness was shaped almost all the time by the struggle against the injustice of property standards and the class system. Generally, the research accentuates the significance of Austen's work in the context of the issues that address women's equality in the early 19th century, such as gender, property, inheritance, and social justice. This research adds to the research body on Pride and Prejudice, but also gives a holistic picture of the multilayered interconnection of class mobility, feminism and Marxism with its literary representation.

Keywords: Gender identity, Marxist feminism, 19th century literature, Social class, Social mobility, Women's self-sufficiency, Social justice.

INTRODUCTION

One of the timeless works of literature written in the 19th century that has consistently appealed to a wide readership is *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen. It explores the complexities of relationships, society, and gender and class-based roles (Brown, 2018). By means of its enduring characters,

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especially Elizabeth Bennet, Jane Austen provides significant insights regarding the obstacles and possibilities faced by women within a societal structure marked by conventional norms, social classes, and income differences (Branca, 2013). This analysis looks at the novel's treatment of the overlapping themes of property and inheritance. Focusing on the lives of the fictional female characters in the novel, the analysis aims to understand the intersection between gender, property, inheritance, and life opportunities. This study is carried out according to the criteria of Feminist Marxist theory that offers a specific perspective on the problems women of the Regency Period faced as a result of their gendered being in a highly stratified class-based social structure (Giménez, 2018).

Statement of the Research Problem

Identifying how property and inheritance permeate the aspirations, preferences, and lifestyle choices of the female characters in *Pride and Prejudice* is the underlying reason for this research. Among the popular means for a woman to achieve her economic and social status in early nineteenth-century England was marriage (Awan & Nasir, 2018). The reason behind this is the socially accepted customs, which were the foundation of gender discrimination and created the social division to maintain social status. The current investigation conducts a close reading of the text of *Pride and Prejudice* to analyze the relationship between gender, property, and class mobility. Using feminist-Marxist theory, the analysis aims to expand our understanding of this classic novel in terms of the economic challenges of women, its relationship with marriage decisions, and social justice, property, and gender equality in the early 1800s.

Research Questions:

- RQ1:** What role does land ownership, inheritance, or its lack play in shaping the identity and freedom of the female characters in *Pride and Prejudice*?
- RQ2:** How do the differences in economic standing, created by property and inheritance, dictate the pursuit of marriage and influence the life journeys of the female characters in the novel?
- RQ3:** How does Elizabeth Bennet defy the patriarchal social division of the Regency era and the rules that are based upon it?

Purpose of the Study

This research will investigate the relationship between property, inheritance and social class in the background of the portrayal of feminine characters in *Pride and Prejudice*. Through the method of thematic analysis guided by a feminist Marxist theoretical framework, this study is aimed at delving into the intricacies of the themes and the gender and socioeconomic dynamics that the novel presents in the Regency-era English society setting. We have the goal of providing an understanding of the actions of women in this time period and the ways in which they struggled to survive in a society marked clearly by class distinctions and gender stereotypes through a close study of the roles played by these characters and the limitations they face in terms of their social-economic status. As a means to achieve this, this research will probe into the character development of the protagonist for this story. We aim at showing that female agency and autonomy were extremely complex and that women had to face great challenges coming from the patriarchal structures and social norms which tried to limit women's independence in those times.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In the context of early 19th-century England, the research literature on *Pride and Prejudice* examines the themes of social class and gender and how Austen's novel reflects these themes. The majority of Austen's works are incisive social satires of her era, and her characters struggle with the complicated gender and social roles of their times. The main character of the book, Elizabeth Bennet, is a strong-willed, intelligent woman who questions societal norms regarding how women ought to act. In a culture where women are primarily valued for their social status and dowry, she must also deal with the difficulties of finding a husband who is temperamentally compatible and socially useful for her economic betterment.

In Chang's (2014) analysis of Elizabeth Bennet's feminist significance in the novel, the author contends that her feminism is clear from her actions and character, as well as from how she differs from other female characters. She analyzes Elizabeth's personality and her relationship to the other female characters using a literary critical approach. To bolster her arguments, Chang consults secondary sources. Because Elizabeth Bennet defies the prevalent gender roles in Regency England, she is deemed a feminist heroine by the author. Her study adds significantly to the body of knowledge on *Pride and Prejudice's* feminist themes, but it could benefit from a more in-depth examination of the other female characters and the connection between

Elizabeth's feminism and her social class.

As seen in Jane Austen's novels about 19th-century society, research literature also focuses on marriage, individual choice, and social class. It examines a number of themes, such as the connection between marriage and social class and gender, the significance of love and respect in marriage, the difficulties in finding a compatible spouse, the double standards that exist for men and women in marriage, and the contribution marriage makes to promoting the welfare of the individual and the family. For instance, Awan and Nasir (2018) use textual analysis to investigate the Marxist themes of social class, wealth, and class discrimination in *Pride and Prejudice*, looking at how these elements affect the characters' matrimonial experiences in the book. As a result of marriage being widely viewed as a way to improve one's social standing and financial security in early 19th-century English society, the writers conclude that Austen is condemning this culture. Harrison (2014), on the other hand, looks at the cultural relevance of the marriage storyline in books from the 18th and 19th centuries and makes the argument that it has normalized heterosexual gender norms as well as the matrimonial institution. She concludes that the marriage plot has had a lasting impact on contemporary plots after using a literary critical technique to study the marriage plots of various great novels, including Austen's works.

Pride and Prejudice is about the journey young women take to become more self-aware and mature in a society that often restricts their possibilities. Emotional growth and self-realization are important topics in these books. Ashfaq and Khattak (2014) analyze the concepts of self-realization and societal harmony in the novel. They argue that when Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy, the two major characters, overcome their pride and prejudice and learn to appreciate each other for who they truly are, they go through a process of self-transformation. As a result of self-realization, characters learn to accept and value one another's individuality which improves social harmony. Offering a unique psychological analytical approach, Paris (2013) analyzes Austen's characters and their challenges, yielding new insights into the author's works. He analyzes the formal structure of the novels using Northrop Frye's comic form theory and Karen Horney's psychology theories to delve into the personalities and inner conflicts of the main characters. Paris argues that Austen draws psychologically realistic characters who try to make sense of their own selves and that of the world around them. He further contends that the conflicts in Austen's novels are both internal and external because the characters are facing their own inner psychological demons as much as they are trying to come to terms with the social forces around them.

His psychiatric examination offers a fresh perspective into the motivations of the characters in Austen's novels that help us understand the conflicts in the novels at a deeper and more nuanced level.

Marxism and social mobility are two topics that Jane Austen frequently explores in her books, looking at how social class and wealth both limit and open up opportunities for her characters. While criticizing the rigid social structure of early 19th-century England, Austen also makes the case for social mobility through marriage and personal development. According to Weng (2019), Marxist-feminist ideals are promoted in *Pride and Prejudice* and *Les Misérables*, and relationships built on equality and respect are more durable than those built on other foundations. She analyzes the feminist themes in both books using a comparative approach, contending that the relationships between Cosette and Marius in *Les Misérables* and Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice* serve as examples of feminist relationships. Analogously, Cook et al. (2018) examine how fictional texts can be used in the classroom to help students understand social ideologies and their implications for society. More specifically, they contend that educators can use critical lenses to assist students in recognizing and contesting the ideologies present in well-known books like *Pride and Prejudice* and *Eleanor and Park*. Classic texts can be taught using critical lenses in a way that fosters critical thinking in students, increases engagement with the texts, and gives students a deeper understanding of the texts' significance in modern society. Teachers can specifically use critical lenses to look at the representations of race, gender, class, and sexuality in classic texts.

The literature overview mentioned above demonstrates that literature covering *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen has been studied for a range of topics for instance feminism, social class, and self-realization. The lack of an in-depth, comprehensive, and thorough examination of the Marxist approach from the literature concerning property, inheritance, and class mobility with regard to the female characters in the novel can be noticed. Although some researchers have dwelt on Marxian motifs in Austen's novels, they have not found enough evidence to support the conclusion about the influence of economic issues like property and inheritance on the lives of leading female characters such as Elizabeth Bennett. Applying the feminist Marxist theory to this novel gives a specific and deeply-textured angle on the problems of that period and women's social and economic limitations of the first half of the nineteenth century in England. To address the above gap in the research literature, the present study uses feminist literary analysis to understand

critically the social commentary in the novel and also the broader issues of economic justice, class, and gender which are still relevant in our times.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical foundation of this research paper is provided by the Marxist feminist theory (Hartmann, 1981; Marx, 1848, 1867) which signifies the interactions of female and male gender roles, class, and the power dynamics existing in society, by combining feminist and Marxist perspectives. Using this multidisciplinary approach, the issues of gender, inheritance, and property can be better analyzed in novels, such as *Pride and Prejudice*. Accordingly, we can proceed to the investigation of the complicated interactions of gender norms, class differentiation, and economic systems that act as the main factors determining the lives of the female characters (Delphy & Leonard, 1992; Kimmel, 2000).

A central tenet of the Marxist argument is based on class struggle which affirms that society is divided into social classes that are perpetually at cross purposes and acquire power over the re-distribution of resources. People's behavior is not driven by reason but by their desires and weaknesses. This notion can be used for *Pride and Prejudice* to demonstrate the conflicts between individuals from different social ranks, their aims, and how they achieve their goals. Further, as per Marxist social critiques, society's fabric and human behavior are largely derived from economic strengths and powers. Several instances of the economic determinism theory are developed by the understanding that how people act or react to the situation is largely dictated by the economic conditions that impact their lives, including inheritance and property ownership. Thirdly, patriarchal inequality can be traced back to the values and ways of thinking incorporated into the feminist-Marxist theory. The limitation of the opportunities of women is shown in the novel under analysis here, based on the expectations of society which tell women to enter into conventional marriage arrangements.

To explore the complexities of the relationship between these themes, this investigation uses Marxist feminist theory (Marx, 1884; Engels, 1884). It helps in analyzing how society and gender depicted in the novel are influenced by property ownership and economic factors. That class is predicated upon female characters' inheritance and property ownership in the patriarchal society and impacts the character's behavior, individual goals, and social status. Besides, the theoretical framework allows to study of the class mobility predicament of women enabling the reader to see that economic status shapes the decisions to be made by female characters

regarding marriage.

METHODOLOGY

This investigation is based on a qualitative research methodology that will look into the correlation between inheritance, property, and class mobility in *Pride and Prejudice*. A qualitative research approach can enrich our understanding of the subtle undercurrents in the novel and also a more rounded appreciation of the interplay between gender and the socioeconomic context of the Regency era (Prasad, 2017; Renz, 2018). Additionally, thematic analysis is used in the current research as it coincides with the study objectives and aims (Braun & Clark, 2006). Thematic analysis, which could be classified as a methodical and flexible methodology, helps researchers to define and highlight common themes and patterns in a text (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The intricate relationships in the novel allow for a more elaborate look at the experiences of female characters, especially Elizabeth Bennet, from different perspectives and explain what significant changes took place in their life during the contemporary socio-economic period, (Guest et al., 2012).

Indeed, building on relevant dialogues, passages, and key character interactions provides a fundamental part of the data collection procedure in the course of this qualitative research. For the sake of keeping the depth of analysis and a focused examination, this study only gives emphasis to the important dialogues and events that have a relation with property, inheritance, and social mobility. Through analyzing the subtle textual nuances and details found in the selected texts, the overall picture of the main character's motivations, limitations, and social interactions emerges from the analysis.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Women, Inheritance, and Social Mobility

In late 18th century England, women encountered significant limitations in terms of their rights and options. They often found themselves dependent on men for economic and social security, and the institution of marriage loomed as a pivotal determinant of their survival and contentment. The famous opening line of *Pride and Prejudice* emphasizes the societal expectation that women should seek marriage to secure their economic and social well-being, highlighting the prevailing dependency of women on men during that era.

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 a neighbourhood, this truth is so well fixed in the minds of the surrounding families, that he is considered as the rightful property of some one or other of their daughters. (Austen, p. 1)

The assertive stance of these famous opening lines is probably meant to parody the objectivist claims of moralistic writings. However, the observation in this witty and satirical comment encapsulates the subsequent events in the novel that illustrate how women's financial security depends on advantageous marriages underpinned by societal conventions.

In the absence of viable alternatives in terms of career choice and legal entitlement to inherit property, women of the time found themselves heavily dependent on the prospects of "marrying well" to secure their financial future. In a letter to Fanny Knight, Jane Austen alludes ironically to the dependence of women's financial safety on matrimony: "Single women have a dreadful propensity for being poor, which is one very strong argument in favor of matrimony" (March 13, 1817). The laws of *primogeniture*, which favored male heirs, and the practice of *entailment*, which restricted the inheritance of land to a specific line of descent, created a sense of insecurity and dependence for women who had no or little fortune of their own.

Like other female characters in the novel suffering from the effects of entailment, Mrs Bennet cannot accept the arrangement of entailment fully. She expresses her resentment for Mr. Collins who may entail their estate after Mr. Bennet's death:

I never can be thankful, Mr. Bennet, for anything about the entail. How anyone could have the conscience to entail away an estate from one's own daughters I cannot understand; and all for the sake of Mr. Collins too!—Why should he have it more than anybody else? (Austen, p. 147)

With a yearly income of £2,000, the financial circumstances of the Bennet family are modest. They fall into the gentry with this income, but they are not regarded as wealthy. The Bennet family is under financial stress as a result of a number of factors. The stability of their economy is first hampered by Mr. Dot Bennet's lack of foresight in managing his finances. The family must also incur a sizable financial obligation by paying dowries for each of

their five daughters. They face financial difficulties as a result of Mrs. Bennet's ostensible lack of skill in handling household finances. Mr. Collins, a distant male relative, will most likely take over as the male heir if there isn't a male heir. Due to the fact that the daughters will not inherit their father's property, this legal arrangement significantly increases family tension and anxiety.

Like the Bennet sisters, other female characters in the novel struggle to secure their financial future. The following passage, about Charlotte Lucas, reflects the idea that marriage during that period was often driven by financial and social considerations rather than love:

Without thinking highly either of men or of matrimony, marriage had always been her object; it was the only provision for well-educated young women of small fortune, and however uncertain of giving happiness, must be their pleasantest preservative from want. (Austen, p. 138)

This passage illustrates the prevailing sentiment of pragmatic marriages based on social and financial security, which was characteristic of the era Austen depicted. The intricate interplay of property and inheritance within *Pride and Prejudice* shapes the destinies of its female characters in profound and multifaceted ways. The influence of property and inheritance is evident in the different characters' lives, their marriage prospects, and their choices. Female characters, particularly those like Elizabeth Bennet, who resist the pressure to marry for financial gain, are depicted as challenging societal norms and striving for independence. This effort of women to get justice and equality in a society where women's rights are not equally recognized makes a significant theme in the novel.

Elizabeth's Struggle for Autonomy and Self-realization

Jane Austen embedded her feminist message within narratives by using the current gender inequality as a tool for fighting the gender injustices of her time. One of such heroines is Elizabeth Bennet who is an example of a female character that dared to go against the conventional norms of society and the marriage conventions of her time. Elizabeth's resistance to the strict norms of patriarchy is clearly seen through her disobedience to the societal regulations that claim that women engage in marriage mainly for financial security. Unlike her time period, she thinks that marriage should be based on common ground and equality between the spouses. She explicitly says no to Mr. Collins' proposal and the second time with Mr. Darcy's because these

men don't provide her with that level of partnership and respect she wanted but rejects both just so she can avoid trouble by being married to a man she does not consider worthy. When Collins proposes to her for the first time, he expressly declares his intention to marry a genteel woman to please his patron Lady Catherine de Bourgh. When he finishes his rather convoluted and long-drawn-out marriage proposal, Elizabeth is quick to decline it without thinking over it for a second as she knows Mr. Collins does not love her:

“You are too hasty, Sir,” she cried. “You forget that I have made no answer. Let me do it without further loss of time. Accept my thanks for the compliment you are paying me. I am very sensible of the honor of your proposals, but it is impossible for me to do otherwise than decline them.” (Austen, p. 120)

Her values and principles are not merely theoretical but are put into practice when she refuses Mr. Collins's proposal, despite the pressure to secure her family's financial future. Her choice to decline Mr. Collins, who is the heir to her family's estate, demonstrates her fierce independence and her unwillingness to compromise her beliefs.

Analogously, when Mr. Darcy proposes to her, her answer is firm as she believes he is responsible for breaking up the relationship between her sister Jane and Mr. Bingley: “Do you think that any consideration would tempt me to accept the man who has been the means of ruining, perhaps forever, the happiness of a most beloved sister?” (p. 213). This quote reveals Elizabeth's strong sense of loyalty and moral integrity. Her refusal of Mr. Darcy's proposal is a direct result of her deep concern for her sister Jane's happiness. Elizabeth is offended by Darcy's interference in Jane and Bingley's budding relationship, and she prioritizes her family's well-being over personal gain. This demonstrates her character's unwavering commitment to doing what is right and standing up for her loved ones, even when faced with the prospect of wealth and social advancement.

Elizabeth is portrayed as possessing a strong moral compass and a strong sense of integrity throughout the entire novel. She is truly shocked and horrified by her friend Charlotte Lucas's choice to wed Mr. Collins—a man she finds intolerable—just in order to ensure her financial stability. Her response confirms her conviction that moral decisions about marriage and the heart are crucial:

She had always felt that Charlotte's opinion of matrimony was not exactly like her own, but she could not have supposed it possible that, when called into action, she would have sacrificed every better feeling to worldly advantage. (Austen, p. 141)

Elizabeth's refusal to follow social norms is demonstrated by her steadfast adherence to her own principles and her dismay at Charlotte's choice. She is a symbol of defiance in an era when women were frequently restricted to specific roles and had little agency. The stereotype that says a woman's value is based on her ability to find a compatible partner—financially or socially—remains ineffective in the case of Elizabeth. She represents the idea that women ought to have the freedom to choose their own paths and get married in order to find love and happiness. By her independence and the procedure of marrying without concern for marriage lineage and social status, she ended up marrying Mr. Darcy in the end, after she had established her individuality as his equal.

Pride and Prejudice demonstrates that women must be allowed to have freedom of thought and learning, with Elizabeth being an example of this. She is not confined to the narrow training of her society that was supposed to teach girls how to become fine ladies. She simply excels in her ability to think independently and even defy social norms and values if they are in contrast to her personal fulfillment. Her sharp intellect and her humor help her to hold witty conversations and scrutinize social norms. Her character portrays how women can gain personal independent identity and happiness when men recognize them as equals rather than objects of their affection. In social institutions such as marriage, education, and the class system, her personality stresses the imperativeness of a foundation of partnership instead of patriarchal superiority.

CONCLUSION

The current study demonstrates that marriage was essential for maintaining economic stability in late eighteenth-century England, where women's rights were constrained. The novel emphasizes the pressure society puts on women to have successful marriages. The well-known opening lines of the book quoted earlier in the current article highlight this social pressure on women to marry well. The vulnerability of women's finances was made worse by entailment and unfair inheritance laws. Practical unions based on social and financial factors were frequent (Marsden, 2014). The significant impact of property and inheritance on the lives, chances for marriage, and choices made by female characters highlight the novel's strong feminist theme.

Elizabeth Bennet, who prioritizes love over wealth and challenges gender stereotypes by promoting equal partnerships, is a prime example of this theme. She rejects the social pressure on women to put financial security in marriage before seeking out equal partnerships based on respect for one another. She firmly upholds her morals and beliefs despite pressure to support her family, as evidenced by her rejection of Mr. Darcy's and Mr. Collins' proposals. Elizabeth represents women who raise objections to the old ways of society and push for greater freedom, education, and employment aspects.

Analysis in the current article demonstrates a feminist Marxist research approach toward literary texts by illuminating the intricate relationships among gender, class, and property as depicted in early nineteenth-century literature. Through portraying the societal obligations on women to ensure their financial security through instrumental marriages, *Pride and Prejudice* shows the patriarchal gender structure of Austen's times (Annanya, 2018). The portrayal of Elizabeth Bennet serves as a model of how to overcome the docile acceptance of these ideologies by opposing marriage as a way to ensure economic security and promote it as a social contract based on equality and mutual respect. This study shows the intricate relationship between the traditional gender roles and socioeconomic status in the early Victorian era predicated upon how the female characters react to inheritance, property, remaining unmarried, or entering into marriages of convenience. As shown in the current analysis, feminist Marxist criticism creates a much deeper and enlightening understanding of how class, gender, and social mobility are depicted within any given piece of literature.

In terms of further research, there is a need to analyze other female characters in the fictional works of this era through the lens of the feminist Marxist perspective. Exploring how those of the female sex were maneuvering the intricacies of class, property, and gendered identity in virtually every time and place is inextricable to understanding the transformations in social norms and restrictions. There is a need for critical analysis of the social, ethnic, cultural, and geographical factors that bear upon the female gender's economic independence and how it intersects with their personal life choices (Jejeebhoy & Sathar, 2001). Lastly, a feminist Marxist literary analysis of female literary characters from different historical eras can contribute to establishing a Marxist feminist analytical approach as a foundation for to struggle for greater gender equality, women's empowerment, and social justice.

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