MARRIAGE AS A SOCIAL TRANSACTION
IN
JANE AUSTEN'S
'PRIDE AND PREJUDICE'

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Introduction
As literature often brings out the image of real life, Austen's 'Pride and Prejudice' is no exception. It holds a mirror which reflects the life of the eighteenth century people. Studying the novel will draw a real image of the social lives of English people at that time. The English community which was affected by the political, economical and social conditions of the country can be seen in 'Pride and Prejudice', though Austen in most of her novels did not deal with the political aspects, the social and economic conditions are explored in details. She gave minute details of how their lives are affected by social and political conflicts. We can find very interesting aspects of their lives through this novel. (Austen: 1990, 95).

One interesting aspect depicted in the novel is how the mindset of the people is controlled by their society. Most of their actions are guided by their consciousness of their standings in society. Mothers hunt for their daughters' husbands and daughters too shamelessly hunt for theirs. Fathers too helped them in their shameless way of match making. This very trend
that was there during the eighteenth century is what Austen satirizes in this novel.

The high class society refuses to get mingled with the lower class people when it comes to marriage. In all standards, the upper class people look with scorn and disdain towards the lower class. However, in reality no one is an exception when it comes to choosing husbands for their daughters. Though they might be a bit better trained than those of the middle class, their extreme actions in hooking a right person is not at all different from that of those they consider as the lower class people. (Ibid:102).
MARRIAGE AS A SOCIAL TRANSACTION IN ‘PRIDE AND PREJUDICE’

Since the two main themes of ‘Pride and Prejudice’ are on ‘love and marriage’ and that of ‘husband hunting’, it is clear that Jane Austen talks much on the topic of ‘marriage’. Therefore, studying the aspect of marriage in the novel seems to be a valid point. It is evident that the writer portrays the life of the eighteenth century people and how the life of the people was centered on how good the economic and the social conditions of the people were. One cannot separate their mentality from the conditions of the society we therefore; the study will have to take into consideration the social conditions of the England during that period. (David: 1935, 65).

Girls who grew up in the middle class society were not educated for any profession, but they were expected to be accomplished in music, drawing, dancing, needlework, etc. During that time, women could not legally inherit their parents’ property, in case they did not marry, they had no economic security. An ageing spinster was, in most cases, neither respected nor properly cared for. Therefore the chief aim of the people of that time seems to be ‘to hook a good husband’. Even though Jane Austen, in Pride and Prejudice satirizes them, it seems that it is unfair to blame them for all the actions taken in their ‘husband hunting’ expeditions. But at the same time, vulgar behavior like that of Mrs. Bennet could not be appreciated. Their thoughtless nature, their world of gossip, husband hunting and their behavior show that they did not have a mind of their own could not be satirized. By picturing the social milieu in which they exist, we could not fully blame them for their husband hunting life since getting a good husband was the most essential thing for them in order to survive in the long
run and gain respect within their society. Therefore, the social condition in which they live forces them to live a husband hunting life. We may be able to make our points clearer if we examine each and every marriage that takes place in the novel:-

( Setheuraman,2009:88)

1. **Mr. & Mrs. Bennet**: Mr. Bennet married Mrs. Bennet just because of her good looks. He did not give importance to individual character and behavior. But this is the very reason in the end, i.e. after having five girls, drove him out from his family mentally. He took refuge in his library and in going for walks in order to avoid his vulgar wife. He ignored his family because he was not able to find peace with his wife’s way of taking care of their children. His disappointment in his wife’s illiberal mind drove him apart from his family and thus love and affection were not present in their marriage.

Mrs. Bennet was a lady of little understanding. She was solely focused on getting her girls married. She does not mind using vulgar words and actions in order to achieve her goal of finding a good husband for her daughter. She took much pain to know that Mr. Collins was to inherit their property and that their five girls could not inherit it. She was very enthusiastic about the arrival of Mr. Bingley, an eligible rich bachelor in their neighborhood, and as soon as she heard about it was very determined to hook the guy right from the time she heard news of him staying in Netherfield Park. When Lydia and Wickham eloped she was so upset that she refused to get out of her bed making all her family worried and later when she heard that everything was settled for them to get married, she boast around town telling everyone that ‘her Lydia’ is getting married. (Ibid:91).

2. **Charlotte Lucas and Mr. Collins**: Mr. Collins who inherited the Bennets property at first tried to propose Jane, the eldest
of Bennet sisters. But when Mrs. Bennet informs him that she is soon to be engaged to someone else shifts his attention to Elizabeth. He feels that it’s his duty as the heir of the family to marry one of the girls. He like Mr. Bennet did not much think of characters and points of view of an individual. He just thinks that marriage should happen in terms of convenience. He is a man of self importance and when Elizabeth turned down his proposal, he at first thought that she was trying to answer him in an indirect manner but when he came to realize that Elizabeth was quite serious in her declination of his proposal, his pride was hurt. But in no time he recovered because he again propose Elizabeth’s best friend Charlotte Lucas. (Kumar,1969:60)

Charlotte was one who was plain and unromantic; she was one who thinks she was desperately in need to get married. She knew about Collins’ proposal to Elizabeth but was unable to decline him even for the sake of her friendship with her. She thought that if she declined now, she would never have the chance to get married again. She doesn’t mind getting married to Collins because she wants to be in a married status and wants the financial security that he can provide. She knew perfectly well what kind of people Collins was, but she chose to be married to him than to spend the rest of her life being unmarried. She knows that she will not be happy with her married life, but she feels that it is convenient to marry him. When Elizabeth has visited the Collinses, it is evident from Charlotte’s attitude that there is tension in Charlotte when Mr. Collins is around boasting with his belonging, and Elizabeth has also observed that there is an air of relief in Charlotte when her husband is gone and Elizabeth suspects that Collins is often forgotten when he is not around. (Ibid)
3. **Lydia and Wickham:** Lydia and Wickham eloped from Brighton. It disappoints all the family members. Mrs. Bennet refused to get up of her bed and did not want to face her neighbors and Mr. Bennet went right away in search of them. Mr. Gardiner also went to follow Mr. Bennet to look for them and after searching for them for a while, news came to the Bennets that Wickham agreed to marry Lydia. (2006,55)

When the news comes Mrs. Bennet at once gets out of her bed and goes around town boasting to everyone that Lydia is getting married. She does not feel ashamed that they have done wrong, but only rejoices with the fact that one of her girls is getting married. George Wickham was on the surface charming and agreeable, but was selfish and unprincipled beneath. He first took interest in Elizabeth, and then turned to Lydia. His only reason for getting married to Lydia was because he was offered an allowance by Mr. Darcy if he agreed to marry Lydia. He is an opportunist who has tried several times to seduce rich heiresses. He failed few times and at last gets hold of Lydia. He does not mind marrying for the sake of convenience only. And at last his attempt to hook a rich girl was accomplished with Lydia though it was due to the involvement of Mr. Darcy. He was not concerned of his future much but was more concerned with a way of supporting his high standards through marriage. Lydia, on the other hand, was naïve, thoughtless, selfish and unprincipled too. She, with her empty head readily falls in Wickham’s trap. Even though she knows that Wickham doesn’t love her. She boasts around her family and was rather proud of being married before all her elder sisters. She doesn’t care who paid for her wedding and was more interested in showing herself off to the others. She ignored the fact that she had made her family suffer and that she has chosen an immoral path and is absolutely
untouched by any remorse when she visits her parents after her marriage. In the end of the novel we find that their love has sunk into differences and their wants were extravagant. Their manner of living is unsettles in the extreme and always move from one place to another. Their marriage of convenience didn’t give them a happy ending but an unsettled and troubled one.

(Barry2007,57)

4. Jane Bennet and Mr. Bingley: Jane Bennet’s first impression of Mr. Bingley is ‘He is just what a young man ought to be, sensible, good humored, lively…’ she said that she ‘never saw such happy manners! – so much ease, with such perfect good breeding!’ From this alone, we can sum up the opinion of Jane for Mr. Bingley. It is clear that she fell for him from the very first time she met him. And for Mr. Bingley Jane is ‘the most beautiful creature’ he had ever beheld and he dances with her twice that evening, which made their mother so happy and proud with the fact that Mr. Bingley chooses to dance with Jane ‘twice’ in the ball. Though Jane and Mr. Bingley were modest in their show for their affection for each other, Mrs. Bennet’s action in showing her approval was not at all modest. This is the very reason that makes Mr. Darcy convince Bingley to move away from Longbourn for a while. (Ibid)

This sudden decision of Bingley hurt and confused Jane. She tried in her own ways to forget about him but she later discovered that she had fallen deeply in love with him. Though most of the character’s view on marriage is naïve and mostly on the social context, it seems that Jane is a different being from most of the characters, she does not view marriage and relationships from the viewpoint of social standings, she really fell in love with Mr. Bingley. And Mr. Bingley also fells for her and for him too, it does not occur that he should get married to
someone of certain agreeable family only. He believes that love alone is enough reason to get married, unlike his friend Darcy who considers each and every aspect of the girl’s character and the social standings and characters of the girl’s family. In the end, we find that Jane and Bingley realized how in love they were with each other and they got married and have a happy ending. For them, as mentioned before, love alone was enough and they did not consider it as a social transaction where they get married in order to benefit out of the marriage. This kind of marriage is something that was not commonly found during that time. As Elizabeth puts it, they are not ‘acting by design.’ (Southam:1968, 111)

5. **Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy:** These two people are the main characters in the novel. They formed a prejudiced opinion of one another from their first meeting. For Darcy, Elizabeth was ‘tolerable; but not handsome enough’ to tempt him and to Elizabeth, ‘he was only the man who made himself agreeable nowhere, and who had not thought her handsome enough to dance with.’ But as time goes, Darcy’s opinion and interest in her grew in a different way in which Elizabeth was not aware. Elizabeth had pride and she was ashamed for her mother’s vulgar behaviors in trying to hook Mr. Bingley. She was aware of how others would think of their family and she bears this burden alone. And when Mr. Darcy unexpectedly proposed her, she was furious and defended her family honor and insulted Mr. Darcy. This outburst of hers made Darcy calculate his own behavior and she found out later when they met again that he had changed his ways in a certain way – that he was not arrogant, proud and conceited as before. And when she found out that her sister’s marriage with Wickham was the result of Darcy’s sacrifice and hard works, she realized that
she had been so wrong in many thing about him and she started to respect him for who he was. Elizabeth’s courage in declining Darcy’s proposal was something that is notable, during their time where marriage was about rooting oneself in the society, she was well aware of the fact that someone like Mr. Darcy was one of the most eligible bachelors in the country with enormous wealth. But, she did not just accept just to conform to the ways of the society. She felt that it is better not to marry at all than to marry someone for the sake of benefiting wealth and stability. She rather defends her family honor than marry someone who loathes her family. She chooses to stand alone and fight for what her beliefs. This is a very strong character when almost all the girls never even think of standing and fighting for what they believe, they are subjugated by the society and do not mind being a transaction in society. . (Barry2007,66)

Mr. Darcy was also one whose appearance of pride stems from shyness. He himself said that he ‘was spoiled’ by his parents who taught him to ‘be selfish and over bearing – to care for none’ beyond his own family circle. He loathe the vulgarity of Elizabeth’s mother and he disapprove of someone marrying for money and stability. That was the reason he convinced Bingley, his close friend, to get away from Longbourne. But though he advised his friend not to marry Jane, he was not able to get Elizabeth out of his mind and eventually proposed her. But unexpectedly, she refuses him. He with his pride thought that Elizabeth, like all other girls he has met, would agree to marry him because of his wealth and the stability he can provide.

Her refusal to his proposal shocked him and later, his pride was corrected by his love for her. Though he knew that Elizabeth did not hold a very high opinion of himself and
though he also knew that his wealth was not enough to convince Elizabeth to marry him, he was not able to forget her and in the end after Elizabeth had realized her mistake of condemning him of many wrong things and most importantly, that she fell deeply in love with him he proposed to her again and the two got married and thus had a happy ending like Jane and Bingley. We can say that these two people did not view marriage as a mere transaction in the society. They wanted to get married for the right reason. And though they made some mistakes, they were not afraid to accept their faults and mend their ways. This led to the right kind of marriage – one that is not based on social transaction. Nor was this marriage based on physical attraction and beauty but it was based on their willingness to accept one another’s viewpoint and mend whatever mistakes they had made. Though they had misconceptions of one another they, in the end, reached maturity which led to a beautiful and blessed marriage. (Kumar: 1969, 45)

Apart from these marriages that we find in the novel, there are also some characters which lead us to believe that the viewpoint of marriage is that of a mere social transaction. When we take a look at Collins’ proposal to Elizabeth, we find that he merely propose her because he thinks that since he is to inherit their father’s estate, if he marries one of the daughters, the pain in losing their estate will be less. This very clearly shows that he does not view marriage much more than a social transaction. Likewise, Lady Catharine’s view for her daughter’s marriage is not very different from that of Collins. She feels that her daughter should be married to Mr. Darcy because they are related and if they marry there are certain benefits for both the parties. Though she knew perfectly well that Darcy was not at all interested in her daughter she keeps on pressuring him to marry her daughter.
In the end she fails to attain her goal because Darcy completely refuses to marry her and he chooses Elizabeth whom she has considered as uncivilized and of a lower class. She loathes Elizabeth so much that she even goes to their house and threatens her. But Elizabeth, like always, stands on her ground and refuses to give her the satisfaction of saying that she will never marry Mr. Darcy, which infuriates her and makes her detest Elizabeth even more. Like the rest of the mothers in the novel, she also had a vaulting ambition in finding a suitable husband for her daughter. Our point will be clearer if we take Caroline Bingley also into consideration. She also is ambitious in her hunt for her husband. Her main target is Mr. Darcy, who is a very good friend of her brother. Though on the outside she was very good and well mannered, she tried to draw the attention of Darcy and also tried to drive away Elizabeth in each and every way possible for her. In her eagerness to secure Darcy for herself, she was willing to use very unrefined characters. But we find that her attempt went vain like that of Lady Catherine de Bourgh’s attempt. Both of them attempt to acquire Mr. Darcy because his social standings are good. They also view marriage as a transaction to acquire wealth and stability. For them, the benefit that a marriage will bring out is more important than the feelings of the people involved in the marriage. Mr. Bennet who made his mistake in marrying his wife seemed to be wizened about the concept of marriage. He of course was very well aware of the benefit that their family would have if one of his daughters married Mr. Collins. But when he knew that his daughter Elizabeth turned down his proposal, he showed his approval. He encouraged his daughter not to marry unless she truly likes a guy. He did not want his daughter to be a mere transaction and did not approve of marrying for the sake of convenience. This kind of outlook is something that seems very
rare. If we take a look at the Lucases, we come to know that their reaction in their daughter’s marriage was that of sheer approval. They failed to see that the marriage of their daughter was that of convenience and that of desperation. Most of them do not care about future happiness and instead feel that "happiness in marriage is entirely a matter of chance". (David: 1935, 77)
CONCLUSIONS

From the above discussion, one comes to know the mindset of the general people of the eighteenth century. ‘Pride and Prejudice’ is a very good satirical novel. By choosing the theme of ‘love and marriage’, Jane Austen manages to point out the ‘husband hunting’ life of the people and how they are willing to take part in marriage where there is no love.

In the novel, it is found that marriage takes place because of attraction to physical beauty, want of stability in the society, lust, want of wealth, view as a convenient solution for family, etc. it is hardly ever seen love and appreciation of one another among the people involved. In fact it is noticed that love was not at all the reason that people get married for. The fact that most find it convenient and beneficial to get married is so obvious.

It is concluded that those who get married just because of attraction of physical beauty, want of stability, lust, etc. do not last in their marriage. Readers witness their unhappy married life. The main aim of Jane Austen seems to be in depicting how thing can fall apart when one keeps an eye only on the physical world rather than the intellectual one. She, in a very well manner, depicts this message in this famous novel of hers. This is an important lesson for the readers not only of her times but for today and the times to come. “Happiness in marriage is entirely a matter of chance” as Charlotte said must have been the opinion of some in marriage but this idea seems to be the opposite of that of Austen’s since what she points out is that one has to stand our ground and not let us be conformed to society’s expectations and that we can decide our own future to some extent.

As we can see in the novel that the chief occupations of the mothers like Mrs. Bennet and Lady Catherine are to strike suitable matches. They have vaulting ambitions for their
daughters that they cannot even act as refined person when it comes down to hunting husbands for their daughter. Though they very much wish their daughters to get married to refined families, they themselves cannot help but act vulgar in achieving their goals. They are desperate to get their daughters married to ones that they like. Austen, in depicting these types of mothers once again satirizes their time and again in the novel and made them as a comic character at time. Their eyes were blinded by their desperate search for their daughter’s husbands. Even in the case of Mrs. Lucas, who was so desperate for Charlotte to get married and failed to see the bad qualities of Mr. Collins. She was too happy to see that her advancing-in-age daughter getting married that made her ignore the unhappy future that was awaiting her daughter which was quite obvious when considering the character and code of conduct of Mr. Collins.

Even the fathers seem to be completely conformed to what society asks of them. Though Mr. Bennet was fully aware of his wife’s stupidity and vulgarity at times, he went with the flow of his wife’s scheme and had not the courage to stop her from whatever she was employing herself in. Mr. Lucas might also have seen what kind of self importance, proud and consequent man he is have to ignore this very fact and was happy and readily gives her away. He has to keep in mind that his daughter is plain and advancing in age with not much offer and if they refuse the proposal of Mr. Collins, they were afraid that no other suitors would come in the future. And they could not as Charlotte said afford to be ‘romantic’ as there might not be any other options in future. So, he had no choice but to take what is offered – stability that his parish could give his daughter.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


