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ELIZABETH BENNET: THE CEREBRAL WOMAN IN JANE AUSTEN'S 'PRIDE AND PREJUDICE'

RITUPARNA CHATTERJEE

Faculty, Department of Language and Social Science, The Aditya Birla Public School Bhubaneswar,

Bhubaneswar-752050, Odisha

Email: chatterjeeritu29@gmail.com



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Abstract

Jane Austen is an exceptional novelist of all times in the portrayal of her female characters with real intelligence, emotions and sentiments. Austen's heroines always tend to possess that extra point over the rest of the characters and even to other contemporary characters of that era. Through her characters she showcases in a wholesome way the main tenets of the societal norms and the individual propensities. In her novel "Pride and Prejudice", she depicts the character of Elizabeth Bennet as a woman with wit and humour. She is that lady, who one can look up to as an ideal character with a balanced mix of sense and sensibility. She maintains the social decorum of her time but with a strong sense of individuality as well. Individuals make societies and the character of an individual is inferred from her/his observed manners. Miss Elizabeth Bennet is an ideal example and she rationalizes this statement with her judgments and her actions. This paper highlights the completeness of the character of Miss. Elizabeth Bennet; as a cerebral woman with compassion and decorum.

Keywords: Cerebral, confidante, confidence, compassion, humour and intelligence

"Pride and Prejudice", the novel is titled as such to portray a tussle between the proud disposition and the prejudiced ideas of the two protagonists Mr. Darcy and Miss Elizabeth Bennet, respectively. This novel was written in the eighteenth century, the period, marked by several political and social changes in Europe. French Revolution and the rise of the middle class charged the environment with a tendency for reasoning. In the social sphere too, there was a prevalence of the enlightenment movement. Incidentally, there was a predominance of reason over faith in the social as well as in the political system. Simultaneously

during this period women were supposed to be given secondary roles.

However, Austen was an exception. When it comes to character configuration by Austen, all her characters, especially the female characters have completeness; they are living, three dimensional with real intelligence, emotions and sentiments; as is evident in the portrayal of the lead character of Elizabeth Bennet in her novel "Pride and Prejudice" as a strong woman with an opinion and understanding of her own.

In the opening of the novel when Mrs. Bennet expresses her excitement over the arrival of Mr. Bingley as a very eligible groom for any of her daughters, Mr. Bennet proposes Lizzy as being more apt than all her sisters. The ease and confidence of the proposal shows the understanding of a father, it depicts his awareness of the intellectual abilities of Elizabeth which in itself is an evidence of her inherent qualities.

Austen's heroines always tend to have that extra edge over the rest of the characters and even to other contemporary characters of that era. In the first part of this novel when she meets Mr. Darcy at the ball in Netherfield, Mr. Darcy points out to Mr. Bingley stating about Elizabeth - "*She is tolerable but not handsome enough to tempt me*". She overhears their conversation and handles it with extreme composure; she even tells this to her friends in a good humour. Such a disposition is really unique and gives the readers a pre-notion that Miss Elizabeth Bennet, the leading female character of this novel, is a woman with humour and wit.

Miss Elizabeth's self-confidence is further emboldened by her affirmation to Jane - "*compliments always take you by surprise, and me never*". The way in which she handles the misbehaviour of Miss Bingley in her brother's house at Netherfield where she went to see Jane, further shows her maturity and her firm hold over her emotions.

Another very excellent trait portrayed in Elizabeth Bennet's character is her ability to lend her ears. Throughout the novel, it has been observed that Jane has opened her heart to Elizabeth; with her she shared all her feelings and emotions. In her sister Elizabeth, Jane finds the most trustworthy and empathetic listener of all. She is her sister's confidante, with her she discusses everything, her passion her distress, and Jane has her utmost faith in Elizabeth.

In the later part of the novel, when her sister falls sick at Netherfield, she leaves everything else behind and walks all the distance to see her sister. When her mother tries to demoralise her, she counters her by saying - "*I shall be very fit to see Jane - which is all I want.*" She is that perfect sister that

everyone seeks for; her love and affection toward her sister gives a pre notion of her ability to become a compassionate guide in future.

Miss. Elizabeth Bennet is a very forthright woman who admits the truth without hesitation; in many instances in the novel we have seen her expressing her views very clearly. She has a unique way of handling opinions, about women in general and about her in particular.

She is a studier of characters and is able to intricately analyse all the characters she interacts with. In one part of the novel she proclaims to Mr. Bingley - "*oh! Yes - I understand you perfectly*". If we consider the time period of the novel and the social situation at that point in time, such a declaration by a woman requires lot of self confidence and stamina. The gravity of her character is even better evolved by the presence of characters like Miss. Bingley, whose phenomenal mood swifts and non - consistent temperament further bolsters Elizabeth Bennet's equanimity.

Elizabeth's way of dealing with Mr. Collins and the way she handles his disdainful nature toward women in general is worth mentioning. She makes it very clear that she is not that type of woman who denies the proposal of marriage only to be asked for a second time. She also affirms that she would be completely unable to make him happy. Denying a marriage proposal from an eligible bachelor having an entail of an estate and under the patronage of a noted woman, Lady Catherine, in such a society which very clearly proclaims that marriage is the only way of gaining a secured and comfortable future, is quite a bold step for any woman.

Elizabeth belongs to a society where women are marginalised and are mainly confined to the domestic spheres. In such a society women are always expected to maintain a social code and a formal approach. Miss. Bennet in Austen's "*Pride and Prejudice*" is never seen to lose that sense of decorum even in the most tumultuous emotional moments. She tries to retain her calmness even though she feels humiliated by Mr. Darcy's views toward her family. Her sense of formality is clearly expressed in the following lines - "*From the very*

beginning, from the first moment I may almost say, of my acquaintance with you, your manners impressing me with the fullest belief of your arrogance, your conceit, and your selfish disdain of the feelings of others". In the above lines, her agitation is evident but the style of narration is an indirect one, in which acquisitions also do have a touch of modesty.

Play of Language is an important aspect of the novel "Pride and Prejudice". Elizabeth's use of formal language with a pinch of wit is often misunderstood because she is a woman. When Elizabeth declines the offer of Mr. Collins, she uses a language which is quite formal and understandable; but he misinterprets it as a typified feminine coyness. She tries to deny and protest against such stereotyping of women in different situations throughout the novel.

Her encounter with Lady Catherine also depicts her confidence and self respect; she clarifies it to the readers that the "*presence of money and rank could be witnessed without trepidation.*" Elizabeth feels the impertinence of Lady Catherine's enquiries but keeps her composure while answering the questions. Her answers are well framed and well balanced; it even compels a proud woman like Lady Catherine to point Elizabeth's decisiveness. In the later part of the novel when Lady Catherine tries to convince her about Mr. Darcy's engagement with her daughter, Elizabeth's perfect and to the point answers gives no room to Lady Catherine to carry forward her argument. Her replies are calm but firm, her answers give a big blow to Lady Catherine's ego and she tags Elizabeth as - "*Obstinate, headstrong girl!*".

In the first part of the novel we hardly get to know about the private thoughts of any character, it is mostly public dialogues, in balls, parties, etc. In the second half of the novel, we are exposed to Elizabeth as a person, her real self, her thoughts and her inner world. Her emotional play with Mr. Darcy matures in the latter half of the novel. She confesses about her prejudiced disposition about Mr. Darcy in the opening sections of the novel; this gets displaced by her open – hearted acceptance of his true intentions later. She never tries to hide the fact that the

possibility of being the wife of a man with such lucrative possessions would be the desire of every women of her time, but she would never compromise her feelings for the sake of materialistic possessions. In her dealings with Mr. Darcy, she never crosses her sense of decency though she makes her points very clear. She admits her faults and simultaneously brings forward Mr. Darcy's with decorum and elegance.

Elizabeth is the main connecting point and is aware of all the events in the novel. She is the one who supports, criticizes, interprets and unfolds all the characters to us and in this way her character too gets unfolded. Darcy's letter of explanation and other circumstances help Elizabeth to get out of her prejudiced dispositions. The philosophy and the love, generated by the clash and readjustment of her understandings, are implicit in her reactions. Elizabeth undergoes a change of feeling as she frees herself of prejudices. The effect of Darcy's letter on Elizabeth has been able to remove all her former prejudices gradually. She is the woman much beyond her time; she analyses the difference between pride and vanity and tries to apply the concept in her dealings with others. She understands the contrasting nature of Mr. Bingley and Mr. Darcy and tries to decipher it as a steady friendship sufficed by the willfulness of Mr. Bingley of being dominated. Even after her marriage, she takes good care of her sisters; Kitty spends most of the time with her. In spite of all the misdeeds of Wickham she continues to give monetary help to her sister Lydia. Her relationship with her sister in law Georgiana is compassionate; they love each other like real sisters. She maintains intimate relationships with the Gardiners and with her parents. All these aspects give completeness to the character of Miss Elizabeth Bennet.

Individuals are formed by societies and societies are formed by individuals, but the character of an individual is inferred from her/his observed manners, and the structure of a community manifests itself in its operative civility. Miss Elizabeth Bennet is an ideal example and she justifies this statement with her actions, her judgments and her composure.

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