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Elizabeth Bennet- A New Woman in the Making?

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Abstract

The kaleidoscopic world of literature has been peopled by intriguing women characters down the ages. Strong-willed and pliable, determined yet impulsive, charismatic yet coquettish, mentally strong yet emotionally vulnerable, she has been an oxymoronic paragon of all creations of God. Jane Austen, an eminent woman novelist of the Romantic period, upholds miniscule social realities in her novels, yet the oeuvre of her characters, especially women characters, is both varied and memorable. For the purpose of closer literary dissection on the premise of George Bernard Shaw's concept of 'New' and 'Emancipated' Woman (highly individualistic women who believe in living life on their own terms, banking solely on personal skill and talent), the researcher has zeroed in on Elizabeth Bennet, the 'delightful' heroine of Austen's celebrated novel, *Pride and Prejudice* and try to gauge how far can Elizabeth Bennet be regarded as a 'New Woman' in the making.

Keywords

Elizabeth Bennet; New Woman; *Pride and Prejudice*; Jane Austen.

Warm, energetic, understanding, all-subsuming, forgiving, empathetic on the one hand, pliable, vulnerable, suspecting and frail on the other, a woman is probably the most delightfully oxymoronic paragon of God's handiwork to have treaded on earth. From time immemorial, man has been trying to decode the halo of mystery surrounding her but failing miserably in his efforts with élan and she has been smiling at his failed efforts, her smile laced with an iota of mystery (as beautifully depicted by Leonardo da Vinci in his magnum opus, *Mona Lisa*.)

The variegated and kaleidoscopic paradigm of literature is peopled with such women characters; be it Lady Macbeth or Queen Isabella or Porphyria or amusing Mrs. Malaprop, she has incessantly confounded and mesmerised poets, authors, writers for generations. However, perspectives differ when women characters are sketched from the perspective of a woman. Rather than being castigated for her frailty and vulnerability, her pliable and oscillating nature is regarded as her strength that helps her to evolve over time as a stronger individual. The multi-faceted character of Elizabeth Bennet (in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*) is a case in point.

Ranked among the ten greatest women writers of literature of all times, Jane Austen's oeuvre was deceptively small and simple. Unpretentious and honest, Austen wrote only about the small world of the provincial town that she knew too well. Born in 1775 at Steventon in Hampshire of middle-class parents, Jane Austen was educated partly by her older brothers and partly by the informal education she received from the wide range of activities within the Austen family—country walks, charades, reading, writing stories and family plays. These were to a considerable extent instrumental in stimulating little Jane's interest in becoming a novelist. Austen deliberately kept herself aloof from the burning contemporary issues of social concern, be it Britain's war with revolutionary

France or gradually developing industrial revolution that was threatening to uproot at home, traditional agricultural economy and culture or, a clarion-call for greater democracy, and a new evangelism; rather she luxuriated in “3 or 4 families in a country village” (as she herself wrote).

Jane Austen’s novels both conformed to and deviated from the social and cultural scenario of contemporary England. Socially, people rigidly and strictly adhered to the social station into which they were born; moral codes were clearly defined and manners and speech were elaborate and ornamental. Culturally, 18th Century boasted its adherence to reason and intellect which almost with clinical precision made the head to rule over heart. Although the newly-emerging Romanticism held out hope of release from such tyranny of intellect, Austen knew too well the dangers of rigid conformity to either of these two extremes. Steering clear of such extremities, Austen realistically and sensibly amalgamates both intellect and emotion and envisages that both are required in equal measure for a relationship to work. In this regard, the character of Elizabeth Bennet, sketched with utmost care and love, gains an added significance as many critics opine that the character of Elizabeth derives largely or is an extension, rather a literary manifestation of Austen’s own self.

As Austen herself envisages, in her novel *Pride and Prejudice*, she gives us a world that is domestic, confined, unadventurous and restrained; the values that it upholds conform strictly to the 18th Century- “practical good sense, good taste, civilised respect for other people...”. However, the fact that Elizabeth Bennet (who doesn’t feel any qualm for her inability to draw; she even goes to the extent of turning down lucrative offers of marriage, knowing fully well the dangerous consequences of such a decision) whom the authoress refers to as “delightful”, has been made the heroine of this novel is amply suggestive of the fact that Austen is against uncritical and unquestioning acceptance of social norms and conventions. However, what Austen goes on to project is that only

through judicious amalgamation of good sense and genuine feelings and emotions can one hope to attain happiness in life.

Jane Austen presents Elizabeth as an unusually defiant and spirited young lady who deeply loves her elder sister Jane although she is less beautiful than Jane. Self-respecting and unconventional, she is at loggerheads with pretensions and “stuffy conventions”. This can be hailed as something iconoclastic, keeping in view the codes of morality ratified by contemporary society. Delineating her character on the premise of G.B. Shaw’s concept of ‘New’ and ‘Emancipated’ Woman who happens to be a self-respecting individual (in self-love) etching out her fortune on personal capability and skills, Austen’s Elizabeth most surely qualifies as a narcissistic individual who allows her prejudice to cloud and prevail over her good sense, at times degenerating to the abyss of illogicality (on being instigated by Wickham). However, being sensitive and quick to react, Elizabeth justifies her prejudice against Darcy while speaking to her friend, Charlotte Lucas, “I could easily forgive his pride, if he had not mortified mine”. Evidently, she here seems to nurse her hurt pride which could be taken as synonymous with her self-respect that was belittled at the Meryton Ball. Although hailing from a lower social strata than that of Darcy, she considers herself equal to him in her accomplishments. Transcending all restrictions that society imposes on women like Elizabeth, she is feisty and spirited enough to speak her mind and ask for her due. In this regard, she is comparable to the servant girl Louka (in G. B. Shaw’s *Arms and the Man*) who has no inhibitions in bringing to book Sergius, the prospective son-in-law of Petkoffs with whom Louka is employed, and demanding her due as a woman.

The narcissistic trait in her personality almost forces Elizabeth to “enlist” others (i.e. Darcy), thereby deriving an almost sadistic pleasure. The entire sequence of events was set rolling when Darcy makes an arrogant and insulting remark against Elizabeth at the Meryton Ball, “She is tolerable but not handsome enough to tempt me”. Austen here tries to bring home the fact that our attitudes

are moulded by the social class we belong to, by our attitudes and ethos which again are influenced by our social class; the influence of such a class-consciousness is so deep-rooted that our genuine feelings and emotions are often subsumed by it. Darcy too betrays no exception to this social reality as he thinks it inappropriate to jive with Elizabeth owing to her middle-class background. However, being a thoroughly “gentleman’s daughter”, Elizabeth in no way brooks this insult to her as a woman. This inadvertent remark immediately flares up her pride and the series of incidents that follow, inevitably draw from this single remark. Austen here tries to convey that insurmountable pride and resultant prejudice can develop into flaws, even in rational and intelligent individuals. Darcy’s aristocratic pride colours his judgement and Elizabeth’s prejudice blinds her genuine understanding of Darcy as an individual. Both of them end up committing grave errors in properly judging each other. Being a narcissist, she thoroughly enjoys moments of discomfiture Darcy faces on several occasions from now on, even misinterpreting his genuine words of appreciation for her as barbs of insult. In this regard, it will be expedient to refer to Darcy’s first and failed proposal of marriage to Elizabeth: “In vain have I struggled. It will not do. My feelings will not be repressed. You must allow me to tell you how ardently I admire and love you” (168). “Coloured”, “doubted”, and “silent” at first, Elizabeth answers in the negative (unable to realize Darcy’s genuine feelings for her) –

...I cannot-I have never desired your good opinion, and you have certainly bestowed it most unwillingly. I am sorry to have occasioned pain to anyone. It has been most unconsciously done, however, and I hope will be of short duration. The feelings which, you tell me, have long prevented the acknowledgement of your regard, can have little difficulty in overcoming it after this explanation. (169)

Visibly shaken, with a voice of “forced calmness”, he says- “And this is all the reply which I am to have the honour of expecting? I might, perhaps, wish to be

informed why, with so little endeavour at civility, I am thus rejected. But it is of small importance” (169).

Darcy is finally flung from the dizzy heights of his aristocratic pride to reality as it really is; through this rejection, Elizabeth almost attains a catharsis, all her wounds purged. However, prodded by her narcissism, Elizabeth here commits an error of judgement as she fails to realize the dictates of her heart. Here it must be kept in mind that George Bernard Shaw was never against love or marriage. However, he was dead against all those hypocritical premises on which these were supposedly based. Enumerating his concept of life force, Shaw envisages that the institution of marriage entails the union of two perfectly compatible individuals who respect and love each other with utmost honesty. For Elizabeth hailing from middle-class, proud and arrogant Darcy hailing from the aristocratic class, would prove to be the most compatible partner. Elizabeth’s narcissism which almost borders on Machiavellianism, prevents her from properly assessing Darcy’s real intentions. Although she harbours vestiges of “New Woman” in her personality, yet Austen envisages that a genuine understanding of one’s emotions can only ensure proper understanding of one’s own self and of others.

The fact that Elizabeth is an “emancipated” woman born ahead of her times, is amply illustrated by the set of unconventional and albeit iconoclastic values that she upholds. According to Harold Bloom, there is a “transcendent strength” to Elizabeth’s will that raises her above that cosmos; Bloom equates her transcendental strength to Clarissa Harlowe’s transcendence of her society, of Lovelace, and even of everything in herself “that is not the will to a self-esteem”. It is her will and her almost Puritan passion to preserve her will coupled with her individualism, that prevent her to forsake her ego ; however, as Darcy undergoes a metaphorical fall after his first and failed proposal of marriage, Elizabeth too needs a regression so that both these individuals can begin to slowly understand and appreciate each other’s feelings. Here, Shaw’s concepts

of “New Woman” seems to be slipping into his concept of “Life Force” that hails marriage as the holy institution for procreation.

Although Elizabeth is highly individualistic, there are ample instances in the novel which illustrate her vulnerabilities, doubts, misgivings, need for security and love as a woman. Although the character of Elizabeth is an unconventional portraiture of an emancipated woman, yet her little oscillations of heart firmly situate her to the contemporary society. According to Harold Bloom, Elizabeth is amusing and dearly loves a laugh although her enjoyment is often private, as she sees through how others make fool of themselves; she turns away “to hide a smile,” from Darcy’s assurance of his “real superiority of mind”; “and she could hardly suppress a smile” when Darcy later seeks the acquaintance of some of her relatives, perhaps thinking them people of fashion. Besides being fond of laughter, Elizabeth impresses as an excellent “sturdier of character” (as Bingley observes) who has rather a ‘vocation’ for seeing into “thoughts and characters”, thereby often correctly predicting action. When Bingley says that most of his actions are impulsive and that he may leave Netherfield in five minutes, Elizabeth retorts, “That is exactly what I should have supposed of you...” Ironically though, her ability to see through and properly read others’ characters, remains defunct in trying to gauge her own. It is the same error in properly judging her character that had kept aloof two individuals (Elizabeth and Darcy) who are destined to be together as both of them complement each other perfectly well. Their union is a foregone conclusion, a necessity for the prolongation of species; their consummation evinces Shaw’s concept of “Life-Force” through the union of the “New Woman” and the “Man”.

The Biblical Garden of Eden was lost forever to Adam and Eve as they attained knowledge, Austen’s Elizabeth moves one step closer to attaining Paradise on Earth after reading the letter from Darcy. In a moment, all her misgivings and misconceptions are cleared and she is able to see through Wickham’s cleverly concocted lies to vilify her mind against Darcy. More than

Wickham, she herself is to be blamed for her folly as she had deliberately allowed herself to be deceived by Wickham, momentarily shaken by his charismatic and handsome personality. In spite of being a strong-willed and individualistic woman who prided herself on her ability to read others, she is not entirely immune from the failings of any twenty-one year old of her times. However, from the time she receives Darcy's letter, her eyes are opened and her emotions gradually shift from hatred of Darcy to love of him, encouraged by his treating her as his equal, which she knows herself to be. Darcy too, like Elizabeth, acquires self-knowledge by the end of the novel as he realizes that there is a lot of truth in Elizabeth's bantering claim that she has "always seen a great similarity in the turn of [their] minds". It is in her that Darcy finds a respite from the wooden aristocratic conventions and rigid adherence to class. It is with her that Darcy can finally learn to laugh at his own follies.

A 'New Woman' carrying the mantle of Shaw's 'Life-Force', Elizabeth is not entirely immune from an acute awareness of her need for social and financial security. When Jane asks her since when she had romantic inclinations for Darcy, Elizabeth retorts- "...I believe I must date it [her love for Darcy] from my first seeing his beautiful grounds at Pemberley".

Although she playfully says to Jane that she began to admire him on seeing his splendid home at Pemberley, we do realize the high seriousness of such a statement (evident from her reflections at Pemberley- "to be mistress of Pemberley might be something"). Although it would be inadvertent to say that her love was completely dictated by materialistic considerations, yet she cannot be totally brought to book had she decided to settle down in wedlock with a rich man, as rigid social conventions offered no scope for financial security to young women rather than those available in marriage. This again brings us to the caustic irony the opening sentence of the novel is pregnant with- "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife" (1).

Even before the first chapter comes to a close, the readers realize that the Bennets with a modest middle-class background are no advertisements for marriage and Mrs. Bennet's desperate scheming to get her daughters married off at any cost, is an uncanny reminder of the limited choices of security available to unmarried young women of the contemporary society. Although the union of the 'New Woman' and the 'Man' is a biological necessity arising out of the need for prolongation of species (evinced by Shaw's concept of Life-Force), Jane Austen's Elizabeth remains thoroughly entrenched in contemporary social conventions and tries to make the most from the lucrative choice available to her once she realizes it. However, her materialistic considerations are not completely dissociated from considerations of heart. Being a highly self-respecting woman who harbours traces of narcissism, she was genuinely hurt by Darcy's inadvertent comment. However, she begins to genuinely admire him when her misconceptions are dissipated on reading Darcy's letter. She acquires self-knowledge and her materialistic concerns only cemented her newly-realized love for Darcy. She therefore remains a 'New Woman' in the making who is unable to completely transcend the social diktat of the contemporary era.

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