

A Study of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* through the Marxist Lens

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Abstract:

Pride and Prejudice is hailed as a great romantic work of the Regent era. However, the present paper discusses the Marxist overtones visible in the work. Marxism sees life as an evolution of the struggle between the dominating and the dominant class, i.e. the bourgeoisie and the proletariats, in society. Here males have been identified as the former and the females as the latter. The struggle between the two is studied using some of the concepts of Marx, Engels, Antonio Gramsci, Theodor Adorno and Alan Sinfield. The economic dependence of women upon men and the unjust policy of entailment form the cornerstone of this study that goes on to show the means adopted to perpetuate this inequality in Regent English society.

Key Words: Marxism, bourgeoisie, proletariats, males, females, Regent English society

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Marxism owes its existence to its founders Karl Marx (1818-1883), a German philosopher and economist, and Friedrich Engels (1820-1895), a German sociologist, and together they brought out the *Communist Manifesto* in 1848. The basic tenets of Marxism lie on the foundation that the entire development of human civilization can be studied along economic lines, in terms of the class struggle between the owners of the means of production and the workers, who are termed as the 'bourgeoisie' and the 'proletariats' respectively, in the modern day industrialized capitalist economy. They believed that the inherent discord in the capitalist system will lead to its eventual downfall thus paving the way for a more egalitarian distribution of wealth by the communal ownership of the means of production. Communism is thus the perceived utopia which functions on the principle of 'From each according to his ability, To each according to his need'.

Marxism has its offshoots in many disciplines and it has also found its way in the analysis of literature, even though no one such fixed strategy can be identified for this purpose. The present paper proposes to analyse Jane Austen's famous work *Pride and Prejudice* through the Marxist lens, trying to juxtapose the views of its founders along with some recent concepts developed by the some newfangled Marxist critics.

Marxism sees society as divisible into "a *base* (the material means of production, distribution and exchange) and a *superstructure*, which is the 'cultural' world of ideas, art, religion, law, and so on" (Barry 151). This 'economic determinism' which states that the superstructure is dependent upon and manipulated by the economic base, forms an integral part of conservative Marxist belief. The ruling class not only dominates the superstructure for furthering its own ends but also for justifying this inequality in the distribution of wealth.

The two antagonistic classes in the society, as has been stated earlier, in the modern capitalist economy, are the bourgeoisie and the proletariats. However in terms of family structure

Engels, in his work *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, classifies “the husband is the bourgeois, and the wife represents the proletariat” (qtd. in Habib 533). Not being circumscribed by the marital bond, I would take this distinction a step further and identify the entire community of male members as the bourgeois and all female members as the proletariats in the Regent English social structure.

This further appears to be a very apt generalization in the historical context of *Pride and Prejudice*. The period of completion of the book is recognized as between the years 1797 and 1813, during the reign of King George III. One of the most important occurrences of the Georgian era was the advent of the industrial revolution which had far reaching repercussions in the political, economic and social spheres in England, the foremost being the fact that many merchants and tradesmen started amassing wealth to be considered at par with the landed gentry .

The three tiered class structure in Regent Britain, apart from the aristocratic class, can be classified as the landowning families forming the cream of society, which simply let out the land (the means of production) to tenants and could afford to have a luxurious lifestyle on the income thus generated. Next in the social scale were the ‘gentry’ or the ‘landed gentry’, the educated members of the upper class which included “country squires, military officers and many forms of clergy” (“Historical Context of *Pride and Prejudice*”). They were considered below the landowners on the social scale but genteel enough to mix with them socially. The lowest rung on the social ladder was constituted of working classes of “household servants, tenant farmers, merchants and “tradesmen” such as Smiths and Carpenters, village doctors, town lawyers and other professionals” (Historical Context of *Pride and Prejudice*”). The principal characters in *Pride and Prejudice* can thus be slotted into classes wherein the Landowning families constituted of Mr Bingley, Mr Darcy and Lady Catherine de Bourgh while the Landed Gentry comprised of The Bennet family and Mr Collins.

All the political power was concentrated in the hands of the aristocracy and the landowners. The growing wealth of the industrious middle class ensured the passing of the reform Act in 1832 to further their interests in the political and economic sphere and can be viewed in the light of a challenge thrown at the “landed privilege and aristocratic corruption..... Striving to establish a society based on merit rather than on one’s birth” (Loftus).

However, the women (the proletariats) had very few monetary rights. A single woman could retain her control over her property which she inherited from her father, but in the case of her being blessed with brothers too, she usually inherited only the personal property which consisted of items of personal use. Whereas in the case of a married woman there was an even worse case scenario wherein her personal wealth would increment her husband’s wealth and she had no control over it unless she was relinquished to the state of widowhood. It was not until the

year 1882 when by an Act of British Parliament, married women were allowed “to own and control property in their own right” (“Married Women’s Property Act”).

This economic dependence of women on their male counterparts is what reasserts their status as ‘proletariats’. In *Pride and Prejudice* not only do the Bennets belong to the class of landed gentry, but they had also been placed in a precarious position by having the family estate of Longbourn entailed to their closest male relative, Mr Collins, in the absence of a direct male descendant. So only two options of survival would be available to the Bennet girls after their father’s demise. Firstly, of marrying a rich man and secondly, of seeking employment opportunities, which were extremely meager for educated young women of good families, and were confined to being either a companion or a governess. Thus Mrs Bennet’s pre-occupation with marrying off her daughters seems entirely justifiable as “Mr Bennet’s property consisted almost entirely in an estate of two thousand a year...and their (the Bennet daughters’) mother’s fortune, though ample for her situation in life, could but ill supply the deficiency of his” (29). We can thus see her exhorting Mr Bennet in the very first chapter to go and pay a visit to Mr Bingley who had recently rented the neighbouring property of Netherfield Park. “A single man of large fortune....What a fine thing for our girls....You must know that I am thinking of his marrying one of them...it is very likely that he may fall in love with one of them, and therefore you must visit him as soon as he comes” (15).

On another occasion, she tries to overcome her hatred towards “that odious man” (48) Mr Collins and develops an amiable attitude towards him when she is acquainted with his desire of marrying one of her daughters, “and the man whom she could not bear to speak of the day before, was now high in her good graces” (53). When against her mother’s deepest wishes, Elizabeth outrightly refuses Mr Collins’s proposal of marriage, Mrs Bennet is unable to accept and understand this irresponsible, “headstrong and foolish” (75) behaviour and insists upon her marrying Mr Collins and tries to draw support from not only Mr Bennet and Jane but from Elizabeth’s dear friend Charlotte Lucas also. The desperation of her desire for this match can be seen as follows. “She talked to Elazabth again and again; coaxed and threatened her by turns” (76).

Her concern over the future of her daughters lest they remain unmarried old maids, destitute and forced to earn their living, is evidently manifested in the pleasure she takes in anticipating the probability of a marriage between her eldest daughter Jane and Bingley. “It was an animating subject, and Mrs Bennet seemed incapable of fatigue while enumerating the advantages of the match....It was moreover, such a promising thing for her younger daughters, as Jane’s marrying so greatly must throw them in the way of other rich men” (69).

The pain and shame of having Lydia eloped with Wickham, was soon forgotten by Mrs Bennet on hearing of her forthcoming nuptials with “One of the most worthless young men in

Great Britain” (180) as pronounced by Mr Bennet. She immediately started planning to settle her daughter in the neighbourhood and wants to share the honour of having a daughter married off, with all her acquaintances and family, even though she had been laid prostrate with grief a few days earlier.

It was a fortnight since Mrs Bennet had been downstairs, but on the happy day, she again took her seat at the head of her table, and in spirits oppressively high. No sense of shame gave a damp to her triumph. The marriage of a daughter, which had been the first object of her wishes, since Jane was sixteen, was now on the point of accomplishment...(181).

Towards the end of the novel when both Jane’s and Elizabeth’s marriage to Bingley and Darcy respectively, have been fixed, Mrs Bennet’s euphoria knows no bounds. “Good gracious! Lord bless me! only think! dear me!....who would have thought it! And is it really true?...Three daughters married!....Oh, Lord! What will become of me. I shall go distracted” (220).

This character analysis of Mrs Bennet brings out the veracity of the base superstructure model of Marxism. The means of production, the land constituting the ‘base’, is owned by the land owners like Bingley and Darcy. The superstructure, constituting the prevalent beliefs, then justify Mrs Bennet’s enunciation of her sole reason for existence, of pushing her daughters to make an advantageous match based primarily on monetary considerations, for their eventual survival in the absence of any financial security for them

“At their most determinist, Marxists hold that culture always is an expression of thinking or consciousness of the prevailing social and economic situation...Marxists in the dialectical tradition such as Theodor Adorno also argued that...culture turns everything into a commodity, and commodity culture creates a way of thinking or consciousness appropriate to it. Minds become routinized and uniform” (Ryan 116-117).

This culture, in other terms the superstructure, witnessed in the hunt for rich men for unmarried maidens, thus giving importance and assigning superiority to the bourgeoisie over the proletariats, is seen as prevailing over the society in *Pride and Prejudice* at large. The very first sentences of the novel bear out this truth “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 of such a man may be on 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” (16).

Thus the obsession with marriage, as the means of survival of the proletariat, is much more than ‘a game of flirting and courting’ as it appears to our post-modern mindset. One cannot just view it as an extension of the maternal instincts of Mrs Bennet alone. This “truth universally acknowledged” also reflects the attitude of the entire society. Not only are the men, the bourgeoisie, regarded as superior but at the same time their degree of wealth is also a measure of their superiority, as Marx points out that the “individual in capitalist society is effectively the bourgeoisie owner of property” (qtd. in Habib 534). The first mention of Bingley is accompanied by the statement of his wealth, “A single man of large fortune; four or five thousand a year” (15). In the same vein, the introduction of Darcy when he enters the ballroom has been laid down as, “Mr Darcy soon drew the attention of the room by his fine, tall person, handsome features, noble mien; and the report which was in general circulation within five minutes after his entrance, of his having ten thousand a year” (19).

Next, we see the concept of ‘reification’ come to life which has been described by Marx in *Das Kapital* as a particular characteristic of a capitalist economy wherein “People, in a word, become things” (Barry 151). Here, women are demeaningly been viewed as “a mere instrument of production” (Habib 534) and it is considered imperative for their survival to be latched onto a bourgeoisie because of their lack of economic independence. The women are regarded as a ‘commodity’ to be traded off rather than a living entity with opinions and choices of one’s own about one’s station in life.

Marx further states that, “One of the main sins of capitalism...was that it reduced all human relations to commercial relations. Even the family cannot escape such commodification” (Habib 534). This mercenary attitude towards marriage is visible in Charlotte Lucas’s acceptance of the marriage proposal of Mr Collins. After her best friend Elizabeth Bennet snubs Mr Collins proposal, Charlotte sets out to apply a sympathetic balm to his bruised male ego, to slyly ensnare him into the state of matrimony. Charlotte’s reflections upon her forthcoming marriage amply bear out the veracity of the above mentioned observation of Marx:

Mr Collins to be sure was neither sensible nor agreeable; his society was irksome and his attachment to her must be imaginary....Without thinking highly either of men or of matrimony, marriage had always been her object; it was the only honourable provision for well-educated young women of small fortune, and however uncertain of giving happiness, must be their pleasantest preservative from want. This preservative she had now obtained; and at the age of twenty-seven, without having ever been handsome, she felt all the good luck of it. (82)

This can be interpreted in the light of the notion of ‘hegemony’ introduced by Antonio Gramsci. “Hegemony is like an internalized form of social control which makes certain views seem ‘natural’ or invisible so that they hardly seem like views at all ‘just the way things are’”

(Barry 158). Thus even though Elizabeth is unable to comprehend this perceived folly committed deliberately by a dearly esteemed friend, in marrying a man she neither loved nor honoured, yet this shrewdness of Charlotte's in securing a husband, eligible at least financially, seems perfectly natural according to the dictates of social behaviour.

It is hegemony which makes the prevalent practice of entailment seem justifiable which meant, that based on the laws of primogeniture, the family estate would be passed onto the eldest male heir who could just live off the income generated by the land during his lifetime, without being able to sell it off for his personal use. The estate could not be divided up among the other sons so as to keep it whole and intact, to maintain the power of ownership of the landowning class from generation to generation. In the absence of a male heir, the estate/land would be entailed off to the nearest male relation, as happened to be Mr Collins in the case of the Bennet family.

This system of inheritance based on birth and sex was unquestionably accepted by one and all and no one even bothered to question how just or equitable it was, all in the name of keeping the family wealth, honour and prestige unscathed and thus perpetuating the unequal class structure. As Marx's conception of ideology states, "Having at its disposal the means of production, it (the dominant class) is empowered to disseminate its ideas in the realms of law, morality, religion and art, as possessing universal verity" (Habib 531).

Austen makes her absurd characters like Mrs Bennet, described as "a woman of mean understanding, little information, and uncertain temper" (16), be silly enough to make frivolous remarks against this policy of entailment and is portrayed in a comic vein, which in keeping with her character, show her acute lack of pragmatism when compared to the worldly wise stance of her practical and sensible daughters, Elizabeth and Jane, who seem to fully concur with this noble practice. "I do think it is the hardest thing in the world, that your estate should be entailed away from your own children; and I am sure if I had been you (Mr Bennet), I should have tried long ago to do something or other about it" (48). On the other hand, Jane and Elizabeth's matter of fact approach to entailment has been manifested as follows, "Jane and Elizabeth attempted to explain to her the nature of an entail. They had often attempted it before, but it was a subject on which Mrs Bennet was beyond the scope of reason; and she continued to rail bitterly against the cruelty of setting an estate away from a family of five daughters, in favour of a man whom nobody cared anything about" (48). This is another example of how the superstructure, constituting literature too, is manipulated to validate the prevalent social, economic and political practices.

Further, Marx contends that "all societies are organized around the production of the means of sustaining life" (Ryan 115), which in the case of Regent England was predominately land, and thus the owners of land tried to restrict the possession of land to a few select

aristocratic families that furthered the perpetuation of inequality in income distribution. “Because material inequality is difficult to justify in itself, ideas and cultural values have become increasingly important for maintaining the unequal distribution of wealth” (Ryan 115).

This is evinced in *Pride and Prejudice* by the episode between Lady Catherine de Bourgh and Elizabeth Bennet, wherein the former condescends to visit the humble abode of the latter, with the sole intention of putting an end to any probability of a matrimonial alliance between her nephew, Mr Darcy, and Elizabeth Bennet, on account of their difference in social class. She not only humiliates and intimidates Elizabeth by driving home this savagely and mercilessly, but also enlightens her that Darcy is supposed to be married off to her own daughter:

My daughter and my nephew are formed for each other. They are descended on the maternal side, from the same noble line; and on the father’s from respectable, honourable and ancient though untitled families. Their fortunes on both sides is splendid. They are destined for each other by the voice of every member of their respective houses; and what is to divide them? The upstart pretensions of a young woman without family, connection or fortune....If you were sensible of your own good, you would not wish to quit the sphere in which you have been brought up. (207)

However, as Alan Sinfield asserts, “In dominant ideologies, one can locate faultlines where the plausibility of the dominant ideology is in question. Such faultlines are inevitable in societies founded on inequality, since an ideology’s account of the world it attempts to justify can never be fully universal, can never speak to or for everyone in the society” (Ryan 119).

Darcy, fully conscious of his own superior station in life, cannot desist from offering marriage to Elizabeth, twice, thus demonstrating this ‘faultline’ in the ideology reflected by the words of his aunt, Lady Catherine de Bourgh. In the first instance, he declares his love for her quite reluctantly, “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 love and admire you” (117). When contrary to all his expectations and long held beliefs, Elizabeth takes offence at thus being addressed, he cannot restrain himself from scathingly asking her, “Could you expect me to rejoice in the inferiority of your connections? To congratulate myself on the hope of relations, whose condition in life is so decidedly beneath my own?” (119).

Elizabeth’s own curt reply to this proposal is, “You could not have made me the offer of your hand in any possible way that would have tempted me to accept it...and I had not known you a month before I felt that you were the last man in the world whom I could ever be prevailed on to marry” (120), which deals a sharp blow to Darcy’s smug class snobbishness.

This turns out to be the turning point in Darcy's life which eventually alters him into a much better version of himself. He indisputably displays a much more civil and considerate behaviour when he next encounters Elizabeth and her Aunt and Uncle Gardiner at Pemberley. Also, he becomes instrumental in preventing the Bennet family from falling into disgrace, in forcibly making Wickham marry the wayward Lydia with whom he had eloped. This 'fault' in ideology is even more apparent in Darcy's attitude when he reiterates his previous sentiments and expresses his gratitude towards Elizabeth towards the end of the novel, as follows:

I have been a selfish being all my life, in practice, though not in principle....I was given good principles, but left to follow them in pride and conceit. Unfortunately an only son....I was spoilt by my parents...allowed, encouraged, almost taught me to be selfish and overbearing, to care for none beyond my own family circle, to think meanly of all the rest of the world, to wish at least to think meanly of their sense and worth compared with my own. Such I was...and such I might still have been but for you, dearest, loveliest Elizabeth! What do I not owe you!...By you, I was properly humbled....You shewed me how insufficient were all my pretensions to please a woman worthy of being pleased. (214)

Pride and Prejudice can thus be labelled as an idealogical work, based on the premise that works of art are most idealogical when "in the face of extremes of deprivation and potential anger, they foster false hope and futile aspiration, as well as a feeling that the society's institutions, regardless of what inequalities they consistently produce, are just and right" (Ryan 128). Austen, through the two happy marriages at the end of the novel, those of Jane and Bingley and Elizabeth and Darcy, despite the variance in their social classes, tries to project a picture of marriage for love rather than the realistic picture of marriage as a means of economic survival. The author thus presents a superficial reality and attempts to negate the antagonism existing in the struggle between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat in the Regent English society by glossing over the harsher actuality, though 'truth has a habit of peeping out now and then', and a true picture lurks behind this romantic façade and makes itself visible beyond all these scintillating trappings.

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