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## THE ECONOMICS OF MARRIAGE IN JANE AUSTEN'S NOVELS

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### Abstract

This paper examines how Jane Austen's novels were driven by the established social norms and how marriage constituted an integral part of the social hierarchy during early 19<sup>th</sup> century. The paper explores the intriguing mix of the pleasurable and the critical elements that make Austen's works to continue to impact the modern world. It also aims to understand the assumptions about women, marriage and behaviour prominent in the society as reflected in Austen's major novels. Many critics argue that Austen's use of marriage plot in novels is a conservative tool that further depresses the power of women. However, it is important to note here that Austen does not follow any strict formula for the marriages that take place in her novels; and chooses to construct plots to highlight the problems of customary gender roles. In a world where marriage is driven by power relations and dowries, and is the ultimate goal, Austen suggests that there might be more important relationships at stake. Thus, she plays upon both intelligence and emotion to unite her audience and mediate a discussion about the social implications of marriage.

### Key-Words

Women, Marriage, 19<sup>th</sup> Century Society, Class Construction, Jane Austen, Women Novelists.

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Jane Austen was a prominent novelist of the Georgian era and is one of the most well known authors of English literature. Though many readers enjoy it for the love stories they carry; her novels also provide a social commentary on the life and times of the period. It was at once an age of great change and also reflected a resistance to change – thereby creating a state of flux in relationships, including marriage. They also present a charming guide to the fashionable life in the Regency period. Austen wrote 6 novels – *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), *Mansfield Park* (1814) and *Emma* (1815) and two that were published posthumously in 1818, *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion*. While all of Austen novels celebrate an ideal union among partners, based on compatibility, affection and respect; alliances contracted as the result of other inducements provide significant counterpoints. The society not only comprised marriages that viewed ideal partnership and conjugal happiness as the legitimate aim of marriage, but it must be noted that marriages of convenience were equally common. Marriage was often the only acceptable future for women of all social and economic strata since custom, religion, law, conduct tracts, and popular literature – all reinforced the idea that ‘marriage was their only permissible profession and their only socially acceptable form of support.’ (Hall, p 37) As the class structure gradually was being transformed through the market economy, it also influenced the new marriage laws and the social construction of the marriage market, which was created to funnel young men and women into marriages that protected the social code. Thus, the question of a woman’s “credit” which was understood to be revealed by her behaviour or conduct, was of utmost importance, as it might allow her and her family to be enriched through a prosperous marriage.

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From the 1790s to the end of her life in 1817, Austen became increasingly critical observer of the marriages which came to her notice. She recognized that affection, friendship and respect were fundamental elements of any workable relationship – but discovered for herself that a man who combined the ability to inspire the necessary degree of love and esteem with the essential qualification of a good income was rare. How important was this combination of money and affection in marriage is also evident from the fact that no Jane Austen heroine marries for money: affection is always part of the equation. Yet, the recognition that romance alone would neither keep body and soul together nor sustain marital accord in crucial element underpinning all of her writing.

She is admired for portraying a world of elegant houses, dances, balls and familiar neighbourhood. David Monaghan is right in his observation on the novels when he points at the significance of the social thrust in Austen's novels which are more of a "study of social rituals ... events like balls, dinners, evening parties and visits, will help us understand how Jane Austen viewed her society. With the exception of *Emma* in which the action only once strays beyond the confines of Highbury, she does not in fact stick rigidly to this one type of setting. However, though her major characters may occasionally move away from village, it is within these settings that their values are shaped and their future lies. Thus, the centres of her novels world are its Burtons. Longbourns, Pemberleys and Mansfield Parks, not its Londons and Baths.

Austen's novels can be called a novel of manners because of their concern with "dignity, breeding and gentility" (Karl 158). Money, character and connections were important to both parties in marriage, and the writers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century stressed upon these aspects in their novels, letters, journals and the conduct literature of the day. If it was morally indefensible to marry solely for money, it made little sense to marry without it; and in reality many choices were made with an eye to monetary gain and emotional happiness. (Jones, 7) women in Austen's novels have a distinct market value, and each of them can be evaluated within the fictive space for her personal character and moral value. The novels accept the reality of life as to how there exists economic valuation of as to how women are perceived within the marriage market and the consequences of such approach in social spheres. Although the heroines in the novels are able to successfully navigate this difficult reality, the minor female characters represent women who find the market more problematic and are exposed to larger social inequalities that they find themselves trapped in.

Austen's readers can be divided into two distinct groups: academic readers and star struck fans. While the academic readers intend to decipher the agenda of her novels, many people enjoy Austen's novels because of the subtle manner in which she narrates love stories. The middle ground that exists between these two approaches leads the two audiences to the same destination. Austen's concerns with the prevalent social norms, the

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patriarchal structure and the gender roles that existed in the 18<sup>th</sup> century society – all of these benefit a pleasure reader as well as a literary critic to understand and appreciate the works.

To be a woman and author during the 18<sup>th</sup> century was a feminist action that could bring censure and shame in a time where respectable women did not write. Austen used methods of subversion to undermine components of her career that could be seen as extreme, such as her sex and her famous plotlines. It is because of being a woman writer, that Austen used subversive techniques to allow her stories even reach her audience. Although her novels were written in a time different from ours, her realism and philosophies are still relevant. Her works reflect significant aspects in the feminist conventions of the time and portray middle class women in animate ways. She writes as a critical judge of her own society, and in her works, describes how a woman's fate is largely dependent on her social status. With an eye for keen observation and apt narrative style, she shows through her works, how intricately entwined a woman's life was in those days. Austen's novels contain an elegant state of social criticism of the community in which she lived because they touch on women's place and outlook. Economic changes also meant women had to find a new position in comparison to the changing social order. The only female vocation addressed by Austen in her novels is that of governess, a fate that haunts the Dashwood women and that is directly addressed through characters such as Jane Fairfax from *Emma*. With the help of the situation created in the novel, Austen comments on cultural shifts that are taking place around, the transition in society left women more vulnerable and confined in the domestic sphere. She utilizes an ironic humour while creating her heroines. Especially, Emma Woodhouse and Elizabeth Bennett represent both the voice and the view of the author herself and the middle class women. That is, Austen chooses a particular social problem about women and she solves that problem from the point of women's thoughts, feelings, and emotions. Her treatment of each woman is different. She knows how to draw the spectators' attention to the qualities of her heroines. That is why Emma is seen as the most important lady of Highbury and Elizabeth's brilliance is quickly realized by Mr. Darcy. Moreover, Elizabeth Bowen makes a further remark that Austen sees her heroines in an enjoyable light and she reflects their liveliness and fun. However, she is also able to reflect the sides of her characters without buffooning or devaluating them. As a result, Jane Austen is regarded as a feminist author owing to her questioning the philosophy of the era about the position of women.

Cultural changes, such as the shift from an agrarian to a cash economy are often dwelled upon in literary texts of the age. Austen utilizes the marriage plot in the same way. Her female role models grapple with the real life problems of economy and marriage, and in the process, Austen subtly brings out issues related to sexual relations. Glenda Hudson

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even goes a step further to point out that Austen uses the marriage plot to change the balance of power in male/female relationships through sibling-like, almost incestuous, relationships.

Women in 19<sup>th</sup> century had their own limitations – imposed upon by the patriarchal society, the religious conventions and the social norms. The main thrust of the argument given by religious heads was that God had made men stronger than women, both intellectually and physically and that this superiority gave them a divine right of authority which women must not seek to challenge. Equality, they cautioned, was neither possible nor desirable; female interests were best served by the cultivation of refined helplessness, guaranteed to stimulate the male protective urge and soften the male heart. Women were put on the earth to please men, after all happiness in marriage could only come through an unquestioning acceptance of male dominance. With the help of two of her novels, *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma*, Austen questions the place of men and women in society. She establishes an ironic level by utilizing the daily conventions of England as a source of her novel, such as economic and educational place of women. Besides, she creates characters that reflect every facet of the society or the conventions of those days. Therefore, the issues about the passivity of women have a significant role in the dialogues that include ironical speeches. The irony can also be noticed in the ending of the novel *Persuasion*. The British Critic review of *Persuasion*, published in 1818, attacked the questionable moral of the story, which appeared to be that where marriage was concerned, the young could avoid certain and prolonged misery by listening to their own hearts rather than those older and wiser than themselves.

One of the difficulties of women in the 18<sup>th</sup> century was to get married in order to gain a social power. That is to say, marriage in the eighteenth century was an economic necessity for women. Thus, it was not a matter of romantic or personal choice. A woman in Austen's time had very limited choices in marriage or employment. Education was very limited to women of the time; and even if they were educated; it was primarily to make them accomplished in arts, music and literature, so that they become more valuable as a wife.

Therefore when a woman made a choice to write as a vocation, it was seen in itself as a feminist act - an act of revolution. It was assumed that an average female would ultimately submit to one of these two extremes: she must either become the innocent dove of great moral worth that was so desired in the 18<sup>th</sup> century; or she must go mad as "the result of too much of story-telling"(Gilbert 28). Because neither of these options was alluring to women who wanted to write and have an impact on her audience, writers such as Jane Austen came up with ways to write while maintaining a sense of innocence.

It was due to this obstacle of being a female writer that all correspondences with the

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publishers were to be handled by Austen's brother. Her biographical details would emphasise on her being a God-fearing, saint like persona – to avoid any potential controversy regarding her reputation. Austen, therefore, chose to weave her stories carefully, not appearing to be too independent or critical of the patriarchal structure; and yet asserting her own voice through her novels themselves. On the level of plot, she subverted her somewhat progressive themes by working within a well-known framework. She herself says: *Three or four families in a country village is the very thing to work on*. In selecting a small segment of society around which her representations of village life were to be constructed, Austen did not attempt to present a demographically accurate cross-section but rather to give emphasis to those groups which her contemporaries regarded as most important. Consequently, her heroines and heroes almost all came from the ranks of the landowners, particularly the gentry – the class to which Jane Austen herself belonged; because these provided society with its moral leadership such as upholding of the cultural values associated with an ideal marriage in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. However, Austen turned this expectation upside down by using courtship as a platform to address deeper problems, such as economics and gender roles.

In order to understand Austen's critiques of social norms, we need to remember that Austen was writing in a time when England was shifting its economic focus from agrarian base to industrialization. Before this transition, women enjoyed a level of independence when working with men in the fields. However, as men began to leave home to bring money; women were pushed into the domestic sphere; ideologically taking care of homely responsibilities. This new responsibility and division of life in public and private spheres surfaced into Austen's writings too. We often find characters grappling with problems that arose due to the emergence of more industrial economy. For example, the women of Dashwood family, in *Sense and Sensibility* find themselves at the mercy of men because they cannot participate in economic transactions.

Economic changes also required that women had to find a new position in comparison to the changing social order. The only female vocation addressed by Austen in her novels is that of governess, a fate that haunts Dashwood women. Austen employs these situations to comment on the vulnerability of women in the wake of cultural shifts that were occurring in the society at that time. Through her plotlines and characterization, Austen reveals to her readers how parental failure to provide is one aspect of Victorian society. The carelessness of Mr Bennett in allowing Lydia undue advantages and the immaturity of Mrs Bennett in taking out time to groom her daughters – all are signs of wrong parenting which Austen wants the readers to question.

This strategy of using literature to guide public opinion has been employed by Austen to highlight the issues regarding love, marriage and courtships. What starts as an

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innocent reading of a romantic plot is actually filled with instances of intelligence and instruction to initiate a discussion between the reader and the text. The choice of marriage as a plot allows Austen to point out problems in the social sphere, focusing on the issues such as wealth and the social set up that requires women to be 'taken care of' by men. Criticism pertaining to the marriage plot as a formula generally stems from the novels *Northanger Abbey* and *Emma*, where the heroine marries to be her intellectual superior and intends to transform her into the ideal woman. However, this is not the only marriage formula that Austen weaves upon. Elizabeth and Darcy are intellectual equals who instruct each other and this slides away the conventional way to address man-woman relationship. Varying the marriage formula also allows Austen to comment on less romantic partnering options. She discusses love that is lost as in the case of Anne Elliot and love without moral boundaries as in the case of Marianne Dashwood. In *Persuasion*, Anne Elliot is still unmarried at the age of 27. By making her the heroine of a story that ends in marriage; Austen insists on changes in the marital structure and foreshadows a transformation that is to come in the near future. (White, 79)

Austen was conscious of the human failings and had a deep desire to make people nicer, more rational and more considerate towards needs of others. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth and Darcy instantly declare their dislike for each other and then gradually realize they are in love. Through the manner in which their relationship evolves, Austen makes it clear that if they were not compatible in the beginning, there was reason to it. There is a clash of egos between the two and Elizabeth, at a key moment, condemns his arrogance and pride to his face. Darcy, later tells her that the rebuke was what he deserved. He says "*What did you say of me that I did not deserve? ... The recollection what I then said, of my conduct, my manners, my expression is inexpressibly painful to me. Your reproof, so well applied, I never shall forget. You taught me a lesson, hard indeed at first, but most advantageous. By you I was properly humbled.*"

Cultural progression is rarely straightforward and simple; and Austen's novels make it evident through the characters which present both sides of the arguments, letting audience discover for themselves that life cannot be classified in black and white. By providing a platform for complex argumentation on issues such as economics, gender roles and social customs; Austen pushes for cultural changes while simultaneously allowing the readers to enjoy the experience of social critique.

Many critics argue that Austen's use of marriage plot in novels is a conservative tool that further depresses the power of women. However, it is important to note here that Austen does not follow any strict formula for the marriages that take place in her novels; and chooses to construct plots to highlight the problems of customary gender roles. In a world where marriage is driven by power relations and dowries, and is the ultimate goal,

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