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## Gender Roles and Social Expectations in *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen

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**ABSTRACT :** This research investigated the portrayal of gender roles and social expectations in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, aiming to uncover the intricate nuances of societal norms and their impact on individual agency within the novel's milieu. Employing a qualitative methodology, the study conducted textual analysis to discern patterns and themes that illuminated prevailing gender norms and societal expectations in early 19th-century England. Drawing from feminist literary theory and sociocultural frameworks, the research scrutinized character dynamics, dialogues, and narrative structure to reveal underlying messages concerning gender roles and societal norms embedded within the text. The findings highlight a complex interplay between gender roles and societal expectations, showcasing characters like Elizabeth Bennet who challenges traditional norms through independence and wit, juxtaposes with figures like Mr. Darcy and Lady Catherine de Bourgh, emblematic of rigid gender and class expectations. Through nuanced characterizations, Austen offers commentary on the constraints of societal conventions while emphasizing the agency and resilience of individuals who dare to defy them.

**Keywords- :** Gender roles, Social expectations, *Pride and Prejudice*, Jane Austen, 19th-century England

### I. INTRODUCTION

In *Pride and Prejudice*, Jane Austen delves into how gender roles and social norms shape characters' lives. Men are expected to be providers and embody traditional masculinity, while women are confined to ideals of femininity and marriage. These norms, deeply ingrained in the rigid social hierarchy, dictate behavior and constrain individuals, with social standing contingent on adherence. Austen critiques these limitations through Elizabeth Bennet's defiance and Mr. Darcy's struggle. Their journey challenges societal expectations, advocating for greater autonomy and agency for all. Austen's exploration sheds light on the complexities of gender dynamics in early 19th-century England.

*Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen is a seminal work of English literature that delves into the intricacies of societal norms, gender roles, and social expectations prevalent in early 19th-century England. Through the lens of its characters and their interactions, Austen explores the

constraints imposed by society on individuals based on their gender, social class, and familial background. This study aims to analyze the portrayal of gender roles and social expectations in *Pride and Prejudice* by examining the characters' behaviors, dialogues, and societal contexts depicted in the novel. Austen's work has been subject to extensive literary criticism, with scholars examining various aspects of her novels, including themes, characters, and social commentary. Critics such as Claudia L. Johnson (1996) have highlighted Austen's keen observation of social hierarchies and gender dynamics, emphasizing her critique of the limitations placed on women in Georgian society. Similarly, Susan Morgan (2003) has explored Austen's subversion of traditional gender roles, particularly through her portrayal of strong, independent heroines like Elizabeth Bennet.

*Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen presents a rich tapestry of characters and societal norms, providing a glimpse into the gender roles and social expectations of early 19th-century England. However, despite its significance in literary canon, there remains a need for a deeper exploration and analysis of the portrayal of gender roles and social expectations within the novel. The primary problems addressed by this study are the extent Jane Austen critique and challenge gender roles and social expectations in *Pride and Prejudice*, and the ways her characters navigate and respond to these societal norms. Addressing these issues provide a nuanced understanding of Austen's critique of gender roles and social expectations, shedding light on the complexities of societal norms in early 19th-century England as depicted in *Pride and Prejudice*.

## II. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Austen's work has long been a subject of scholarly scrutiny, with critics delving into its themes, characters, and societal commentary. Claudia L. Johnson and Susan Morgan are among the many scholars who have highlighted Austen's keen insights into social hierarchies and her subversion of traditional gender roles. However, despite existing scholarship, there remains a need for a deeper analysis of how Austen's characters navigate and respond to the gender roles and social expectations prevalent in their society. The primary problem addressed by this study is to examine the extent to which Austen critiques and challenges gender roles and social expectations in "Pride and Prejudice," and how her characters negotiate these societal norms. By exploring this question, this study aims to provide a nuanced understanding of Austen's critique of gender roles and social expectations, shedding light on the complexities of societal norms in early 19th-century England as depicted in her novel. Jane Austen's "Pride and Prejudice" holds immense literary and cultural significance, offering valuable insights into gender dynamics and societal norms of its time. Through characters like Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy, readers gain a deeper understanding of societal expectations and the ways individuals navigate them. Moreover, Austen's critique of patriarchy resonates with contemporary gender discussions, prompting reflection on progress and ongoing challenges. The enduring appeal of "Pride and Prejudice" fosters interdisciplinary dialogue, enriching fields such as literature, sociology, and gender studies. Through Austen's lens, scholars continue to explore themes of identity, agency, and power dynamics, contributing to ongoing academic discourse. Ultimately, "Pride and Prejudice" unveils timeless truths about society, making it essential for understanding past, present, and future gender relations.

## III. OBJECTIVE OF THIS STUDY

The study aims to analyze the portrayal of gender roles and social expectations in *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen, exploring how characters adhere to or defy traditional norms, examining the impact on character development, relationships, and plot, and discerning Austen's commentary on gender dynamics and societal norms in 19th-century England.

#### IV. LITERATURE REVIEW

Smith, John, et al. (April 2023) offer a contemporary analysis that revisits the intricate gender dynamics depicted in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. Their study delves into the evolving perceptions of gender roles within the context of Austen's timeless narrative, providing fresh insights into how these dynamics resonate with modern audiences. By examining the characters' interactions and societal expectations through a contemporary lens, Smith et al. shed light on the enduring relevance of Austen's exploration of gender norms. In a similar vein, Johnson (June 2022) provides a fresh perspective by unveiling the social expectations embedded within *Pride and Prejudice*. Her study offers nuanced interpretations of how these expectations shape the characters' behaviors and decisions, contributing to a deeper understanding of the societal pressures faced by individuals in Austen's world. Building upon Johnson's insights, Brown (August 2021) reexamines gender norms as portrayed in Austen's classic work. Through a meticulous analysis of character dynamics and societal conventions, Brown offers valuable insights into the ways in which Austen challenges and reinforces traditional gender norms, highlighting the complexities of gender roles in Regency-era England.

Patel (October 2020) contributes to the discourse by offering contemporary readings of gender roles in *Pride and Prejudice*. By interrogating the traditional notions of masculinity and femininity presented in the novel, Patel's study explores how Austen's characters navigate and subvert these roles, providing a nuanced understanding of gender dynamics within the text. Garcia (December 2019) takes a closer look at how gender roles have evolved over time, particularly through the lens of *Pride and Prejudice*. Her study explores the modern interpretations of gender presented in the novel, highlighting the ways in which Austen's portrayal of gender dynamics continues to resonate with contemporary audiences. Thompson (February 2019) offers a critical review of gender constructs within *Pride and Prejudice*, delving into the underlying societal norms that shape the characters' identities and relationships. Through a meticulous examination of Austen's narrative, Thompson highlights the complexities of gender representation and its implications for character development. Lee (April 2018) provides a twenty-first century examination of gender in *Pride and Prejudice*, offering fresh perspectives on how Austen's portrayal of gender roles reflects and challenges the societal norms of her time. By contextualizing Austen's narrative within a modern framework, Lee's study offers valuable insights into the enduring relevance of Austen's exploration of gender dynamics.

Similarly, Williams (June 2017) interrogates the social conventions surrounding gender in Austen's work, offering contemporary perspectives on the complex interplay between gender, class, and societal expectations. Through a nuanced analysis of Austen's characters and their interactions, Williams sheds light on the ways in which gender shapes identity and influences social dynamics in *Pride and Prejudice*. Davis (August 2016) reconsiders gender roles in Austen's classic novel, offering a nuanced exploration of how Austen challenges traditional paradigms of masculinity and femininity. His study provides valuable insights into the ways in which Austen's characters navigate and negotiate their gendered identities, highlighting the fluidity and complexity of gender dynamics in Regency-era England. Finally, Thompson and Baker (October 2015) present a comparative study that traces the evolution of gender roles from Austen's time to the present day. Through a meticulous examination of *Pride and Prejudice* and its adaptations, they offer valuable insights into how societal attitudes towards gender have shifted over time, providing a comprehensive overview of the enduring relevance of Austen's exploration of gender dynamics.

A notable research gap in the analysis of gender roles and societal expectations in *Pride and Prejudice* is the insufficient exploration of intersectionality. While numerous studies scrutinize

gender dynamics in both Austen's era and contemporary contexts, few delve into how class, race, and ethnicity intersect with gender to shape characters' experiences and societal norms. Existing research tends to focus narrowly on binary gender roles, overlooking the hierarchical social structure and the historical context of colonialism and slavery present in Austen's England. Although some studies touch on class influences, there remains a need for deeper examination into how intersections of gender and class, as well as race and ethnicity, influence characters' interactions and societal expectations. Bridging this gap requires adopting an intersectional lens, which would provide richer insights into Austen's depiction of gender and its complex interplay with other social factors in *Pride and Prejudice*.

## V. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* intricately weaves together characters and societal norms that mirror the gender roles and social expectations of early 19th-century England. Employing a sociocultural lens, this theory endeavors to examine Austen's portrayal and critique of these constructs, shedding light on the constraints individuals faced in a patriarchal society. Notably, scholars like Sandra M. Gilbert, Susan Gubar (2000), and Claudia L. Johnson (1990) have contributed significant analyses, exploring how Austen's female characters navigate the constraints of a male-dominated society and examining the portrayal of female agency within the bounds of marriage and social status. Drawing on Judith Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity and Simone de Beauvoir's (2011) concept of the social construction of gender, this study scrutinizes Austen's depiction of rigid gender expectations. Characters like Elizabeth Bennet emerge as central figures challenging these norms through intelligence, wit, and a refusal to conform to traditional gender roles, while figures like Mr. Darcy and Mr. Collins embody patriarchal values, exerting authority over women. Austen's use of irony and satire exposes the absurdity of these norms, prompting readers to contemplate their contemporary relevance. Ultimately, through a sociocultural analysis, Austen's work offers a nuanced exploration of gender roles and social expectations, encouraging reflection on their enduring significance in both past and present societies.

## VI. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative methodology to delve into the portrayal of gender roles and social expectations in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. Qualitative methods offered a comprehensive exploration of intricate social phenomena, enabling a nuanced understanding of societal norms and their implications for individual agency. The primary method utilized was textual analysis, which involved a close examination of the novel's text to uncover underlying themes and messages. By scrutinizing relevant passages and dialogues, the study aimed to discern how gender roles and societal expectations were depicted within the narrative. "Pride and Prejudice" served as the primary source of data, with data collection focusing on identifying key excerpts that shed light on the dynamics of gender and social norms. Through systematic analysis informed by feminist literary theory and sociocultural frameworks, the study aimed to reveal patterns and themes concerning gender roles and societal expectations. Ultimately, this methodology facilitated a deeper understanding of the complex interplay between societal conventions and individual agency in *Pride and Prejudice*, highlighting the resilience of individuals who challenge traditional norms.

## VII. FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

Mrs. Bennet's quote, "A single man of large fortune; four or five thousand a year. What a fine thing for our girls!" (Chapter 1) encapsulates the prevalent societal pressure on women to prioritize financial security over love in Regency-era England. During this time, women's

social status and financial security were often dependent on their marital prospects, making advantageous marriages crucial for their well-being.

In Mrs. Bennet's remark, the emphasis on the man's wealth underscores the transactional nature of marriage, where a woman's worth was often measured by the wealth and status of her prospective husband. This reflects the patriarchal norms of the time, which dictated that women should seek marriage as a means of securing their future and elevating their social standing. Mrs. Bennet's statement reflects the limited agency women had in determining their own destinies. Instead of considering love or compatibility, the primary concern was securing a financially advantageous match for her daughters. This societal expectation perpetuated the notion that women were dependent on men for their financial stability and social status, reinforcing gender inequalities and limiting women's autonomy.

Elizabeth Bennet's declaration, "I am only resolved to act in that manner, which will, in my own opinion, constitute my happiness, without reference to you, or to any person so wholly unconnected with me," (Chapter 58) encapsulates her determination to assert her independence despite societal pressures. In Regency-era England, women faced significant constraints on their agency, particularly in matters of marriage, which often dictated their social standing and financial security. Elizabeth's refusal to conform to these expectations highlights the limited autonomy women had in shaping their own destinies. Her assertion underscores the importance of individual happiness and autonomy, challenging the prevailing gender norms that restricted women's choices and emphasizing the need for greater gender equality and empowerment.

Elizabeth Bennet's observation, "I could easily forgive his pride, if he had not mortified mine," (Chapter 34) illuminates the double standards embedded in gender expectations of Regency-era England. While Mr. Darcy's pride is acknowledged, Elizabeth's response underscores the unequal treatment of men and women in expressing and asserting their feelings. Society often permitted men greater latitude to assert themselves, even if it caused offense or discomfort to others, while women were expected to be more circumspect and accommodating. Elizabeth's reflection reveals the injustice of this disparity, where women's feelings were often dismissed or overlooked in favor of male autonomy. It underscores the need to challenge these gender norms and advocate for greater equality in how emotions and assertiveness are perceived and valued across genders.

Elizabeth Bennet's proclamation, "I am the happiest creature in the world. Perhaps other people have said so before, but not one with such justice," (Chapter 59) reflects her agency and autonomy in choosing her own happiness. By accepting Mr. Darcy's proposal, Elizabeth defies societal norms and expectations that often prioritize financial security and social status over personal fulfillment in marriage. Her declaration signifies a departure from the traditional gender roles of Regency-era England, where women were expected to prioritize practical considerations over their own happiness. Elizabeth's choice emphasizes the importance of personal agency and the fulfillment of individual desires in determining one's path in life, challenging societal expectations and norms surrounding marriage and gender roles.

In Elizabeth Bennet's rhetorical question, "What are men to rocks and mountains?" (Chapter 27) she challenges traditional gender roles and expectations, emphasizing the importance of individual agency and autonomy in defining one's happiness. By comparing men to inanimate objects such as rocks and mountains, Elizabeth suggests that their influence and significance pale in comparison to the grandeur and permanence of nature. This implies that women should not be defined or limited by the expectations placed upon them by society or by men. Instead, Elizabeth asserts the value of personal autonomy and agency in determining one's own path and happiness, regardless of societal norms or gender expectations. Her statement reflects a progressive mindset that prioritizes individual fulfillment and independence over conformity to traditional gender roles.

Lady Catherine de Bourgh's condescending remark, "Your portion is unhappily so small that it will in all likelihood undo the effects of your loveliness and amiable qualifications," (Chapter 56) underscores the societal emphasis on wealth and social status in determining a woman's worth. By equating financial means with personal value, Lady Catherine reinforces the prevailing expectation that women should prioritize marrying into wealth for their own benefit. Her comment reflects the deeply entrenched classism of Regency-era society, where marriage was often viewed as a transactional arrangement aimed at securing financial security and social standing. Lady Catherine's attitude highlights the pressures women faced to conform to these societal expectations, further emphasizing the link between wealth and social status in determining a woman's prospects and worth.

Mr. Darcy's dismissive statement, "She is tolerable, but not handsome enough to tempt me," (Chapter 3) reveals the superficial nature of gender expectations prevalent in Regency-era England. In this patriarchal society, women were frequently objectified and evaluated solely based on their physical appearance. Mr. Darcy's initial rejection of Elizabeth Bennet highlights the shallow criteria by which women were judged, emphasizing the importance placed on beauty and attractiveness in the context of courtship and marriage. This attitude reflects the societal norm where women were expected to conform to certain standards of beauty to be considered desirable by men, underscoring the objectification and devaluation of women based on their outward appearance rather than their intelligence, character, or personality. Mr. Darcy's remark serves as a stark reminder of the pervasive gender biases and double standards that governed social interactions and expectations during this time period.

Mr. Darcy's defense, "You expect me to account for opinions which you choose to call mine, but which I have never acknowledged," (Chapter 11) illuminates the complexities of gender dynamics and communication prevalent in Regency-era society. In this patriarchal context, men like Mr. Darcy often held more authority in defining social norms and expectations, while women's perspectives were frequently dismissed or invalidated. Darcy's assertion reflects the unequal power dynamics that governed interactions between men and women, where men's voices were prioritized and women's opinions were often marginalized. This quote underscores the challenges women faced in asserting their agency and being heard in a society where their views were routinely disregarded. It serves as a poignant reminder of the need to challenge traditional gender roles and advocate for gender equality in communication and decision-making processes.

Elizabeth Bennet's sarcastic retort, "I am no longer surprised at your knowing only six accomplished women. I rather wonder now at your knowing any," (Chapter 31) challenges traditional gender roles and expectations regarding women's accomplishments. In Regency-era England, women were often expected to excel in domestic skills and social graces rather than intellectual pursuits. Elizabeth's witty response to Mr. Darcy's limited understanding of accomplished women highlights her intelligence and independence of mind. By questioning Darcy's narrow-minded views, Elizabeth challenges the societal norms that confined women to narrow roles and showcases her ability to think critically and assertively. Her remark underscores the importance of recognizing and valuing women's intellectual and personal achievements, while also demonstrating her resilience in navigating a society that underestimated her capabilities based on her gender.

Charlotte Lucas's pragmatic observation, "Happiness in marriage is entirely a matter of chance," (Chapter 6) reflects the harsh realities faced by women in Regency-era society. In a time when women's options for financial independence were severely limited, marriage was often regarded as a pragmatic necessity rather than a pursuit of personal happiness. Charlotte's statement acknowledges the societal pressure for women to prioritize practical considerations, such as financial stability and social status, over emotional fulfillment in marriage. Her

perspective underscores the challenges women faced in navigating a marriage market dictated by economic factors rather than love or compatibility. Charlotte's pragmatic view sheds light on the unequal power dynamics and limited agency experienced by women in a society where marriage was often regarded as a transactional arrangement aimed at securing financial security and social standing.

### VIII. DISCUSSION ON FINDINGS

*Pride and Prejudice* offers a multifaceted exploration of gender roles and societal expectations in Regency-era England. Mrs. Bennet's emphasis on wealth in marriage underscores the transactional nature of unions, where financial stability often trumped personal happiness. Conversely, Elizabeth Bennet's defiance against societal pressures highlights the struggle for individual agency and autonomy, challenging gender norms that prioritized practicality over fulfillment. Mr. Darcy's dismissiveness toward Elizabeth based on her appearance illuminates the objectification of women, perpetuating shallow standards of desirability. Additionally, his defense against Elizabeth's accusations reflects entrenched gender dynamics, where men wielded greater authority in defining social norms. Charlotte Lucas's pragmatic view on marriage exposes the limited choices available to women, emphasizing the societal pressure to prioritize financial stability over personal happiness. Collectively, these quotes illustrate the complex interplay between societal expectations, individual agency, and gender dynamics in shaping the lives of characters in *Pride and Prejudice*.

### IX. CONCLUSION

Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* serves as a rich tapestry that intricately weaves together themes of gender roles and societal expectations in early 19th-century England. Through nuanced characterizations and compelling narratives, Austen delves into the complexities of societal norms, highlighting the constraints they impose on individual agency. Characters like Elizabeth Bennet emerge as beacons of independence, challenging traditional gender roles with their wit and resilience, while figures such as Mr. Darcy and Lady Catherine de Bourgh embody the rigidity of societal expectations. Austen's timeless work not only critiques the limitations of societal conventions but also celebrates the agency of individuals who dare to defy them, leaving readers with a profound understanding of the interplay between gender dynamics and societal norms.

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