

AN ECONOMY OF HER OWN: A MARXIST FEMINIST CRITIQUE OF PRIDE AND PREJUDICE

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Abstract

The present study analyzes Jane Austen's Pride and Prejudice from a Marxist Feminist perspective to analyze the position, role, and image of the woman in the 18th-century male-dominated society. Within the Marxist Feminist theoretical framework, the study aims to explore how Jane Austen represented the image of women viz-a-viz man with a special focus on their economic conditions. More than any other female novelist of her time, Jane Austen created six admirable novels and today her fair reputation chiefly rests upon these six remarkable novels she produced during her short creative life. Although she primarily wrote about the social milieu of her time and the precarious position of women in that society which was, in the first place, a male-dominated class society that accorded women only a marginal role and status, her treatment of the gender politics and the subtle ideological maneuverings that determined the structure of the society, as well as the thoughts of the people, make her novels grand success with the readers and the critics alike.

Pride and Prejudice is one such significant novel by Jane Austen that has been immensely popular amongst Austen's lovers throughout the ages for its splendid depiction of the 18th-century society with its sharp class stratification which categorized the people into different groups according to the social rank they possessed and thus the economic position of a person became the principal foundation of his respect, privilege, influence, and power in the society. The study inspired by the depiction of the socially-conditioned roles and images of the bevy of the female characters in Pride and Prejudice intends to realize and explain the subtle operations of the deeply classed society to demonstrate how and why women were not allowed to develop an economy of their own and realize their true potential.

Key-words: Economy, Marxist, Critique, Accorded, Marginal, Maneuverings, Stratification.

Introduction

Jane Austen is regarded as one of the finest female novelists of the 18th century. As the women novelists during the 18th century were very few for they were neither encouraged to produce arts nor were they thought to be having talent and intellect, unlike men, to be able to write the proper stuff, creating literature of enduring excellence, therefore, was nothing less than a wonder for a woman writer. The 18th-century society, biased in favor of male creativity and having an obvious tilt towards marginalizing the women's creative potential would not have easily accepted Jane Austen as the artist-at-par with the contemporary literary giants like sir Walter Scott and others, and it was virtually the case since Jane Austen was acknowledged as an outstanding novelist only after the 20th century as her contemporaries didn't have a high opinion about her art and disregarded her real worth, although they scantily praised a few aspects of her genius. More than any other female novelist of her time, she created six admirable novels and today her fair reputation chiefly rests upon these six remarkable novels she produced during her short creative life. Although she primarily wrote about the social milieu of her time and the precarious position of women in that society which

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The current stud proposes to analyze *Pride and Prejudice* within the theoretical framework provided by the two diverse, though intertwining theories-Marxism and feminism. The rationale behind adopting this mixed theoretical approach is because Jane Austen shows a remarkable fascination for depicting women's financial and economic concerns about her gender performance. This interlocking, therefore, of the ideology of economy, class, and gender in determining the fate of women in the 18th century weave the matrix of this dissertation. We propose to reveal the nexus of imperceptible ideology, social structures, the ideologically conditioned performance of ossified gender roles, and the impermeable class movement in creating barriers against the hetero-normative and homo-socialite relationships. As mentioned above Austen's society was, in all respects, traditional society, carrying on the past-driven assumptions of the superiority of men over women in matters of vital importance: education, marriage, intellect, social roles, the performance of gender, and so on, and these assumptions,

permeated the everyday lived social life as the soul resides in the body. Masses enacted these realities, both ideologically and practically, as naturally as sacred, inviolable truths. Women, therefore, living at the margins of male-centered society, had practically little to offer in terms of intellectual involvement in matters of paramount social significance and were, consequently, relegated to the position of passive recipients of the male contribution. The only thing they had to attract the male attention and favor was the beauty, the beauty that males had a penchant for, and that he cosseted the women to cherish. The criterion for a woman's worth, other than her social rank, was, therefore, her charming looks which she was supposed to cultivate and value more than anything else if she had to find herself a secure future, of course, with a well-off husband. What she had to be safe in the society which denied her inheritance rights and permission to work was: to be beautiful as it was the most precious commodity she had to bargain for the economically secured future with a wealthy husband. The situation, however, was anything but cruel for those who were unfortunate in

the gift of beauty as they had the hardest time living. Lacking beauty and grace for a woman meant she had bleak prospects in life and had to be ready to make compromises. This study in this regard is an attempt to find out whether Jane Austen, in the conception of her female characters, was inspired by the dominant socio-cultural currents of her time and was inclined to ascribe her female characters the socially acceptable role and mentality or had challenged and dismantled the oppressive ideology or struck a compromise between the two extremes or what else.

Aims and Objectives of the Study

- The foremost aim of this study is to see whether Jane Austen has portrayed the conventional image of a woman or subverted the dominant ideologies of her time and presented a more emancipated view of the woman.
- The study seeks to unveil the ideologically inspired social structure of the 18th-century society in which women were relegated to inferior positions and were largely subordinated to men in matters of vital social importance.
- The study also intends to delve deep into the social structures and ideologies of Austen's times to find out how women were kept away from the mainstream intellectual culture and were subjected to male dominance view of society.

Research Questions

1. How does Jane Austen portray the life of a female character in *Pride and Prejudice* about the social circumstances she lived in?
2. Does Jane Austen, in the representation of gender performativity, conform to the traditional thinking of the society or subvert it in *Pride and Prejudice*?
3. How does Austen's female character struggle for economic and social emancipation in *Pride and Prejudice*?

Significance of the Study

The present study is significant in terms of highlighting how Jane Austen subverted the oppressive patriarchal views about women in a society which was regulated by strict social standards and which was inflexible in its attitude to gender roles. Men and women were supposed to function within narrowly defined roles for them.

Austen represented the struggle of women for social and economic emancipation in a society where women were disregarded as worthless, having no talent to match the intellectual, artistic, and professional abilities of men. The study signifies that beauty was not the only redeeming feature of the woman living in the 18th century by cultivating good morals and manners as well as intellectual and artistic aspects women were engaged in transforming their traditional image. Austen's art, in this regard, plays a significant role because she projected progressive, emancipatory, and subversive images of a woman through subtle art.

Literature Review

Pride and Prejudice was Jane Austen's second published novel that centered on the themes of love, marriage, class society, gender roles, and perhaps more importantly the economic predicament of a woman in the Regency Era. In which women were deprived of the inheritance rights that left them solely dependent upon men. Jane Austen, being the daughter of a country parson, and a very minute observer of the social conditions prevailing around, conceived her characters from their social point of view and presented them about their social environment. The present research closely looks at these social circumstances, politics of gender roles proposed by the society, and the relative spheres of influence of both males and females, to investigate whether Jane Austen's novels, especially *Pride and Prejudice*, support the already established social conventions and the role of women therein, or subverting the stereotypical images of women, presents an emancipated view of the women. About Jane

Austen's novels another famous English novelist Anthony Trollop notes "Throughout all her works, a sweet lesson of homely household womanly virtue is ever being taught". Scrutiny of the character of the female protagonist in particular and other female characters, in general, will reveal whether the above-mentioned declaration of Trollop is authentic or not and whether Austen's characters, living in class society, handle the social situations. With particular reference to Marxist Feminist theory, it will be analyzed whether the women living in the patriarchal society can hope to find their independent way to life, securing their future. Marxist theory's main focus is the relationship between individual and class.

Research Methodology

This research is qualitative research carried out within the framework of Marxist Feminist theory, fiction, and history. It is an interpretation of the many-sided Feminist and Marxist arguments made by Jane Austen in *Pride and Prejudice*. The Marxist Feminist critical discussion of the ideas is supported by textual evidence. As the research by its very qualitative nature required intensive study of the text to figure out and collect relevant evidence to support our argument, we have deeply and analytically studied the text and marked the relevant portions. After many close readings and intensive study of the text, the relevant textual evidence was located, marked, and extracted. After the extraction of the data, it was meticulously sorted out and carefully categorized. Finally, Marxist and Feminist theories regarding the representation of Feminist and Marxist perspectives of the novel are applied to analyze the data to address the research questions. Finally, detailed conclusions will be drawn from the critical discussions.

Marxist Feminist Analysis of Pride and Prejudice

Women's economic security is closely related to the social class and rank in the Regency era that Austen presents in *Pride and Prejudice*; money and class are interdependent in many ways; therefore the analysis of the novel will follow the thematic discussion on these two issues in particular in the backdrop of the Marxist theory propounded by Carl Marx and Friedrich Angles. Since money and class determine to a great degree the position of an individual in society, the protagonist of *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth Bennet, has to deal with both these issues in a variety of ways. Admittedly, Elizabeth, though the daughter of middle-class parents, is a strong woman in so far as she demonstrates ego and self-respect and refuses to be overawed just by the class or economic superiority of others. Established measures of social superiority these two considerations were in general social set-up though, she does not go by these rules and follows her standards of behavior and social interaction in; she does not have the weakness of traditional romantic heroines of the age and possesses strong individuality where her self-respect is concerned. She has something classic about her that equates her with the women of upper social class, therefore, unlike Anne Eliot, the upper-class heroine of *Persuasion* who prefers staying away from her class and doesn't take advantage of the privilege of her class, she doesn't feel afraid of indulging with upper-class people, nor does she feel subdued by the superficial brilliance of class and money. It is, however, obvious, that class and money, the crucial concerns of the 18th society, were the decisive factors in social mobilization. Elizabeth Bennet also couldn't have remained unaffected by the anxiety of the economic factors for she was the daughter of middle-class parents for whom economic and financial issues mattered a lot especially because the family didn't have any male heir that means for the secure future the daughters had to be fully dependent on the future husbands' money and class.

Mrs. Bennett's growing anxiety, to the extent of madness, nevertheless, makes perfect sense given the inexorable social fact that in the absence of the male heir each of the Bennet daughters had to marry an eligible young man who would provide for their needs otherwise

their respectable survival will be jeopardized. Absurd and shallow though at times Mrs. Bennet may sound as she all the time remains occupied by the thoughts of the prospective husbands for her daughters, she is, however, not wrong in her consuming search for the eligible well-off bachelors for her daughters because her daughters, like legions of others, have no means or professional life to sustain without husbands. This is why Mrs. Bennet is seen throwing her daughters in the path of various opulent men in the hope of getting them married off to one of them. In *Pride and Prejudice* at the very outset of the novel, Mrs. Bennet gets excited listening to the news that an eligible young man of enviable fortune has come to stay at Netherfield, therefore, entertaining hopes that one of her daughters, preferably Jane or Elizabeth, will get married. She has the reason to feel hopeful because her daughters, especially the two elder sisters, are exceedingly charming. Marriage had everything to do with class: the life of men 'in possession of good fortune' as Austen declares, were incomplete without a fair wife, thus, the chances of entering upper class for the daughters of middle-class fair daughters were determined by their social manners and cultivation of beauty.

When Darcy, an immensely wealthy young man and a close friend of Mr. Bingley, refuses to dance with Elizabeth at the ball, one major reason for this haughty refusal is Elizabeth's low class for Darcy dances with Bingley sister, a girl of the upper class, in the same ball albeit he said he was in particular humor to dance at that occasion. Darcy had no special liking for Miss Bingley yet he prefers to dance with her in the public event suggesting that there exists strict class boundaries and transcending these boundaries is not easy. On gradually discovering the folly of his inflexible adherence to the class system that beclouded his vision and made him prejudiced against the lower class, when Darcy proposes Elizabeth, still retaining traces of pride in the superiority of his class, he is shocked to confront the unexpected: refusal of marriage proposal by Elizabeth. However, ironically, this rather masculine refusal of Elizabeth endears her all the more to Darcy for the latter is impressed by her courage and exceptional attitude. She refuses his offer primarily because she couldn't withstand Darcy's repeated indictment of her low birth and retaliate by humiliating his pride. This is quite obvious therefore that class and material wealth went a long way in the consideration of marriage. Love didn't have as much importance in the matters of marriage, because match-making was something that was decided by money and class rather than love. Even when Darcy found himself increasingly falling in love with the woman he had disparagingly rejected and when he was seriously considering to marry her, the stigma of her low birth haunted him too strongly. Elizabeth too, on discovering the merits of Darcy after the film of class prejudice was gradually removed from her eyes, falls in love with him and but finds prospects of marriage with him seriously hampered by her low class and her family's clumsy manners coupled with Lydia's folly.

Apart from convincing Elizabeth of his love for her that disregards class and money as the touchstone of marriage, Darcy would have to overcome other social obstacles to marry Elizabeth: her aunt Lady Catherine De Bourgh's prejudice against Elizabeth's inferior class. One major tenet of Marxist theory that text doesn't articulate its ideology explicitly, rather it speaks strongly through its silence, is evidenced in *Pride and Prejudice* as what it doesn't state explicitly is more significant than what it states since suggestions in literary texts are more powerful than statements as the former invokes numerous responses and perspectives without trying to give exclusive or universal truths. As Terry Eagleton, a Marxist critic would have it: "The text is, as it were, ideologically forbidden to say certain things."

The writer, literary writer in particular, while attempting to represent reality or tell the truth from his subjective position, cognizant of the fact that he is transmitting only a version, an interpretation of the truth, reveals only a part of the ideology. He or she can't give full

expression to the ideological assumptions behind the act of writing because the act of writing, by its very nature, presents equivocal truths. Having this Marxist tool of analysis in mind when we read the text, say, *Pride and Prejudice*, comes to mind is Austen's silence on the working class. Historical evidence demonstrates that this was a society where the working class was not of much value to the upper class other than laborers and hands, therefore, there is not a great deal of representation of this class in Austen's fiction. Alienated from the mainstream culture, as this laboring class was, Austen doesn't mention them a good deal in her novel also because the target readership of the novel was constituted of the upper or upper-middle class. Since Austen's literature is marked by social realism and she portrays in fiction the most realistic picture of her times, the absence of the working-class in her novel shows that this class was redundant for the most part to the upper-class people, hence little or no illustration of this class in her literature.

As pointed out in the above quote ideology works so subtly and imperceptibly in the society, influencing the very thinking of the subjects, that they begin taking the existing order as unchallengeable, natural, and the perfect. Ideology, functioning through different conflicting discourses, permeates the language of the society, thus impacting the thought system of the society, makes people believe in the legitimacy of the present social system which is governed by the ruling class.

Since the upper class had nothing to worry about the economic problems, manners, social outward manners which were the symbolic identity of the upper class, were supremely important. The social world of the upper class, marked by their carefree lifestyle, superficially brilliant conversations, and the culture of get-together where the noblemen and ladies met and chatted in an elegant environment, gave a lot of value to the cultivation and appropriation of manners. The highly formal and synthetic nature of the morals was harmonious with the overall texture of the upper class; therefore, we see a good deal of depiction of morals and moral values in *Pride and Prejudice*. People of the upper class and especially the women were supposed to master these and many other things of the same brand to be termed accomplished in social manners. Symbols of a refined personality, these manners were taught to girls from their early childhood and the accomplishment in such manners was not only the sign of well-bred personality but also a mark of distinction between the upper and lower classes. The low class was thought to be divested of the elegant manners which were the privilege of the upper class alone; therefore, Darcy is pleasantly surprised to find Elizabeth, the daughter of a middle-class family, accomplished in social manners. Ironically enough, despite not having been formally trained in the art of learning upper-class manners, nor does she possess sweet manners, elegant personality (though Darcy doesn't find her that 'handsome' in the first meeting) and balance of mind, she also exposes the shallow manners of the conceited practitioners (like lady Catherine).

The depiction of the class conflict among Bennet, Bingley, and Darcy families including the rising business class Gardiners throw ample light on the different viewpoints of the society about money, class, and the rise of the early capitalist system in the society. Austen wrote this novel at a critical juncture in English history when the capitalist system was raising heads in England gradually putting an end to the agricultural economy. With the rise of capitalistic trends in the market economy of English society, social stratification was also experiencing changes. In this new orientation of society business class, traders, shopkeepers, etc. were gaining respect as is obvious from the example of Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner. Regardless of how one views Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner in respect to class, it is obvious from the respectable treatment of this couple in *Pride and Prejudice* that Austen supports the rising capitalist society with its burgeoning business and trading class like Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner. The only character in the novel that could be truly said to belong to the working class is George

Wickham, the son of old Mr. Darcy's steward, who has no inheritance and lives on the mercy of Darcy's three thousand pounds.

Prejudiced against Darcy because of his rather haughty manners and disregard of the lower class, when Elizabeth Bennet develops tender feelings for Mr. Wickham, inspired by his outward grace as well as exploitation at the hands of Darcy, she is told by Caroline Bingley that Wickham is no good and has used Darcy ill but "really considering his descent one could not expect much better" (P&P, 80). Caroline Bingley's obvious suggestion is towards Wickham's rather ordinary social rank. Overcome by a newly found fascination for Wickham, also because of ill-founded prejudice against Darcy, Elizabeth defends Wickham against the discriminatory and incriminatory judgment of Miss Bingley because she does not believe in the class discrimination in the first place, and secondly, she is deceived by Wickham's villainous nature. She is, however, proved wrong as Wickham, as pointed out by Caroline, turns out to be a corrupt and heartless rogue: he has squandered the money left him and has been living in an ungentlemanly manner, trapping women for money and sex, and eventually ending up as an insolvent.

Whereas Mr. Wickham fails to demonstrate good manners and morals and remains an exploiter of the women, Caroline's slight on Wickham is more readily believed to be a comment on the prejudices of the upper classes against those of lower descent. The novel is replete with examples of social class differences and the subsequent conflicts however the most prominent class difference is found between Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy, the protagonists of the novel who meet at the beginning of the novel, develop a prejudice against each other based on their respective class differences, get enamored of each other's charms and merits, face hostile criticism and resistance from the class lords, and finally overcoming all the social obstacles get married to each other, thus laying the foundation of a new society was not class but inner worth of the individual matters more. Why Darcy cannot convince himself to dance with Elizabeth during their first meeting is because of the class difference between them. Nevertheless when he eventually falls in love with her and the love makes him shed away the class prejudice, he continues to hesitate in fully accepting Elizabeth as a life partner unless he is completely humbled by love.

His first proposal to Elizabeth is couched in such words as are highly offensive and emblematic his class superiority: "could you expect me to rejoice in the inferiority of your connections? To congratulate me on the hope of relations, whose conditions in life are so decidedly below my own?" (P & P, 159). Elizabeth rightly turns down this arrogant proposal of marriage because it was more humiliating than celebratory and continues to form low opinions about Darcy's humanity unless she has visited Pemberley, his great estate in Derbyshire, where the reverse process starts and she comes to view Darcy from close quarters. This change of heart experienced by Elizabeth has received a mixed reception from different critics. Some, including Sir Walter Scott, are highly critical of this change. Walter Scott, a celebrated romantic novelist, and contemporary of Jane Austen criticizes the change. Elizabeth's visit to Pemberley is instrumental in bringing change to her heart, which is partly inspired by the pomp and show of the estate as well. Unquestionably she feels a longing to be the Mistress of this estate.

In *Pride and Prejudice*, it is the member of the aristocracy that possesses most of the land and the means of production but at this point of time when commerce started to make an impact on the society, these members are starting to give way to the bourgeoisie, who have found their way to prosperity and status through commerce. It is, however, notable that the means of the productions are in the hands of men mostly, for a few women are owners of much at all. Bennet's estate is entailed away to the nearest male relative because the family consists of daughters alone, and in the absence of any male heir, they are not legally entitled to hold the

estate. It is only in the exceptional circumstance that some women have an inheritance left to them, for example, Mr. Darcy's sister, Georgiana, has a fortune of thirty thousand pounds but this too, when compared with her brother's income of ten thousand pounds a year, is too small that shows the economic state of women of those times.

In matters about independence and marriage also, the women of the 18th century, as the novel gives us evidence, were not very fortunate because when unmarried the women were left to the grace and goodwill of their father and brothers. In *Pride and Prejudice*, the eldest daughter of Bennet's neighbor Charlotte Lucas, also a very good friend of Elizabeth seems at first to have such a future to look forward to. She is "a sensible, intelligent young woman, about twenty-seven" whose prime time for marriage is fast running out and if she does not succeed in getting married soon her chances of a happy future will be very dim, and she might have to end up as a spinster. Without income and education, for both these things were out of the reach of the majority of women, she doesn't know what to do with her life. The only option opened to her marriage, the sooner she gets married, the better for her. As the eldest child in a family of many children, and the daughter of a respectable but middle-class father who doesn't have a large income, her options in life are indeed limited. Charlotte states to Elizabeth her wishes: "I ask only a comfortable home" that reflects upon her unambitious life that the most she looks forward to are a comfortable home at any cost. At the arrival of Bennet's cousin to Meryton, an option opens to her, though a not very attractive option because "Mr. Collins was not a very sensible man, and the deficiency of the nature had been but little assisted by education or society" but she agrees to grab this opportunity because she feels she has no choice but to take it.

Mr. Collins, one of the stupidest and ridiculous characters ever written, is a timeless creation, who is a source of much mirth and comedy of manner in the novel.

Elizabeth is shocked to listen to the news of Charlotte's acceptance of Collins' proposal because she would never have thought of Charlotte accepting such a ludicrous proposal since she believed she knew her friend too well. Herself being a great supporter of love marriage, the one that comes after a great deal of understanding and affection between the two people, she feels convinced that her friend has agreed to marry for all the wrong reasons, for everything but love. She fails to see that Charlotte, already advanced in years by her society's standards, has to marry for ensuring her comfortable future. Love or an ideal husband based upon the romantic ideal of love is not her friend's reference. Elizabeth empathizing with Charlotte thinks that the latter has lost all chances of happiness by agreeing to marry the dupe: "And to the pang of a friend disgracing herself ... was added the distressing conviction that it was impossible for that friend to be tolerably happy in the lot she had chosen." Charlotte's decision, however, was quite sane in the given circumstances of her society which allowed the women either to accomplish the dream of a happy future by getting married at the earliest or be ready to serve as governance or servant whole life that would entail losing friends and family and sinking low in life. Those women were little more than miserable salves being bound by societal constraints seem true in the case of Charlotte Lucas. Apart from Charlotte-Collin's marriage of convenience, yet another example of bad or awkward marriage is that of Wickham and Lydia's running away marriage that destroyed both Lydia's reputation and all possible future options. Wickham's possible punishment for destroying a woman's as well as her family reputation one can assume is to live the rest of his life with a woman whom he doesn't love and will perhaps never be happy.

Conclusion

The application of Marxist Feminist theory to analyze *Pride and Prejudice*, as we have done in the last chapter, entails interesting results and offers new insight into the novel. Marxism, it must be remembered, has the bourgeois and the proletariat as the two most important terms to

define two different classes, but the British class system of the 18th century was too complex to be properly defined by these terms. It is pretty hard to categorize Elizabeth Bennet and bourgeois and the proletariat. With the kind of life she lives, she certainly cannot be said to belong to the proletariat, but does that mean she is a bourgeois. The case is poised. Unlike the proletariat, she does not have to work to support herself. She along with her sisters has a large house to live in and they can keep servants too which means she cannot be placed within bourgeois. However, since she does not possess her own house, and never will because according to the then prevalent legal system, after the death of her father, the house will pass to the nearest living male relative. Therefore, what follows from this state of affairs of women, is that Elizabeth like Charlotte could not have worked like the proletariat compromising his friends and family. Women were a distinct class of their own at the time, and in many ways was inferior to and worse off than the men of the proletariat if they could not marry, therefore, the marriage of convenience as in the case of Charlotte for example was better than living in humiliating celibacy. Having not many options to carve out a decent future for them, women, it seems, were forced to marry sometimes with the men they did not like, therefore, such a marriage was little

more than prostitution as its purpose was nothing more than securing a comfortable house.

The conclusion we draw from the discussion above about women's economic and feminine status in Austen's time is that Jane Austen was writing within the ideology of her time. She was not out to dismantle the social ideology of her time, however, she was not teaching a "sweet lesson of homely household womanly virtue" only as many of her critics believe. I stress that she was, in her characteristic ironic appropriation of language and themes, exploring new options, a more independent and emancipated role for women, and new ways of thinking for the women of her time. Her protagonists like Elizabeth Bennet are strong and independent in their thinking and acting and they are the representative of the new emerging woman who is not only a threat to the conventional role assigned to a woman by the male society but also mark a positive change in the socio-economic life of a woman. Jane Austen, being a female writer who was supposed to conform to the patriarchal conventions of novel writing is she had to get her novel published, was writing taking into account the superstructure and ideology of her times, however, deviating within her limits from the standard norms and traditions the society had prescribed for women. The description of Elizabeth's way of living is enough to show the strength and independence of her character and the liberties Jane Austen was taking to present emancipated women.

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