

## **Redefining Female Identity in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice***

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### **Abstract:**

When observing the novel *Pride and Prejudice* from the perspective of classifying the work as a conformist view of the female universe, one finds significant findings from a feminist soul writer. However, the author is not so simple to be characterized as traditional or proto-feminist. For the past thirty years, scholars have tried to draw a parallel between Austen's novels and feminism. While Marily Butler (1975) maintains that Austen's novels restricted women only to marriage and the domestic sphere; Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gulbar (1979), affirm the opposite: the characters of Austen contradict these conventions, defending the rational education for the woman, with obstinate female characters, of independent and daring minds. More recent studies point to a possible balance between conservatism and feminism. In this way, the novel can be characterized as a narrative of female identity, using ironies to criticize the society of its time, thus denoting a non-conformist side of the writer. Jane Austen was certainly influenced by the proto-feminist writings of Mary Wollstonescraft. However, she was tolerated by other conservative publications, which curbed the progress of feminism. The purpose of this work is to present a parallel between and the female characters of *Pride and Prejudice* and the representations of women in English society in the 19th century, taking into account both the view on the marriage of these characters.

**Keywords:**( Feminism, Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, Female Identity).

## إعادة تعريف الهوية الأنثوية في رواية (كبرياء وتحامل) للكاتبة جين أوستن

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### الملخص:

عند معاينة رواية كبرياء وتحامل من منظور تصنيف العمل كوجهة نظر مطابقة للعالم الأنثوي ، يجد المرء نتائج مهمة من كاتبة روح نسوية. ومع ذلك، فإنه ليست بهذه البساطة وصف الكاتبة بأنها نسوية تقليدية أو بدائية. على مدار الثلاثين عامًا الماضية، حاول المختصون إجراء مقارنة بين روايات أوستن والنسوية. بينما تؤكد ماريليتلر (١٩٧٥) أن روايات أوستن تقصر النساء فقط على الزواج والمجال المنزلي؛ تؤكد ساندرنا جيلبرت وسوزان جولبار (١٩٧٩) العكس: شخصيات أوستن تتعارض مع هذه الأعراف ، وتدافع عن التربية العقلانية للمرأة، بشخصيات أنثوية عنيدة ، وذات عقول مستقلة وجريئة. تشير الدراسات الحديثة إلى توازن محتمل بين التيار المحافظ والنسوية. وبهذه الطريقة ، يمكن وصف الرواية على أنها سرد لهوية الأنثى ، باستخدام المفارقات لانتقاد المجتمع في عصرها ، وبالتالي تدل على جانب غير ملتزم للكاتب. تأثرت جين أوستن بالتأكيد بالكتابات النسوية البدائية لماري ولستونكرافت. ومع ذلك ، فقد تم التسامح معها من قبل المنشورات المحافظة الأخرى ، مما حد من تقدم النسوية. الغرض من هذا العمل هو تقديم توازي بين الشخصيات الأنثوية في كبرياء وتحامل وتمثيلات المرأة في المجتمع الإنجليزي في القرن التاسع عشر ، مع مراعاة وجهة النظر حول زواج هذه الشخصيات.

الكلمات المفتاحية: (النسوية ، جين أوستن ، كبرياء وتحامل ، هوية أنثوية).

### 1. Introduction

The concepts of masculine and feminine are historical constructions, the result of social relations. Most societies claim the existence of different roles for men and women, where each one plays a social role, played in iteration with the other. One can have the idea that men and women live in different universes,

however, the relations between both are interconnected, both in the public and private spheres (Kumar, 2021; Kumar & Khalaf, 2021). Also, self-identity is a basic prerequisite of peaceful survival and stability of individuals and communities (Khalaf & Kumar, 2021; Kumar, 2020).

According to Caixeta and Barbato (2004) the information about women, until the beginning of the century, was obtained mainly in the domestic space, “through letters and diaries, including, it is known that many were destroyed by the women themselves, generally married, to adapt to the socio-cultural standards of female silence and stillness ” (p. 211). The authors state that with the recovery of oral and autobiographical history, women also began to have their history valued and told not only in the domestic space but in the public as well. However, we cannot forget that universal literature tells us stories of men and women, and precisely for that reason, we can have a vision of how the relationships between them were based through the eyes of the writer.

## 2. Literature Reviews

The vision of the female universe was basically a look from the male point of view since the function of the writer was essentially that of the man. This context begins to change, with writers like Cristina de Pisano (1364 - 1430) who refused to accept the exclusion of women in French universities in the 14th century (Wikipedia: 2013). The author published in 1405 the book "The City of Women" where she uses "allegorical figures of Reason, Justice, and Righteousness to build a city of famous women of the past and virtuous women of all times in a world made for men (World Library: 2011).

In England, at the end of the 18th century, Mary Wollstonecraft was already discussing women's rights with the publication of "A Vindication of the Rights of Woman" (1792) - is considered as one of the first feminist philosophers. Wollstonecraft's publication was a kind of response to eighteenth-century political and educational theorists who did not believe that women should receive a formal education. In Wollstonecraft's opinion, women had the right to education aimed at the formation of critical thinking, in addition to being important to society as they educated their children and could have useful debates with their spouses, and not just be 'homemakers'. In the author's view, instead of mere ornaments of society or 'objects' for advantageous exchanges in the valuable marriage market, women were human beings who had the same rights as men.

Other contemporaries of Jane Austen have also devoted themselves to the writing of feminists such as Priscila Wakefield (1751–1832), Elizabeth Hamilton (1756 –1816), Jane West (1758-1852), Clara Reeve (1729–1807), and Maria Edgeworth (1768 - 1849), and in a way, were important to Austen's fiction. Moderate feminists believed that women were trapped in patriarchal systems unable to effect any positive change and that therefore only heroic and fragmented efforts on behalf of women could help them change this society (Sulloway, 1989: 69).

However, Jane Austen's publications were nothing like the writings and claims of the authors mentioned above. Perhaps due to the life context of Jane Austen, daughter of a parish priest in the interior of England, the author had no conditions or interest in raising a banner for women oppressed by the world through articles that could scandalize the society of her time. On the other hand, through a sharper look at her works, we can analyze her

books from the point of view of a feminist soul writer, who was not attached to the standards of a vision of fragile and conformist heroines. While scholars like Marilyn Butler (1975) maintain that Austen's books restricted women only to marriage and the domestic sphere; Gibert and Gulbar (1979) affirm the opposite: Austen's characters contradict these conventions, defending rational education for women, with obstinate female characters, of independent and daring minds. Thus, Austen's works can be classified as a narrative of female identity, using ironies to criticize the society of her time, denoting a non-conformist side of the writer.

### **3. Discussion**

#### ***3.1 Women in 19th century English society***

As the family was the basis of support for all the girls belonging to the middle class and the aristocracy of that time, it was expected that the father would leave a certain amount after his death or that the brothers would be responsible for helping the single sisters. The law supported the birthright, only if the child was male, if the family had no males, the inheritance would be passed on to the closest male relative, thus facilitating that all the family's properties and sources of income remain always on behalf of it, for several generations. Thus, there were not many options for the girls to guarantee their livelihood in old age, the option was to get married, even to guarantee basic survival since they were not allowed to work. Any type of occupation, even exercising the role of a tutor, was considered something degrading, even in the middle class or *gentry*, as it was classified at the time of Jane Austen.

Between the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, girls were not expected to have any kind of initiative to advance their studies beyond basic knowledge. The families themselves were in charge of teaching when they had a large library and a housekeeper. Jane and her sister went to school at two different periods in 1783 they were educated by Mrs. Cawley, but they stayed there for a short time, as they had health problems; then they went to a boarding school in Reading, between 1785 and 1787.

The desirable skills for a girl at the time were basically related to the knowledge that could be used in the family sphere, such as languages, basic knowledge of geography and history, music, painting or drawing, embroidery, and dance. The main languages that the girls learned were French and Italian, mainly so that they could translate the songs, enjoy them and be able to sing them. The knowledge related to geography and history provided a basis for future discussions about other countries. On the other hand, being a good pianist (pianoforte) attracts a lot of attention, especially from future suitors; thus, the girl would be able to entertain visitors in her future home. Family girls, even with high purchasing power, aspired to have skills related to drawing and painting in watercolor. Being a good embroiderer was a source of pride for the girl's family or for her husband since her work with the needle could be displayed in the living rooms and enjoyed by everyone. Finally, dance was a very important element in the life of any girl of that time, since the balls offered the opportunity to meet and talk to other boys. Most of the girls practiced the dances with their sisters until they were introduced to society.

Life in society was conducted by rules of conduct, etiquette, and moral standards. Most of the English population lived in the countryside, where there were very few opportunities

for the rules to be broken. Even in London, it was practically impossible for anyone not to participate in social events, since most families had similar habits when they went to big cities at certain times of the year. Both girls and boys must obey the rules imposed, especially if the goal was marriage. The first observation that must be made is in relation to peers: initially, the boy should try to find out if there was a girl in the family to whom he wished to make the court.

According to Sullivan (2007) when the woman got married, her obligations were restricted to developing a good relationship with the housekeeper, planning the menus for daily meals and dinners, leading the employees, helping the poor and sickest mothers, decorating the house, home, literate children (if they are too small to have a housekeeper), among other responsibilities. From a financial point of view, from a feminine point of view, marriage was seen as a lifeline for women who had no family income and who did not want to live in poverty. There were rare cases of marriage for love, thus prevailing, marriage for essentially masculine and economic interests. Marriage was an "agreement" between families. The wealthier had an interest in further increasing their incomes and properties; the poorest, on the other hand, saw social ascension. Jane Austen, who ended up not getting married, experienced the situation of being financially dependent on her wealthier brother. In Emma the author portrays an opinion in spite of the need for marriage for financial security, Emma Woodhouse argues with her friend Harriet Smith: "*... it is poverty that makes celibacy despicable! One single woman, without income, would be an old maid, ridiculous and disagreeable! It would be a joke!*" (Austen, 2012: 114). Concerned about old age, some women were willing to marry, as

this was the only way to financial stability or even to escape from an incompatible family.

In relation to the laws, women's rights were quite limited. Property rights and control of money were exclusive to husbands and the English laws of the time placed women in a very delicate situation. Only after *The Married Woman's Property Act*, of 1870, did women gain the right to inherit income and property after marriage; in 1882, they manage to maintain what they achieved during their marriage. Before these laws, women were treated as criminals and even insane. The 1857 *Matrimonial Causes Act* gave a man the right to divorce if his wife were unfaithful to him. The bodies of women also belonged to their husbands, who were banned that same year from imprisoning their wives in order to obtain marital rights relating to sex.

### ***3.2 Female Identity***

When writing her novels, Jane Austen brings a new facet to literature: her novels have an unusual wit and irony in her time. The writer was a pioneer in exposing what was once frivolous and considered 'sub-intellectual' with a lot of humor and intelligence. Furthermore, it can be considered the one that modernized the novel, as her books involve stories about how to be a woman in the 19th century, but in doing so, she elevated the trivial to an art form, and, as the author herself mentions, it only took about three or four families from the interior of England to build their stories.

Although '*Pride and Prejudice*' presents some conservative ideas, such as women submissive to men, families structured by patriarchy, Austen's work is basically guided by the female voice, whether as a way of identifying the woman's place in society or showing her situation through narrative point of view. The female



identity in the writer's novels is established through the construction of the characters, mainly through each character's own conscience against the patriarchal system. Obviously, all the female characters in Austen's novels cannot be taken into account, as many have only figurative or secondary role. There is not much detail about what goes on in their heads. However, it is the main character, Elizabeth Bennet, who in most cases represents the 'female voice'. The narrative point of view is used to identify the place of women in society or to show the life situation of most of them. When developing his characters, Austen makes them go through situations that can lead them to intellectual and rational growth.

Her characters develop, at different levels, awareness of the situation of women in a society governed by men. In another novel by Austen, '*Persuasion*', there is a very interesting dialogue between Anne Elliot and Captain Harville, highlighting the main character's strong opinion. Harville says: "I don't think I have opened a single book in my life that didn't talk about female inconstancy. Songs and sayings always speak of female volubility. But perhaps you will tell me that they were written by men". (Austen, 1996: 278). In turn, Anne Elliot defends women and replies: "(...) please do not make reference to examples from books. Men took full advantage of us by telling their own story. (...) The pen was in your hands. I cannot admit that books prove anything" (Austen, 1996: 277-278).

Austen builds his characters in order to express his female voice, as stated by André Brink (1998), Claudia Johnson (1990), and Gilbert and Gubar (1979) Austen created a feminist conscience in his works. As suggested by Pacheco and Souza (2011: 02): "Austen reaches a level of conceptualization of heroin

in different moral perspectives within the framework of social relations". Some critics do not perceive a feminist position in Austen's writings. Armstrong (1987) apud Kollmann (2003) states that Austen's goal is not to criticize society but only to redefine wealth and status. There are also criticisms such as Seeber (1999) that consider Austen's work as dialogical, citing as an example the growth process of Marianne Dashwood in *Reason and Sensitivity*. Seeber also argues that the two main characters of *Reason and Sensitivity* live parallel and juxtaposed situations, where heroines experience the world in different ways. Still, on the question of uncertainty regarding a feminist stance in Austen's work, Seeber (1999: 231) highlights that: "... Austen makes us aware of gaps, omissions, and contradictions ... By incorporating contradictions, Austen incorporate discourses against, offering us a glimpse of a polyphonic world that the dominant ideology ... needs to suppress".

Elizabeth Kollmann (2003) considers Austen in relation to the social circle in which she lived and the patriarchal heritage of the society of the time. According to Kollman, Austen had to make a secret criticism, possibly because in her time, to survive as a woman and writer she could not rebel against the system. Under the great feminist, Austen's work can be considered as the main focus of the situation of the women of the 18th century, issues such as (lack of) education of women, lack of knowledge, marriage as a patriarchal institution of women's imprisonment and identity. There are many indications as to how women should be raised only for domestic life and how the education of that time was biased, leaving women with no possibility of intellect development, subjugating them to everyday tasks, and without great responsibilities. Austen makes a point of showing, in the great majority, women as rational beings, despite the prejudice

and limitations of society. Obviously, Austen mixes women in different stages of critical thinking, not just attending to the vulgarities of idle minds or exaggerated rationalism. The author seeks balance when developing her female characters, even if some have to go through situations that led them to intellectual and rational growth.

### ***3.3 The Female Characters of 'Pride and Prejudice'***

The novel tells us the story of the five Bennet sisters (Jane, Elizabeth, Mary and Lydia, and Kitty), sons of Mr. and Mrs. Bennet. The girls' mother is somewhat desperate for them to find suitors and get married soon. The father is a little more reserved, and since he has no sons, he will have to pass on his inheritance to his closest male relative, cousin Mr. Collins. The story begins with the arrival of two fortunate young men Mr. Darcy and Mr. Bingley to the village where the Bennets live.

The novel is considered a comedy of manners. Austen takes as a basis his impressions of the time in which she lived and the question of the woman's position in society, leads the reader to an analysis of her time through fine ironies and even sarcastic humor. According to Vivien Jones (1997):

"... romantic comedies. That is, they are love stories with happy endings. 'Comedy' here is not just used to suggest something that makes us laugh, although Austen's novels do it very well, but as the opposite of 'tragedy'. In other words, a positive and celebratory view of life, representing happiness and ideas as possibilities. Jane Austen's novels are often compared to Shakespeare's comedies, and if you're familiar with them you find that they end in a similar way,

with marriages symbolizing reconciliation and harmony (p. 50). "

According to Lima (2009: 02) "Austen shows us how the love between the protagonists was able to overcome the barriers of pride and prejudice of the social difference between them and the scarce power of decision granted to women in the society of the time".

The central character of the work, Elizabeth Bennet, has a strong personality and has enough independence to desire marriage for affection and not just for financial convenience.

There are two conceptions about marriage that can be identified in the work: the traditional or aristocratic view, which saw marriage as an alliance between families and financial security for women; the modern and bourgeois view, on the other hand, sees marriage as the individual's right to choose. Taking these aspects into consideration, we can analyze the work from the perspective of the construction of female identity through marriage and it is through this bias that the analysis of the main characters of the book will be made.

From this point of view of her ideal marriage vision, Elizabeth is a hero ahead of her time because she refuses Mr. Collins' request, as it is only a family arrangement so that her father's inheritance would not leave the hands of family. However, it would be an arranged, loveless marriage. And this goes completely against the vision of happiness that the main characters in Austen's books have. The novel is seen, basically, under Elizabeth's gaze and the character has "the power to enter the narrator's head, inducing him to narrate his feelings and

opinions, in addition to being able to penetrate the character's conscience" (Andrade, 2013).

Elizabeth Bennet's mother can't wait for her five daughters to get married, in order to guarantee, mainly, a reasonable financial situation in the future. This character, often interpreted as a lady Obed by the marriage of her daughters, where financial security through marriage is a kind of lifeline. However, it must be taken into account that the Bennet family matriarch is not essentially a self-interested woman, she is really concerned with the future of her daughters and obviously knows very well the situation of the girls who do not marry and end up being a hindrance to the family. Since women were unable to work at that time, the guarantee of livelihood depended solely and exclusively on a good marriage. If this did not happen, the family should provide the single woman for the rest of her life. This occurred within Austen's own family, where, after her father's death, Jane, her sister, and mother had to leave the city of Bath and move to a village near Alton, where Austen's wealthier brother offered them a chalet as a dwelling.

The influence of Mrs. Bennet's thinking influences the daughters so much that the youngest ends up getting involved in a scandal that would tarnish the family's good name. Lydia Bennet runs away with Wickham and, in the context where the work is inserted, gives rise to a series of family embarrassments and would possibly be the target of society's scorn if it were not 'saved' by the dowry that Mr. Darcy pays Wickham so that he marries the girl. Despite being motivated by the attraction she feels for Wickham, Lydia ventures and ends up sealing her future when she thinks that this would be a happy marriage. The oldest daughter of the Bennet family, Jane, ends up marrying for love and with her

husband very well financially. It is an example of a wedding very similar to fairy tales.

In the novel, there is also a young woman who, by the standards of the time, was already considered a lost cause because she was 'too old' to get married. Charlotte Lucas, Elizabeth Bennet's best friend, ends up benefiting from Elizabeth's refusal to propose to Mr. Collins.

Charlotte later ends up accepting a marriage proposal from Mr. Collins, purely by social conventions established to ensure financial security. Their marriage is a kind of 'agreement', where he, a young pastor, sees the need to get married in order to maintain his reputation with the faithful of the church where he works. She, in turn, marries not to be a nuisance to her family. Despite being married, Charlotte's husband "was neither intelligent nor pleasant; her company was dull, and his love for her, probably imaginary "(Austen, 2012: 165). The character had achieved financial protection through loveless marriage, even though "at twenty-seven years of age, without ever being beautiful, she realized how lucky she was" (Austen, 2012: 165) Charlotte knows very well the opinion that friend Elizabeth has about this type of marriage out of interest, she knew how surprised her friend would be at the news of the marriage proposal. Even if her decision was unshakable, Charlotte would be extremely hurt by her friend's disapproval, so she decided to tell the news her personally. However, Elizabeth's astonishment could not have been greater: "- Mr. Collins's bride" My dear Charlotte ... it is impossible "(Austen, 2012: 168). Elizabeth, realizing how much it hurt her, decided to get around the situation by wishing her friend well, despite not being able to understand how Charlotte would be able to "sacrifice all the best feelings in favor of worldly

advantages" and felt immense pain when she saw "demotion" up and fall in your esteem ”adding to the“ painful conviction that it was impossible for a friend to be reasonably happy with the chosen destination ”(Austen, 2012: 168). Charlotte, for her part, knows very well that her behavior is something inexplicable for Elizabeth, and has a certain difficulty in showing her friend that her choice was rational:

“You know I’m not romantic; I never was. I just want a decent home; and, considering Mr. Collin's character, relationships and financial situation, I am sure that my chances of being happy with him are as reasonable as those of most people who reach matrimonial status ”(Austen, 2012: 168)

The visions of marriage represented by Charlotte and Elizabeth are versions of what was established early in history, with many words from the two regarding their opinions. While Charlotte is interested in a ‘comfortable home’ and observes it as opposed to her friend’s, Elizabeth desires a union where the couple has equality and respected intellectuality. According to Jones (1997), what Elizabeth calls a happy marriage, where there is affection and compatibility between the couple, Charlotte assumes that it is just romanticism.

Elizabeth's own view of Mr. Darcy changes throughout the book and is related to the ideal of happiness. When visiting Darcy's Pemberley estate, Elizabeth is amazed not only by the grandeur of the place but also by the fact that he is a landlord loved by his employees to the point that a maid emphasizes that "(...) he is the best landlord and the best boss ”(Austen, 2012: 316) and Elizabeth's aunt concludes that Mr. Darcy as a brother, as a

landlord, as a boss, she considered how much the happiness of so many people depended on him.

Through irony, Elizabeth questions Mr. Darcy, when he claims to know about half a dozen arrested women. According to Mr. Darcy, to be considered a gifted girl, a woman should have a thorough knowledge of music, singing, drawing, dancing, and modern languages to deserve such qualifications. And besides all these qualities, the girl should have something in the way of being and in the way of walking, in the tone of voice, in the treatment and in the expressions, so that each word is only deserved in part. Finally, the character adds that the woman should cultivate intelligence through wide readings. However, as a way of questioning Mr. Darcy's opinion, Elizabeth says: "I am no longer surprised that you only met six women arrested. My surprise now is that you know so many" (Austen, 2012: 55).

Even before this dialogue took place, Elizabeth and Darcy already had formed opinions about each other. She finds him arrogant and proud, for not getting along with the other participants of the ball, right at the beginning of the story. What makes Mr. Darcy irritating and unacceptable is the fact that he refuses to dance with the girls at the ball, as can be seen in the excerpt:

"He refused to be introduced to any other girl and spent the rest of the night walking around the room, occasionally chatting with one or another person in his own group" (Austen, 2012: 18).



#### 4. Conclusions

Although some critics suggest that Austen does not establish any relationship between the historical factors of her time and the history of the characters, the writer is silent only on political issues of her time, however "dismantled myths proposed by many (conservative) writers without necessarily proposing a radically reconstituted (reformist) society "(Cláudia Johnson: 1990). Vasconcelos (2002: 40-41) highlights what we can observe in 'Pride and Prejudice' as characteristics of writers like Austen since 18th century novelists "(...) are the founders of the modern novel and do not disappoint the modern reader". And it is not the "realistic surface of his novels that we value, but the organization of experiences, both introspective, as well as social, reflective and practical, personal and general".

Austen's books provide us with interpretations that can oscillate between liberalism and/or conservatism. Austen offers an overview for its readers to examine and to question the institutions (family, religion, work) and not to destroy them. She found a balance between liberalism and conservatism, as it confirms the importance of the traditional family in a changing world, however, in her view, the family always incorporates something new (its characters undergo important changes throughout the narrative). In addition, the writer demonstrates her clear opinion that women should be taken seriously, not only because they are beautiful and elegant, as Elizabeth Bennet protests: "(...) do not think that I am an elegant woman with intentions to stir up it, but a rational creature that speaks from the heart "(Austen: is a woman, her texts can be read (Kirkham, 1986).2012: 147)

The author has to be seen initially as a woman, then as a writer, and consequently, considering Austen's texts because she

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