

The Battle of the Conscious Self and the Power Dynamics of the Beauty Myth¹

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Abstract

In almost all the novels of Austen the problem of companionship runs consistently which makes a common reader think that her novels are all about marriage. However, they fail to see the underlying meanings that is exhibited in her attitude towards the social dilemma of bridging the conscious self and the socially desired identity. In *Pride and Prejudice* alone, we come across many characters for whom the sole purpose of life is to acquire a socially acceptable position. Yet her heroines in all her novels exhibit a certain discretion in their choice of a life partner. Instead of compromising with “socially acceptable” identity they stand against all odds to believe in their own capabilities. They labor hard against the then norms of the society to prove themselves and materialize their ideals. They possess a beautiful mind and prefer a contented life over later dissatisfaction that are the outcome of hasty decisions. Men and women are seen striving for acquisition of worldly gains. Trapped in the snare of the beauty myth females are exposed in improving their appearances rather than refining their mental capabilities. Her male protagonists live an unconscious life too and hence they ought to go through a process of realization to learn and appreciate the difference between the socially acceptable and the higher ideals of the true self. These are those who don’t believe in the power dynamics of their society in form of money or masculinity to gain happiness.

Keywords: Dilemma. Socially Acceptable; Identity; Beauty myth; Power Dynamics

Austen’s novels present the picture of the society that lives in constant threat of deprivation; be it financial or emotional. Everybody desires to have more than what they possess. Even those who claim high social status yearn to increase their wealth. Lady Catherine de Bourgh in *Pride and Prejudice*² owns wealth that hushes people to

silence and obedience, desires to get her daughter marry Darcy to multiply assets for her daughter. Elizabeth stands singularly unusual in this situation. She is a great degree different from the other women in the novel. First of all, she seems to possess common sense so instead of nurturing romantic thoughts for those who would forsake her for someone wealthier she pities their lack of judgement and discretion for a “happy life” which the others mistakenly associate with wealth and worldly possessions, hence, when Wickham abandons her to marry the affluent Miss King she lets him go good humoredly without any criticism. Secondly, she is intelligent enough to see through the plans of those whom she detects scheming for petty gains. She senses Bingley sisters attempt to separate Jane in order to find a wealthier life partner for their brother.

Elizabeth owes her intelligence to her keen sensitivity towards the artificiality of human beings around her. It seemed that her knowledge of books is versatile as she herself claims “such of us as wished to learn, never wanted the means. We were always encouraged to read and had all the masters that were necessary” (156). This adds in the improvement of her mind.

She seems to possess acumen of looking into another people’s personality. She is the first to see through the shallowness of Collins personality only by listening to his letter. Above all, she is fully conscious of her power to analyze things with a broader perspective. She, at times, becomes skeptical too while talking to Jane, whose goodness of heart is incompatible, and hence she fails to see through the tricks and plans of the others: Elizabeth from the beginning doubts the intentions of Bingley’s sisters. When Darcy proposes her, she is at loss for words for a few seconds and is overwhelmed by the credit he gives her. However, the feelings are soon disarmed by the resentment that she feels against him. When Elizabeth meets Lady Catherine she quickly sees through her vanity and reacts by being on guard while others are awestruck at her grandeur. She retaliates by using all her efforts to argue back quite rationally, leaving Lady Catherine wonder at her spirit and the way she braces for counter arguments.

Charlotte Lucas is the only other woman in the novel who equals Elizabeth’s intelligence and while the rest of the Meryton Assembly censures Darcy’s behaviour these two consider his pride justified. They know more about human nature and realize that being “so very fine a young man, with family, fortune, everything in his favour, should think highly of himself” (16). He is an only, wealthy, independent son of an established family and even Elizabeth “could easily forgive his pride, if he had not mortified mine” (16,17). All this makes him justified in claiming a degree of exclusivity among the Meryton assembly.

Elizabeth is conscious of Darcy’s position in the society, but not much conscious of the power of her beauty; when Sir Lucas tries to persuade Darcy to dance with Elizabeth by wondering how he could refuse when “so much beauty is before you”

(23), she recoils by refusing the offer; making Darcy revise his opinion of her. Throughout the novel Austen does not dwell on her physical charm and she never falls a prey to the then popular “beauty myth”, as Naomi Wolf calls it; which overshadows female capabilities under the guise of female accomplishments. This idea of “staged female identity” (Backscheider.172) is a harmful product of the beauty myth. We observe this idea in P&P, though stated lightly between the conversation of Elizabeth and Jane. Jane is as usual trying to give explanation of Bingley’s behaviour and defends him claiming; “It is very often nothing but our own vanity that deceives us. Women fancy admiration means more than it does.” To this Elizabeth with higher understanding realizes that “men take care that they should” (129). Jane falls a prey to the idea of ‘beauty’ and a ‘sweet girl so intensely that she fails to develop her mental faculties and throughout remains dependent on Elizabeth. She lacks confidence, which is why she never finds the courage to meet Bingley in person and ask him why he jilted her so outrageously.

Elizabeth, on the other hand has a different idea of admiration and beauty and she retains it to the very end. For her it is the beautiful mind that has every advantage over the physical beauty. She is conscious of her beautiful ‘self’ and so she does not bother to appear beautiful rather she basks in the glory of feeling beautiful. That is her main source of power over the others. Like the women of twenty first century, she seems to believe “we must see that it does not matter in the least what women look like as long as we feel beautiful” (Wolf.272). She is satisfied and comfortable with her ‘self’, which makes her potentially more capable than the others. Furthermore, Elizabeth is least dress conscious though in that society great care was taken in outward appearances which revealed vanity and occupied most of the precious time which could have been used in a more rewarding way to increase the understanding. The most prominent among the possessions that consumed money were social masquerade in form of clothes. Like printed culture, they offered the opportunity to lift women out of their rank. ‘Clothes have long carried moral associations, particularly for women, as emblems of deceit and display, sexuality and consumption:’ (Backscheider, 167) As opposed to Elizabeth we see the vain Mrs. Elton of Emma obsessed by dresses and vanity that harmed her character and though she might be possessing good qualities they are pushed in the background because of her desire to look beautiful and show off.

Darcy is a perfect match for Elizabeth when it comes to the definition of beauty. He may admire good looks but though “he had detected with a crucial eye more than one failure of perfect symmetry in her form”, yet what attracts him is the “easy playfulness” of her “manners” (20). He enjoys listening to her conversation and later when she stays with him in the same house for few days, he realizes that he cannot escape her attractions. Throughout the novel, he tries to break away from the power that she has over him, only to realize that the more he struggles for a breakthrough the more entwined he becomes; this admiration is not skin deep. She enters his tumultuous emotions and that is why there is no escape. Even the humiliation of a flat refusal does

not change his desire for her, rather; he must amend his own concepts. Elizabeth's consciousness of her femininity is over brimming which is quite unusual in that society, yet her friends do not perceive it as it passes over the normal understanding of her friends and family; she positively galvanizes Darcy's interest.

In P&P the idea of beauty surfaces more as a state of mind; it is a conscious awareness of one's power over the others. It is through this quality that Charlotte manages to secure her future comfort. She is a victim of the expectations of her society and hence enslaved by the norms. Living a parasitic life, on the whims of society, not only financially, but emotionally and socially her chances of happiness seem to be meager. As her existence is 'parasitic,'³ she ought to think of becoming independent to live like an individual. It is this desire which makes her compromise with the idea of marrying Collins. Women's "marginal life frequently renders them conservative, for like all persons in their situation—they identify their own survival with the prosperity of those who feed them" (Woolf. 38). They look forward to male approval.

When Darcy calls Elizabeth "tolerable, but not handsome enough to tempt me", he is stating his preference without considering what effect they may have on the listener. Elizabeth on the other hand considers it "ridiculous" (9). The question is why she considers it ridiculous? The reason could be that she is not impressed by the 'Darcy' that is there, sexually a weakling who is only conscious of his social position. Elizabeth has no appetite for such male dominance. Her power lies in complete confidence of her abilities to judge, analyze and retain her graces with confidence. Her powers come from within and that is why she is least bothered about looks; though she knows the value of a beautiful face and figure. This is evident in her speech when she humors the unsure Jane after her first meeting with Bingley; "he could not help seeing that you were about five times as pretty as any other woman in the room" (12). She knows that Bingley is a trapped figure. In contrast to this Darcy's attraction for Elizabeth does not depend on physical beauty alone for had this been so he would never have called her "tolerable". He is impressed by Elizabeth's intellect which challenges his own intellectual powers. Hence it is a war of ideas and ideals between the two. Giffen believes that "Darcy is attracted by something in Elizabeth's nature that is lacking in his own; and, because he is who he is 'that is, because everyone around him wants something from him' he probably finds her disinterest in him refreshing" (94). Darcy and Elizabeth both need each other because both suffer from some sort of a lack to some extent, and hence fall short of wholesomeness. Darcy lacks anima while Elizabeth's problem is an inflated animus. Both need to unite to complement each other for a wholesome personality.

Elizabeth is high spirited like Arabella of *The Female Quixote*, a novel by Charlotte Lennox, who does not beg but commands the others. Arabella though outwardly a silly romantic girl, is strong enough to believe in herself and expects complete fidelity and an attachment unhampered by any social inhibitions. She, like Elizabeth, refuses to succumb to male domination and social pressures. She is proud of herself and her

ideals as is Elizabeth who won't come to terms with Darcy till he owns her as she is. Her power makes him accept her identity so much so that he goes on to confide his private affairs and shares his grief with her. Entrusting his secret with her he is sure it will be well guarded. She refuses to succumb to tyranny as she herself proclaims that her courage rises when people try to intimidate her (164). Later she proves it when Lady Catherine tries to bully her by ordering her to refuse Darcy's proposal; she tartly answers that she is "resolved to act in the manner, which will, in my own opinion, constitute my happiness" (358).

In P&P, men and women are interacting at different levels, which helps them change their perspectives of power politics. They are seen continuously trying to bridge the gap between themselves; between different classes; social institutions and even different moral stances. It is only by remaining stagnant at a place that people become bound to local values and ethics. It is through movement that humans can broaden their horizon; hence the characters in P&P move from one place to the other, learn and became conscious of their lack. Those who try to improve their understanding achieve happiness. Even Emma, in Austen's novel *Emma*, who has never been outside Hartfield, goes to Donwell, a neighbouring village to broaden her understanding of other men and women of her society. She becomes conscious of her own female faults and learns about the others through this visit. Interestingly she does not go far yet it is this journey which brings her to self-realization. In earlier times, females were deprived of worldly education and their so-called accomplishment confined them to the knowledge of drawing, dancing, modern languages and the so called 'conduct books'. They did not know what freedom meant as we do in the modern age. Austen's heroines react against the norms of their time by becoming aware of their 'self' and refusing to succumb to the dictation of their society. In their own way they are the forerunners of the feminist movement.

With men, in P&P, the marriage perspective becomes comparatively different especially if they turn out to be rich. Bingley and Darcy can afford to fall in love and prefer domestic felicity over money. Their social status allows them to indulge in such schemes whereas gentlemen like Wickham and Colonel Fitzwilliam have to consider monetary considerations before they decide whom to marry. Wickham, because he is poor and under a lot of financial strain, gets panicky in utter desperation, realizes that he has nothing to offer except his looks; hence he makes blunders. He loses Georgiana and Miss King because he does not know how to use his power intelligently, while Colonel Fitzwilliam is very sensible and does not blunder even when he could have made some progress with Lady Catherine's daughter. Interestingly he does not hide his intentions from Elizabeth, as if it was the course of event he must follow, and Elizabeth understands this.

Elizabeth listens to Fitzwilliam's conversation seriously and seems to understand his point of view to some extent. She knows well that the power of her beauty cannot compete with the power of money. She knows that the Colonel's conversation and

the explanation are meant for her and hence; she gets “coloured” (173) with shame. The matters of ‘great weight’ are none but the emotional attachment but Fitzwilliam must succumb before his “want of money” (173). Being a realistic and a true gentleman he does not want to misuse his sexual power no matter how much Elizabeth may attract him; all he could do is to wait for her for “at least an hour” (198) before leaving Rosings.

The power dynamics of P&P seems to be made for men; the reason is that it is their world; the laws are made for them and by them. It is for their convenience that activities are planned, and it is for their good that marriages are arranged. They are the shareholders of the larger part of the property and inheritance. The females are given a fixed share that is five times lesser than that of the male as Bingley’s wealth amounts to about one hundred pounds whereas his sisters are to get twenty thousand a piece. Balls and other social activities are planned when there are enough gentlemen to dance and so females must literally beg for entertainment.

In the beginning Darcy appears to be highly conscious of self-importance because society has given him a certain preference over the others in Meryton. With a free will, only bridled by social status, all his expectations of a life partner are those as are expected of him; but Elizabeth challenges them all with the force and power of her character. Her strong personality makes him review his earlier stated qualities of a desirable woman. Although he approves the prevalent list of accomplishments i.e. knowledge of music, dancing, modern languages, manners of walking and carriage etc., he wants in his life partner “something more substantial, in the improvement of her mind”. He does not fully realize what that improvement could be, for he restricts it to “extensive reading” (36). Considering the list of accomplishments, one is led to pity the mental state of the people of that time, for all the above-mentioned qualities are superficially acquired. They lack substance and practicality. The qualities that may bring happiness to the spouse; a superior understanding of the other, are not considered. Interestingly, he still finds Elizabeth attractive, though she loudly claims, “I am not a great reader” (33).

Darcy’s views of the other sex are different from the others. Marsh believes that when Darcy calls “cunning despicable” (36) he is not referring to females recommending themselves to the opposite sex, as proclaimed by Miss Bingley; according to him it is generally a “mean art” (36) and a trick which Elizabeth particularly lacks. Elizabeth is devoid of any such attempt and even wonders why Mr. Darcy takes interest in her instead of considering it a great compliment. Marsh further states that Darcy’s interest in Elizabeth is born out of a desire “for some ‘masculine’ qualities in his ideal woman” (134) and Elizabeth’s defiance to certain social norms are not considered feminine in that society. Darcy is not only looking for a wife but a companion with whom to share more than a stereotypical relationship and Elizabeth meets his need of “greater reality and equality than conventional masculine and feminine roles could provide for him” (Marsh. 136).

P&P particularly highlights ideas of desirability in the life partner. In this power politics male have the upper hand and females are on the receiving end. The desire for a partner hence originates in males. Bingley desires a wife who is beautiful and accomplished, with sweet manners and Miss Bennet fits his description to the utmost. Some believe that one

might well fall in love for the sole reason that the beloved is beautiful but after several years find that beauty is among the lesser charms of the beloved. (Or, more complex, that the very conception of what is beautiful about the beloved has radically changed.) (Soloman.5)

Elizabeth enters this social milieu with impudence and unceremoniously. She enters a sphere of experiment so far unknown to the females of that era; but on her own term which that society never endorsed. Sure, of herself she becomes a contrast even to some males in the novel.

Bingley is an easy-going person easily led by others; he does not ask for much and hence his choice is easily made which he does not fail to show by preferring Jane's company and dancing particularly with her. The attention that he pays her is too explicit for the people to doubt his intentions. He is the first bachelor in the marriage market. He is equipped with all the tools of power that give him an edge over the others. First, he is a man, then a bachelor who is independent and wealthy. This is enough to strike the Meryton Assembly into subordination. Crowning all these qualities, he turns out to be "good looking and gentlemanlike; he had a pleasant countenance, and easy unaffected manners" (7). To this demigod, the society is ready to sacrifice their daughters and though all want to secure him, yet they agree to present him the most beautiful flower in the form of Jane Bennet. Even Jane does not mind rather she looks forward to meeting him again, is happy to attract his attention and is "very much flattered by his asking [me] to dance a second time" (11).

We see a similar drama around us though so far in time; women are still in the same situation. However, in the West things have gone to a drastic change. In modern times men and women have come to believe in vertical rather than horizontal relationships, which is why the female protagonists of Austen's novels are considered the forerunners of modern females. If all this happens to the present-day woman, the first question that comes to our mind is: will she be flattered? Certainly not, rather she would consider the offer with a lot of suspicion for she has come to know the gender exploitation of the past eras and awareness of female rights in the contemporary times. Even in Bingley/Jane relationship we observe that Bingley is awed by Jane's physical beauty. For him she is "the most beautiful creature" and "he could not conceive an angel more beautiful". For Bingley she is a 'creature' and an 'angel' while for her "he is just what a young man ought to be" and that is "sensible, good humoured, lively" (9,14,11). He appreciates her physical beauty while she appreciates the abstract attributes of his personality. Bingley leaves Jane without a word when told that

“though she received his attentions with pleasure, she did not invite them by any participation of sentiment” (186). According to modern concepts, he literally dumps her which is a great insult to a modern woman, yet nobody blames Bingley.

Darcy on the other hand misunderstands Jane’s grace and natural shyness, although the common acceptable practice is “usual with young ladies to reject the addresses of the man whom they secretly mean to accept, when he first applies for their favour” (102). Bingley has never been vocal in his love so Darcy’s criticism of Jane’s lack of exhibition is nothing but male prejudice. If he does not want Bingley to demean himself by getting a refusal, then why does he expect Jane to leave modesty and grace by an open declaration? She cannot do so even if she wants to because women are not taught to behave in an open manner and state their intentions openly; they are to observe propriety and decorum which forbids them to be open in showing their feelings. Interestingly, when Elizabeth does this, by refusing Collins, she is censured by her mother. In contrast to other characters Collins’ seems to be quite naïve in this matter. His criterion of a desirable woman is as dictated to him by Lady Catherine, he does not have any idea, so he quickly changes from Jane to Elizabeth and when refused by her; he proposes Charlotte Lucas.

The other eligible young men in the novel are Wickham and Colonel Fitzwilliam but their preferences are thwarted by their desire of heiresses, rather than free minded or accomplished young women. This makes one realize the freedom with which men express their desires while free choice for women is curtailed by the society; she becomes a pathetic figure. The qualities that most men desire in women are totally different from what women secretly desire in men; it changes from person to person. Jane and her father wonder if Elizabeth is attached to Darcy to the extent of marrying him “are you certain that you can be happy with him” (353)? For Mr. Bennet, he is a “proud’ and ‘unpleasant” (356) man, but for Elizabeth he is entirely what she ever wants in a husband. His practical approach perhaps impresses her.

In the world of P&P, we deal with the obsession of acquiring “wealth” and “eligible bachelors”. It’s a world where the females are left on the mercy of circumstances and a wild run for happiness. In P&P the females are left on their own to acquire happiness_joy, which is shallow for it depends on fulfillment of puny desires. Is there a daring person who would break these barriers and be able to lift high and be able to appreciate inner? True happiness we observe is achieved by those who possess moral and intellectual supremacy.

Mooneyham believes that marriage for Austen, is not a tale that ends with living happily ever after, rather it is “the culmination of the educative process” which proves that one can achieve happiness by surpassing self-love and achieve “wholeness of being”. He further states that this “give and take is charged with sexual energy” (63)⁴. It can also be stated safely, that it is the intellectual energy of these two characters that recognizes the true worth of each other and finds an affinity, which leads them to see

truth. People around them fail to understand their conversation when they exchange ideas. Once, they are interrupted by Miss Bingley when they are discussing “failings” in character (54), and the next time Lady Catherine and Colonel Fitzwilliam interrupt them because they are unable to understand the discussion (166). This delays their complete understanding. Darcy learns by accepting her individuality and she in return not only becomes self-conscious but world-conscious too.

Notes

¹This is a revised and altered version of my unpublished PhD work I submitted to the University of Peshawar. I completed my work under the supervision of Nasir Jamal Khattak.

²All subsequent references to this novel *Pride and Prejudice* are indicated by the letters, P & P and page numbers for the sake of brevity. Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (London: David Campbell Ltd. 1991).

³ Kate Millet talks of this state of women in detail in her book *Sexual Politics* (London: Virago Press 1977).

⁴ Laura G. Mooneyham offers a detailed discussion on the education of Miss Austen’s heroines. She believes that Austen’s heroines retain a moral superiority over all the other characters around them. They are honest in their dealings with the others which he considers ‘a rare commodity in the world of social commerce.’ P.5

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