



**“Women live at the mercy of men”- Undergraduate Students’ responses to Gender in Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* and Contemporary Pakistani Society**

<sup>1</sup>Asadullah Lashari, <sup>2</sup>Ghazal Shaikh, <sup>3</sup>Tania Shaikh

<sup>1</sup>Assistant Professor, Department of English, University of Sindh, Thatta, Pakistan

<sup>2</sup>Associate Professor, English, Institute of English Language and Literature, University of Sindh, Jamshoro, Pakistan

<sup>3</sup>PhD Scholar, English, Institute of English Language and Literature, University of Sindh, Jamshoro, Pakistan

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\*Corresponding author:

(Dr. Ghazal Shaikh)

Corresponding Author email

[Ghazal.shaikh@usindh.edu.pk](mailto:Ghazal.shaikh@usindh.edu.pk)

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**Abstract**

The study explored the perceptions of undergraduate students at a public university in Pakistan, regarding the issues of gender, marriage, and social class identity in relation to Austen’s novel *Pride and Prejudice*. The study was guided by Rosenblatt’s Transactional Reader Response Theory that views the reader and the text as partners and active agents in the meaning-making process. The data collected through 23 written scripts of students was analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings suggested that students identified the themes of gender, marriage and social class identity in the novel and related to the present-day issues of Pakistani society. Moreover, students’ responses validate Rosenblatt’s transactional model that they not only took meaning from the text in understanding 19th century English life but also assigned meaning to the text by interpreting the text in light of their own experiences of 21st century Pakistani society.

**Introduction**

Responses to different literary texts vary from student to student. Rosenblatt (1938/1970, 1978/1994) argues that readers’ understanding of a text is tailored by their own beliefs, experiences, and influences. In this study, we explore the perceptions of Pakistani undergraduate students, through their exam scripts, regarding gender identity, marriage, and social class with reference to *Pride and Prejudice*.

Research Questions guiding this study are as follows:

1. How do contemporary Pakistani undergraduate students perceive gender in *Pride and Prejudice*?
2. How far do students connect women in Pakistani society to *Pride and Prejudice* in the novel?

**Status of Women in Pakistani Society**

The status of women in Pakistani society is seen by many through the lens of culture and religion. Cook (2007) establishes by quoting examples from various western writers that the common image of Pakistani women is that of suppressed individuals who do not have equal rights as men. Lall (2009) in her study on parents’ attitude towards girls’ education held interviews with parents in the four provinces of Pakistan and concluded that attitudes of parents in rural Sindh were more traditional towards educating boys and girls- education of boys was considered more important than those of girls. Lall’s study suggests that there are cultural and ethnic reasons behind the inequality of rights between the genders while Shah (2006), Jamal (2006) and Hassan (2002), considered Islamic laws to be the reason.

Jamal (2006) highlights the attitudes of judicial bodies in Pakistan towards the rights of women in light of a legal case- ‘Saima case’. Saima, an adult woman, chose to marry a man of her choice against the wishes of her father, who filed a custody case arguing that he was her guardian and the marriage was void without his consent. Even though the final decision was given in Saima’s favour, it was a long painstaking process. Although women are entitled to choose partners in marriage constitutionally, yet due to extreme tribal and patriarchal customs, women are sold, bought, and exchanged to settle disputes in Pakistan (Critelli, 2012). Lack of rights to choose a partner often leads to elopement of girls as reported in many newspapers in Pakistan (e.g. Tribune, 2023; Dawn, 2022). Families often try

to cover elopement by calling it kidnapping as evident from this headline “eloping incidents- families use cover of kidnapping” (Dawn, 2013).

### Literature Review

The novel, *Pride and Prejudice* has enjoyed a wide popular and critical audience throughout its publication that has earned Jane Austen a respected spot in literary history. Since the novel is rich in themes, it has been widely researched from different theoretical perspectives I-e gender issues, matrimonial aspect, and class stratification.

The novel echoes indisputable social superiority of men. It reflects women's dependence on men for their social and economic stability (Przybylska, 2015). Hall (2009) claims that the novel critiques economic and social privileges afforded to men and denied to women. In the novel, we see the economic independence of male characters like Collins, Darcy, Bingley, and Mr Bennet. Whereas the dependency expected of women is reflected in female characters of the novel. Ispriyani's (2008) study also analyses the novel from gender perspective and claims that the novel has pictured the double standards of 19th century English society where inheritance laws benefit only sons. Since females do not have any share in inheritance, this makes female characters as weak in financial affairs, having no economic individuality. It also shows limited options and opportunities for women as far as education and profession were concerned in Regency England (Lindstörn, 2010).

Some studies have analysed the novel by connecting the theme of gender to the role of women in relation to matrimony. 19th century England was a patriarchal society in which marriage was the only way for women to gain recognition (Zhang, 2020). Through such social conventions of securing a good marriage, the novel shows the importance of being married and how women's dependence on men in any way affects relationships (Asker, 2012). Kica (2017) reflects that the novel depicts the choice of a partner based on financial status and fortune. The very opening sentence of the novel establishes the centrality of marriages dominated by a material base where a gentleman with good fortune is preferred (Gao, 2013). Moreover, marriage in the novel is shown more as a necessity for men and social security for women than a bond based on love, as can be seen in the case of Collins and Charlotte. (Pei, Fu, and Huang 2014). This is criticised by Kloester (2005) who claims that women in Regency England had no other occupation but to find a husband and have a house of their own. Marriage in the Regency era was more like a business where finding a partner was more important than who that partner was (Coontz, 2005).

Research studies have also connected the theme of marriage with class differences and social stratification. Burgess (2003) in his study maintains that the novel presents an accurate picture of 19<sup>th</sup> century England reflecting people's attitudes to perceive social divisions and the possibility of mixing among the classes. It shows how money shapes the behaviours and attitudes of people and how upper-class people look towards lower or middle class (Ispriyani 2008). Class served as an essential factor while considering a partner. Hence, Austen's society was based on the elements of economy and materials (Siddiqui, 2013).

Fiction reflects the conflicts and crises thrown up by society (Dubey, 2013; Duhan, 2015). Reading fiction also boosts readers' empathy and their ability to understand different perspectives (Alsup, 2005). Each literary work has its own theme, emblem which brings the readers endless taste and consideration. So is Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. The novel is a work of universal pretensions of the particular. The panoramic view of female characters in patriarchal society, matrimonial issues, and the true description of English society in the novel attract eternal attraction (Gao, 2013). Miller (2013) argues that modern day readers of 19th century literature encounter vastly divergent heroines who exhibit dissimilar personalities and diverse ambitions as the status of women has changed with ages. However, other studies have pointed out that the novel enables the readers to understand the earlier time and examine with greater insight into our contemporary conditions (e.g. Salman and Yusoff, 2020; Anggraini, Petrus and Inderawati, 2019; Meadows' 2019).

Research studies have probed to explore how students' understanding of literary texts, based on socio-cultural expectations, influences their literary expectations and textual engagement. Louwerse and Kuiken's (2004) study connects readers' personal engagement with the text impacted by their socio-cultural influences. The findings reveal that readers' personal motivation towards the text is regulated by the themes and setting. The results indicate that the characters' experiences, events, observations, and the story influence readers' involvement with the text. Teenage students' responses towards early modern poetry were researched by Naylor (2013). The study highlighted the challenges faced by adolescent teenage readers in creating meaning out of poetry of the early modern period. Syed (2019) conducted research on undergraduate students' responses to four novels. Her findings revealed that the selected novels were seen to have an effect on readers' sense of citizenship. Her participants perceived the aspects of citizenship of identity, rights and duties as presented through the medium of selected novels. They related more significantly to the novels that were more relatable to their life experiences and socio-cultural context.

## Methodology

This study follows a qualitative research design. Students' responses to an essay question in semester examinations were analysed as data for the study. The exam question was: "Do you find any connection between the novel *Pride and Prejudice* and modern Pakistani society? Justify your answer with examples from the text and society."

These students had studied *Pride and Prejudice* as part of their curriculum in the module of Fiction. The respondents were final year undergraduate students of English literature at a public-sector university in Pakistan. The response selection followed purposive sampling technique (see also Bryman, 2012). We chose answer copies of students who had attempted the question on gender identity in *Pride and Prejudice*. Furthermore, students who had average or above average scores in the last semester were approached for consent. A total of 23 participants responded and gave consent to their answers being used for this research. The length of the responses varied between 300-600 words. Consent was taken from all the participants for use of their data before proceeding with the analysis.

The answers were then typed and analysed in accordance with Braun and Clarke's (2006) model of thematic analysis. Insights from Elliott (2018) regarding coding were also used to inform the coding process. The responses were individually coded by the two researchers. The coding was then collated, and an agreement was made on the coding categories to be used for the second stage coding. A second stage coding, termed analytical coding by Richards (2005) was carried out using the jointly developed list of codes. This helped organise the data under broader themes. These themes were then reviewed, and findings were written as given in the following section.

### Pre/Partition Entanglements

In response to the question of gender identity in '*Pride and Prejudice*,' the participants maintained that many aspects of the novel reflect gender roles. Fifteen of the participants mentioned the theme of women's dependence on men for their social and economic stability. They maintained that the novel critiques this aspect by showing the economic independence of male characters like Collins, Darcy, Bingley, and Mr Bennet. Whereas the dependence expected of women is reflected in female characters of the novel. One of the participants wrote by giving textual reference,

Charlotte gets married to Mr Collins to avoid dependency on her brother, but she chooses another dependency, upon her husband. She married to get financial value and recognition in the society. Women live at the mercy of men who are the means of production.'

Another participant penned down the inheritance laws of the 19th century English society that benefitted only sons. Since females did not have any share in inheritance, this makes female characters as weak in financial affairs, having no economic individuality. It also shows limited options and opportunities for women as far as education and profession were concerned in Regency England. Six participants wrote about the limited mobility of the female characters in the novel as they were not allowed to go outside without the accompaniment of any male family member. Twenty of the participants reflected women's position and their social expectation, most of which were related to the theme of marriage. They connected the theme of gender to the role of women in relation to matrimony. The participants maintained that through social conventions of securing a good marriage, the novel shows the importance of being married and how women's dependence on men in any way affects relationships. One of the participants reflects that the novel depicts how the choice of a partner is based on financial status and fortune. Another participant quoted the very opening sentence of the novel that establishes the centrality of marriages dominated by a material base where a gentleman with good fortune is preferred. One of the participants mentioned,

'In the novel, the only motive of the female characters is to achieve a well-established handsome male to get married with. As Caroline Bingley in the novel, flatters and convinces Mr Darcy to marry him, all the time she is obsessed with the idea of marriage. Also, other characters like Jane, Lydia, Charlotte; they admit in their lives the only notion of getting married'

In this context, twelve participants also highlighted the concern of parents for their daughters' marriage. As one participant reflected, "Mrs. Bennet is the typical mother whose only motive of life is to get her daughters married as she said that she wants to see her daughters happily settled in Netherfield and she has nothing more to wish for". Further, the participants also critiqued marriage presented as a central social concern, based more on social interests than true love and compatibility. They connected the theme of marriage with class differences and social stratification where class served as an essential factor while considering a partner.

In response to the question of connecting the novel to contemporary Pakistani society, the participants found a great deal of parallels between the 19th century English and their contemporary society. Participants reflected that all characters in the novel are representative personages of different groups. A classic Regency novel corresponds to the modern century as it continues to impact the modern world. They maintained that the plot, characters, and scenarios of the novel are familiar which make it a distinctly prime work for establishing modern connections. Twenty of the participants connected the theme of marriage as depicted in the novel to their society by giving various references from their personal experiences and social observations. The participants maintained that even in Pakistan, there are

a number of families that make women feel that marriage is the only way to get settled in life or to survive in the society. As one of the participants wrote,

‘The novel in many ways can be taken as an apt depiction of our Pakistani society as we can see the same issues as depicted in the novel. The opening lines of the novel are very close to our societal mindset where men, who are financially settled, and their families regard them as eligible bachelors who must get married soon as it is a compulsory domain for an accomplished life’.

Further, the participants maintained that the concern of parents for their daughters’ marriage is also very much relatable to their society. In the novel, Mrs Bennet is shown as a typical mother whose only motive of life is to get her daughters married; the responses reflect that Pakistani mothers are also very much obsessed with their daughters’ marriage. One of the participants shared that there are families who do not give much attention to girls’ education, but they start preparing the dowry for their daughters from the very birth of their daughters. Another participant wrote,

Mrs Bennet is the portrayal of our Pakistani mothers with the same typical traits that see the daughters’ lives’ sole purpose is to get married. Hence, girls are left with the only option of marriage. We can totally relate this sentence to our modern society that girls should marry quickly and marry well at least to someone who has some wealth at his disposal.

Sixteen of the participants also connected marriage presented as a central social concern, based more on social interests than true love and compatibility. They connected the theme of marriage with class differences and social stratification where class served as an essential factor while considering a partner. One of the participants shared his experience of a marriage proposal where the girl’s family rejected his proposal only on the basis of not having a government job. Other participants also reflected that in Pakistani society, the parents of any girl want to marry their daughter to a boy who is either from class above them or is financially stable enough that he could support her in future. One of the participants wrote,

‘In our society, never a girl would be allowed to marry into a class below her own. As in the case of Lydia and Wickham, eloping is the only option. In higher classes, the daughters are either married in their own class or if they do not find a suitable match for them there, they may marry them abroad. There has not been any case in the news recently, where a woman or a man from the higher class has married into the lower class’.

Seven of the participants connected closely the marriage theme with age factor. Participants maintained that as Charlotte, at the age of twenty-seven accepted the proposal of Mr Collins, similarly many girls accepted their marriage proposals because of their increasing age. One participant wrote, “Pakistani society demands a young girl to get married in her early twenties. If she gets near her 30s and remains unmarried, she is considered unfit for the marriage settlements”.

Two of the participants reflected that the parental behaviour of Mr and Mrs Bennett also have a close connection with Pakistani society. The lack of communication between Bennets and their daughters results in elopement of Lydia, who was so obsessed with the idea of marriage that she elopes with a soldier from an army regiment named Wickham. Her elopement exemplifies many incidents that are daily fodder for newspapers like Dawn (2013) and Express Tribune (2023). Most students also reported a lack of communication between parents and children in Pakistan when it came to discussing choice in marriage which may result in elopement.

In response to connecting the theme of gender identity in the novel to contemporary Pakistani society, participants also produced some contrasting features. One of the participants reflected that although, in Victorian era because of entailment verdict the women were compelled to get married, in this connection Pakistani women are little fortunate because of Islamic teachings and rules, the Pakistani women have quarter part in their father’s property and are little secured but in the connection of dependency of marriage still present in the women of countryside and to some extent in urbanised families too, due to their conservative thinking and mentality. Parents think their daughters are nothing and cannot survive or feed themselves without the support of a well-settled, wealthy ‘prey’ in the form of spouses. Another participant maintained that modern day readers of 18th century literature encounter vastly divergent heroines who exhibit dissimilar personalities and diverse ambitions as the status of women changes with age. Women of the 21st century control their own future, having much more choices than marriage unlike the novel has depicted.

At another level, the participants maintained that the struggle of Elizabeth to express her individuality in a society that demanded strict social conformity is also very much relatable to the women of contemporary Pakistani society. One of the participants gave reference to Muniba Mazari, a Pakistani activist, while connecting with the rebellious character of Elizabeth, who embodies feelings of freedom, individuality, and nonconformity. One participant mentioned,

‘Every female character represents a class of women in Pakistani society. The character of Jane who symbolises beauty, innocence and socially acceptable, we do find such girls in modern society. We find

Lydia, a crazy and wild nature who does not follow any social norm, then Kitty, a bookish and quiet girl who remained unmarried throughout the novel. Like Elizabeth, in our Pakistani society, we also see such women who challenge the standards of society and live independently.'

Students also found a revolutionary spirit in the character of Elizabeth who defied the norms of her age and upheld her individuality. They highlighted that unlike other female characters that were desperate to get married, mainly due to socio-economic security, Elizabeth pursued a relationship based on mental understanding and equality. Students resonated the characters of Elizabeth to modern day feminists in Pakistan, who according to them proved that women can be happy without marriage too.

### Discussion

Women's social and economic dependence on men is identified by the students in the novel and connected by some with current Pakistani society. The economic dependence was observed in terms of inheritance as well as marriage in the novel. Noting down the inheritance law in the novel, only a few students made connections to limited inheritance received by women in their own society. As the participants were young, most might not have first-hand experience of inheritance and were not able to make connections with real life. This is in agreement with Rosenblatt's (1938/1970, 1978/1994) idea that readers are able to connect literary texts to their experiences if they have understood the text properly. Furthermore, participants identified that this economic dependence was translated into women being considered weaker both in the novel as well as society. This agrees with Cook's (2007) argument that Pakistani women are usually suppressed.

Marriage is seen as a social contract that elevates the status of women in the novel as well as in society. Participants were able to talk about marriage in terms of the 'benefits' it brings for women through the medium of the novel. Mohammad (2016) argues that marriage in 21st century Pakistani society is more about security than happiness. Zhang (2020), Asker (2012) and Kloester (2005) made similar conclusions about 19th century England pointing out that marriage provided a woman with a house in absence of any other options. The participants showed similar understandings of marriage and social security in the context of the novel as well as their lives. Connecting their own experiences of worried parents of daughters with the Bennet's, they showed how a literary text helped them form connections between fiction and reality.

Students also highlighted that the issues of social class and marriage were intrinsically connected to each other. Quoting the example of Lydia and Wickham from the novel, students argued that social class plays an integral part in making matrimonial arrangements. Just like, Lydia and Wickham had to elope to get married due to class difference, participants explained that there are numerous cases of elopement reported in Pakistan due to social stratification as marriage of a girl in a class lower than hers is rarely approved by her family. Marriages without family approval are looked down upon as established in Samia's case presented by Jamal (2006).

Students highlighted another important factor in marriage, is that of the age of a girl. Giving an example of Charlotte from the novel who married at 27, similarly, they highlighted the suitable age for women to get married is their early 20s. If they pass beyond this age, their chances to get married are reduced. Talking about the issue of 'accepted' age for women's marriage in their society explicitly with reference to the novel, participants were able to demonstrate the influence of their own experiences in society on their interpretation of the novel (Rosenblatt, 1994). As Connell (2000) argued that readers are able to immerse in their own experience through the aesthetic experience of reading.

The character of Elizabeth as an independent, thinking woman, challenging social norms was appreciated by students in their responses. Students were able to compare the character of Elizabeth and other female characters in the novel and relate to the outstanding of women in their own society. Students' observation of distinguishing elements of freedom, individuality, and nonconformity towards social norms in Elizabeth were relatable to their surroundings. This is in line with Jamal's (2006) study about the case of Samia who went against the norms to marry the man of her choice and had to fight her own father in the court to be able to live with him. Women who go against the norms are rare in the novel as well as in society as noticed by participants and supported by literature.

The participants in the study were able to identify various themes related to gender, marriage and identity in the novel and interpret them in light of their own experiences. Students one hand, identified the issues of inheritance, matrimony and social dependence of women on men in 19<sup>th</sup> century Victorian society (as suggested by Dubey, 2013; Duhan, 2015), on the other hand, they identified and related the 21<sup>st</sup> century characteristics of freedom, individuality and nonconformity in the character of Elizabeth. This indicates that students were not only able to compare the social norms and values of the 19<sup>th</sup> century presented in the novel to present day society, but they were also able to see the characters in the novel from the perspective of 21<sup>st</sup> century values. This supports Rosenblatt's (1938/1970, 1978/1994)

basic notion of transaction of meaning being a two-way process. Meaning is not just transferred from the text to the readers, but readers also assign meaning to the text in accordance with their own world view.

### Conclusion

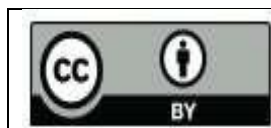
The participants of the study were able to make sense of the incidents in the novel that were close to them in their own lives such as issues and challenges surrounding marriage. On the other hand, they were unable to connect with other areas evident in the novel such as inheritance issues as they had limited experience of these in their own lives. Though there were limited views on inheritance, there was not much discussion on how it might be connected to real life issues.

On the basis of the findings of this study, we recommend that teachers should consider highlighting the importance of personal experiences while asking students to interpret texts. Making students familiar with Rosenblatt's model may also be a good idea. Enabling students to exchange ideas especially on issues where the majority did not have an opinion can help in expanding the horizons of the students' criticality, understanding and literary interpretations.

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