



The Divergent Afterlives of *Pride and Prejudice* in Post Modern Britain and in Post-Liberalized India

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ABSTRACT: In this proposed paper I shall be engaged in a comparative study of the endings of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) and two of its early 21st century film adaptations. The first of these is *Pride and Prejudice*, a British film directed by Joe Wright, and released in 2005. The other one is *Bride and Prejudice*, a British-Indian, Bollywood-style, musical adaptation of the novel, directed by Gurinder Chadha and released in 2004.

Pride and Prejudice by far is the most well-known work of Jane Austen and therefore, many researchers and scholars have done a lot of research works regarding various aspects of the novel. But in this paper, I would like to argue how the desperation for marriage in Regency Era has gradually reduced in 21st century and the consent of a couple, and not their parents, has come to attain much significantly greater importance in a 21st century marriage.

In *Pride and Prejudice* Austen reflects the social realities of the English society at late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. She wrote this novel at a time when women were still regarded as the inferior sex and her novel was in a way mirroring her contemporary society. At the same time, the film adaptations of *Pride and Prejudice* reflect the particular societies which produce them. Therefore, the films depict the changing attitude towards women's position in 21st century, while the basic story remains same. Although having certain significant departures from the novel, the British version of *Pride and Prejudice* remains faithful to the novel. On the other hand, *Bride and Prejudice* takes only inspiration from the basic storyline of the novel, while transforming the entire scenario by setting it in 21st century India.

In this proposed paper I intend to deal with the elopement episode of Lydia with Wickham and propose to compare the intensity of this episode

in Austen's novel in 19th century and in the 21st century film versions to show how this same scene has presented differently in two different timeframe. Another episode is of asking for Mr. Bennet's consent to Darcy's marriage proposal. Therefore, I proposed to compare, in this paper, their representations in the films of 21st century vis-a-vis Jane Austen's novel in context.

But most importantly, the objective of this paper is to focus on the position of women in the changing society. As the settings of these two films are completely different, I shall be drawing on two predominant features of these two nations, India and England, in early 21st century, to get an idea of the particular society, which itself undergoes certain changes over the years. For India, I shall count post-liberalisation as an important event, which inaugurates the way to the betterment of women's position in Indian society. And in England twentieth century was marked by several feminist movements, especially the post-modernist feminists were struggling a lot to smoothen the way of gender equality, which eventually resulted as a considerable development of women's situation in every sphere of life in English society. Therefore, in this paper, I shall consider select aspects of post-liberalisation in India and post-modernism in Britain as the major factors which lead to the improvement of women's situation in society.

Key Words: Pride and Prejudice, women's position, 21st century, social conditions.

Research Method: I will be drawing on select aspects of qualitative analysis as a methodology. In this paper, I shall be using two kinds of materials--- primary and secondary. The primary materials are the two types of primary texts. The first text is Jane Austen's novel, *Pride and Prejudice* (1813).



The other one is the two film texts, *Pride and Prejudice* (2005) and *Bride and Prejudice* (2004). And the secondary materials are used as references such as critical writings, historical writings, theoretical writings, film reviews etc.

I. INTRODUCTION

Pride and Prejudice(1813) is by far the most popular novel of Jane Austen. The novel as an art form reflects the society of which the writer is a part. Similarly, Austen uses her novels to show the subordinate position of women in English society in late 18th and early 19th century. The novel, *Pride and Prejudice*, explores the conditions of women in Austen's contemporary society. What Austen is showing us with her characters' behaviour, is how the 19th century expects people to behave. Although Elizabeth may seem to be a strong-willed, independent and spirited woman, it is still within the confines of her social position as a woman. In late 18th century and early 19th century, women had to follow certain strict rules of conduct to maintain their dignity in society. Austen represents the dire situation of women and their subservient social position in her novel, *Pride and Prejudice*, through the Bennet family. We can understand the desperation for marriage in Regency England when we consider the Bennet daughters, where their family home will be lost to them on their father's death. Austen shows us how certain social conditions affected many people in her contemporary social system. What this reveals is that a literary work of fiction always reflects the society which produces it. Therefore, in her novel, *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen clearly displays the predominant patriarchal social norms of that time, and women's helpless subjection to those patriarchal standards.

Pride and Prejudice, the 2005 film version, features Keira Knightley and Matthew Macfadyen as Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy. Although this version remains comparatively authentic to Austen's novel, there are subtle significant distinctions from the novel which reflects certain characteristics of English society in 21st century.

In *Bride and Prejudice* (2005), the director Gurinder Chadha, keeping the basic story same, transforms it into something completely new by setting it in Amritsar, India in 21st century. Accordingly, Elizabeth here becomes Lalita, Jane-Jaya, Lydia-Lucky and Mary-Maya and the Bennet family becomes Bakshi family of Amritsar. The director very beautifully puts Indian elements in Austen's story and transforms the English society of

19th century into Indian society in 21st century. Here, Aishwarya Rai plays the role of Lalita and Martin Henderson acts as Darcy. Director, Gurinder Chadha, also intertwines two societies and two completely different cultures at the same time in one frame by making Darcy an American and Lalita an Indian.

As women have become more assertive in recent years, the film makers provide the audience with the kind of film adaptations they want to see, which focus on strong, independent woman of 21st century. What this reveals is even though the story of *Pride and Prejudice* remains the same, the film versions echo the social standards of that particular society which produces them. The growth of feminism in the twentieth century in England helps women to gain some sort of significance in the male-dominated world. Similarly, in post-liberalised India women are comparatively in a more respectable position. Therefore, it is natural that film adaptations of *Pride and Prejudice* in 21st century would definitely depict this changing attitude towards women.

Researcher Axioma Dany Imamasari, have done a research on a comparative study between the novel and the 2005 film version of the novel. She compared the novel and the movie and pointed out the similarities and dissimilarities between the two. However, the objective of this paper is entirely different. This paper is going to analyze the different endings of the films and the novel, and attempts to investigate what socio-economic setting made these desirable changes possible. Therefore, this is not a mere comparison between the film versions of *Pride and Prejudice* and the novel itself; the purpose of this paper is to examine the social aspects which shape the changing position of women in the society of 21st century.

The novel, *Pride and Prejudice*, ends in a complete happy note with Elizabeth getting married with Darcy. Many twenty-first century readers seem to be opposed to the novel because of its trivial storyline; they think that this fairy-tale kind of ending in a way dismisses the tensions initially created by the author in the novel. But in order to understand Austen's works we need to consider her contemporary society within which she wrote all her novels. Throughout history across culture women have always occupied a secondary position in relation to men. Especially, in eighteenth century fiction women were represented merely as the angel in the house. The position of women in society was to ensure the welfare of her husband. Women were positioned only in the private sphere of home and family and they didn't have access to public spheres.



Therefore, *Pride and Prejudice* explores the conditions and position of women in English society of nineteenth century and **“Austen does challenge the prescriptive order and constructs a female protagonist who continues the tradition and marries the hero, but only as her equal and only when he can recognise her value as a partner, not just a wife.” (SH, 14).**

According to W.L. Cross the marriage of Elizabeth and Darcy is the most logical conclusion of the novel. He comments: **“The marriage of Elizabeth and Darcy is not merely a possible solution of the plot, it is as inevitable as the conclusion of a syllogism or geometrical demonstration.” (qtd. in Introduction, 19).** Therefore, this conclusion to the novel seems to be unavoidable in order to satisfy Austen’s contemporary readers of English Society. Although remaining single herself, all of Austen’s protagonists happily marry, as expected of women in nineteenth century. Thus, Austen in *Pride and Prejudice* portrays the importance of marriage in 19th century English society. Now, considering Austen’s contemporary society, we can easily comprehend that marriage of Lydia and Wickham was the only solution, one could think of, after their reprehensible elopement. The unimaginable disgrace would have unleashed on Bennet family if Lydia would not get married with Wickham and it would be impossible for Bennet family to be even called respectable in their society. Moreover, nobody would marry the other four Bennet daughters with a ‘fallen’ sister and we can easily imagine their dire situation in near future after their father’s death with no home and no money to support them. Therefore, we cannot cast doubt on the process in which Darcy persuaded Wickham to marry Lydia by providing him with a handsome amount of inducement.

By comparing Austen’s writing with the script of 2005 version of *Pride and Prejudice*, we can determine whether this scene is effectively established in the film or not. In the film the representation of Elizabeth’s behaviour on receiving Jane’s letter is not dramatic enough. We can see that she is upset and crying, but it becomes slightly comic, as she appears and disappears time to time and with Darcy acting like a fool every time she appears. **“It is as though the effect of Lydia’s behaviour has not the sense of doom in the twenty-first century as it did in the eighteenth, so perhaps the screenwriters decide to add a comic element to this scene.” (SH, 90).** Austen in her novel, *Pride and Prejudice*, represented this scene more intensely as Elizabeth was well aware of the

consequences of Lydia’s actions. She knows how this situation will disgrace all the Bennets: **“Lydia--- the humiliation, the misery she was bringing on them all, soon swallowed up every private care; ... Elizabeth was soon lost to everything else;” (Austen, 239).** The significance of this particular event has been diminished by the director in the film version as the society that originally produces the film is early 21st century. After many feminist movements in twentieth century women in Western society manage to get a better position in the society. Therefore, the director wittily adds a comic element to this elopement scene in order to trivialize the matter in 21st century.

However, as the film (2005) actually sets in 18th century, the director portrays the consequence of Lydia’s actions just as we can observe in the novel but with a little bit of comical approach in order to denigrate the situation. As soon as Mrs. Bennet comes to know about Lydia’s marriage, she almost springs out of her bed with pure triumphant joy and rushes to Mrs. Lucas to tell her that one of her daughters gets married only at 15. In this scene of the film, Mrs. Bennet’s mannerisms are portrayed by the director quite hilariously:

[Lizzie looks her mother in perfect astonishment as she gets out of bed]

Mrs. Bennet: A daughter married!

Lizzie: Is that all you think about?

Mrs. Bennet: When you have five daughters, Lizzie, tell me what else will occupy your thoughts and the perhaps you will understand. (IMSDb).

Though the director presents this scene comically in the film to trivialize its effect in 21st century, we can assume the pressure of women to get married in Austen’s contemporary society. Though Mrs. Bennet appears to be a woman of ‘mean understanding’ (Austen, 7), through her character Austen presents women’s desperation for a prudent marriage in Regency England: **“The business of her [Mrs. Bennet] life was to get her daughters married;” (Austen, 7).** Both in the novel and in the 2005 version film, Elizabeth, in spite of knowing Wickham’s real character, cannot afford to oppose the marriage in order to maintain the social status of her family. She is able to understand that they would have lost all their reputations in the respectable English society if Lydia and Wickham would not get married. Thus, the film emphasizes on the unfortunate conditions of women in 19th century, previously presented by Austen in her novel.

In *Bride and Prejudice* (2004), the director treats the elopement scene of Lydia in a



complete different manner. As this film sets in 21st century India, it was easy for the director to conclude the scene in a way which will satisfy the audience of 21st century. After understanding her own fault, Lucky returns with Lalita and Darcy, who come to rescue her. Lucky never wishes to marry Wickham after knowing his disagreeable character and vicious intention. She is heartily accepted by her parents as soon as she comes back with Lalita and Darcy. Lucky did not have to bear a loveless relationship throughout her life as Lydia had to do in Austen's novel. It is because the society of 21st century permits it. No forceful union occurs in this film version. Director, Gurinder Chadha, affords to skip the imprudent marriage between Lydia and Wickham because his film sets in the early 21st century India. And this becomes possible because women have gained some sort of importance in post-liberalized Indian society; at least to that extent where women are capable of thinking about their own interests and well-being apart from anything else. What is more fascinating is that women could achieve a position in the society where they are able to choose whom to marry and to whom not. Dr. C. Thanavathi on her essay, 'Status of Modern Women in India', says: **"It is definitely after Independence that the Indian women gained considerable importance within their country in social and political spheres... They took many progressive decisions such as organizing themselves to fight for a new set of goals. The goals were getting equality based on gender, job opportunities, reforming the existing laws which gave women only partial justice, and creating a society which did not oppress women intellectually, physically and emotionally."** (Introduction, 1)

Therefore, the director, Gurinder Chadha, in early 21st century, not bound with typical social norms, has the privilege of not showing a forceful engagement between two people merely because they try to elope with each other. Thus this film clearly depicts the changing attitude towards women and their position in the society of 21st century.

Another striking difference between *Pride and Prejudice*(2005) and *Bride and Prejudice*(2004) is the very last scene of each film which reflects the 19th century qualities and 21st century characteristics of the society accordingly. The British version of *Pride and Prejudice* (2005) seems to have an abrupt ending. The film ends at a moment when Mr. Bennet gives his consent for Elizabeth and Darcy's marriage. This ending forces the audience to think the marriage will take place because Elizabeth's parents permit it and no

ceremony regarding the marriage is shown in the film, which definitely signifies the importance of parental consent in a marriage in 18th and 19th century.

In contrast to that, there is no scene in *Bride and Prejudice* (2004) where Lalita and Darcy ask for their parents' consent for their marriage. They simply get married when they realize their love for each other. Again this reflects the society of 21st century where a woman can choose her life partner freely without her parents' approval.

There is another fascinating distinction between the U.K. and U.S.A. version of the *Pride and Prejudice* film (2005). The British producers released a decidedly different ending for American audience. The British version ended with Elizabeth's father consenting to Darcy's marriage request. The American version of the film is 8 minutes longer and there is one last scene at Darcy's estate, Pemberley. In this swoony moonlit scene we see a romantic and intimate scene between Elizabeth and Darcy and we witness the only kiss in the film. The director of the film, Joe Wright, chose to cut the final kiss for the domestic market after test audiences in England complained, but kept it for the American market, figuring, not wrongly that it would impress the Americans as they were satisfied with a lighter allegiance to literary accuracy. Some Americans were happier as they thought it was more realistic that two lovers might actually kiss on screen, but the British found it to be downright silly. The British were not ready to accept something that they had not read in the novel. Similarly, Jane Austen's readers of North America are less than impressed and they express their dislike by claiming that it has nothing at all of Jane Austen in it. Therefore, it is clear that the actual readers of Jane Austen, irrespective of British or American, found the American ending of *Pride and Prejudice* displeasing as they do not probably wish to see anything actually not written in the novel by Austen.

II. Conclusion:

This paper has briefly examined and compared the novel, *Pride and Prejudice*, and two of its early 21st century film adaptations to show how the attitude towards women has changed in the society from late 18th century and early 19th century to early 21st century. The novel, by Austen, shows how women were treated in Regency England and when it comes to marriage their appalling situation was unthinkable as they always had to search for a wealthy partner to secure their future and wanting a marriage out of love was undreamt of. They were incapable of doing anything in the patriarchal



society and were dependent on either their husbands or their fathers. This helpless situation of women in English society has slightly changed with the interventions of many feminist movements in twentieth century. Postmodern feminists seek to analyze any notions that have led to gender inequality in society and attempt to promote equality of gender. And in post-liberalisation period comparatively women are in a more respectable position in India. **“Development in the field of science and technology, universalisation of education, socio-political movements, modernisation and similar developments have changed the approach of people towards women to a certain extent.” (Thanavathi, 10)** Thus, the changing attitude of society towards women has reflected in the film adaptations of *Pride and Prejudice* in 21st century, more evidently in *Bride and Prejudice*. The films portray how patriarchal perceptions have changed throughout theyears. Therefore, this paper has attempted to show that most of the artistic works, whether a novel or a film, echo the society and social standards of that particular time.

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