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**Humiliation and Social
Negotiation:
A Study of Pride and Prejudice**

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Humiliation and Social Negotiation: A Study of Pride and Prejudice

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Abstract

This paper deals with the strategy and tactic that Jane Austen's heroines use in order to escape humiliation, fear and shame. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth Bennet, threatens male superiority through social negotiation and laughter. Ullaliina Lehtinen, in his book "Underdog' Shame", identifies two kinds of shame, the underdog's shame and the aristocrat's shame. Thus, this theory will be applied to investigate Elizabeth's feeling and reaction, in addition to that, the relationship between the individual and society will be examined.

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Introduction

Conduct book writers in the eighteenth and nineteenth Century along with the social order have long restricted female behaviour. Women were regarded as inferior to men. They suffered from humiliation, fear, and shame. In consequence they learned to defend themselves by negotiation, social debate and laughter, which was the greatest threat to male superiority. 'Laughter was believed to have capacity for breaking down hierarchies and it constituted an identifiable threat to the social order.'¹ This paper demonstrates that women were not only suffering from these social barriers but they were also deprived from the personal right of reproving men's behaviour; as a result they used the trick of laughing at their follies. They felt relief by this strategy and could at least take revenge for their wounded pride. Elizabeth Bennet, the heroine of *Pride and Prejudice*, is taken as a model for this research. Moreover, the paper discusses theories about shame and applies it to Elizabeth and Darcy's behaviour towards each other.

Humiliation and Social Negotiation

In response to conduct book writers' foolish claims, some female authors presented in their novels heroines, who were regarded due to their behaviour as a threat to the male superiority and social order. Elizabeth Bennet is a typical character who experiences humiliation, shame and fear that emerge from the injustice of social hierarchy and patriarchy. But she does not submit to these feelings, which were caused mainly by men or high-class society members. Elizabeth is so witty and sensible to keep silent when attacked by men; so she decides to laugh at them. Thomas Hobbes defined laughter in the early eighteenth Century as a "sudden glory' at the sight of another's inferiority."² Conduct book writers acknowledged their fears from those females who laugh at foolish men for they may fall into the danger of laughing at respectable men as well " 'And if a man of grave aspect and more wakeful reflection presumes to step within the circle, they assail the unwelcome intruder with a volley of brilliant raillery and sparkling repartee'. In consequence, they might fall into the danger of losing the ability to distinguish between foolish and non foolish men". By laughing publicly at men, women may acknowledge their superiority which is what Gisbourne dreaded.³

¹ Bilger, Audrey. *Mocking the 'Lords of Creation': Comic Male Characters in Frances Burney, Maria Edgeworth and Jane Austen*, *Women Writing: the Elizabethan to Victorian Period*, Vol.1 (1), 1994.16.

² Castellanos, Gabriela. *Laughter, War and Feminism: Elements of Carnival in three of Jane Austen's Novels*, New York: Pete long publishing, 1994.

³ Bilger, Audrey. *Mocking the 'Lords of Creation': Comic Male Characters in Frances Burney, Maria Edgeworth and Jane Austen*, *Women Writing: the Elizabethan to Victorian Period*, Vol.1 (1), 1994.79.

Austen's heroines do not rebel against social orders but they do something more revolutionary for that day: they laugh. After her first meeting with Darcy, Elizabeth is convinced that Darcy is very arrogant. When he refuses to be introduced to Elizabeth: "Which do you mean? And turning round, he looked for a moment at Elizabeth, till catching her eyes, he withdrew his own and coldly said 'she is tolerable; but not handsome enough to tempt me; and I am in no humour at present to give consequences to young ladies who are slighted by other men.'" (Pride and Prejudice 11-12). Darcy's comment humiliated Elizabeth; she experiences shame and embarrassment because of a gentleman's arrogance. As a weapon to regain her self regard, being appraised as a female, she makes fun of his conduct and tells the story among her friends in a playful manner "with great spirit for she had a lively, playful disposition, which delighted in any thing ridiculous" (Pride and Prejudice 12). Carol Mitchell observed in this respect that "women experience both a sense of power and a therapeutic release of tension by laughing at the foolish men."¹

Theories of Shame

Many philosophers and psychologists tried to find suitable definition for shame, which happens perchance to be a typically "feminine feeling".² Philosopher Gabriele Taylor defines shame as a "self-directed adverse judgment".³ In shaming we oppose someone's behaviour and most of the time the objection is directed toward a person's innate negative qualities.⁴ The sufferer experiences feelings of inferiority, discomfort, degradation, embarrassment, and he wants 'magically to "sink underground"'.⁵ This emotion of shame is mainly associated with women because they are taught to believe themselves inferior to men in many respects due to the patriarchy which is in one way or another very dominant even now, especially in the middle east countries. This however does not mean that men do not experience shame. Every human being can experience this feeling but women and other socially subordinate groups are more shame-prone than men.⁶ Lehtinen differentiates between two types of shame: "the non moral or 'natural shame' which happens because of an injury to our self-esteem owing to our not having or failing to exercise certain excellences that can be called "natural excellences" and

¹ Bilger, Audrey. *Mocking the 'Lords of Creation': Comic Male Characters in Frances Burney, Maria Edgeworth and Jane Austen*, *Women Writing: the Elizabethan to Victorian Period*, Vol.1 (1), 1994.82.

² Lehtinen, Ullaliina. *Underdog Shame: Philosophical Essays on Women's Internalization of Inferiority*, University of Göteborg, 1998. 141.

³ Lehtinen, Ullaliina. *Underdog Shame: Philosophical Essays on Women's Internalization of Inferiority* University of Göteborg, 1998.4.

⁴ Lehtinen, Ullaliina. *Underdog Shame: Philosophical Essays on Women's Internalization of Inferiority* University of Göteborg, 1998.5.

⁵ Lehtinen, Ullaliina. *Underdog Shame: Philosophical Essays on Women's Internalization of Inferiority* University of Göteborg, 1998.12.

⁶ Lehtinen, Ullaliina. *Underdog Shame: Philosophical Essays on Women's Internalization of Inferiority* University of Göteborg, 1998. 106.

examples here be “imagination and wit, beauty and grace. Moral shame, on the contrary, is occasioned when we find ourselves lacking in moral virtues or excellences. Examples here can be courage, honesty, loyalty, fairness, and self-command.”¹

Lehtinen investigates further and observes that shame, can be identified in two different forms. She calls the first form *the aristocrat's* that is attributed to a privileged person when he/she suddenly comes to realize his/her moral standard's fall. The second type, according to Lehtinen, is the *Underdog's shame* that can take many forms. An underdog, especially in a mixed company, can be silent, submissive, hesitant, self-doubting or the underdog can be shameless and provoking. Moreover Lehtinen believes that the underdog's shame stems from “Low-grade” discrimination, racism, or sexism. He concludes that unfair treatment of women, people of colour, or any other categories of people produces a feeling of lower-self respect or inferiority which leads to the feeling of an outcast and not belonging to the general frame.²

In applying Lehtinen's explanation of shame to Elizabeth first, we find that she experiences throughout the novel the underdog's shame since her pride is wounded. Darcy disgraces her and treats her disrespectfully, through which the underdog's shame emerges. Elizabeth's reaction to his behaviour starts with making fun of his follies and laughing at him. She decides to be rude herself to avoid “growing afraid of him” (*Pride and Prejudice* 24), as she tells Charlotte. Her strategy is teasing and laughing at Darcy or punishing him by obliging him to talk when he wished to keep silent. Elizabeth tells Miss Bingley her disposition in general: “I hope I never ridicule what is wise or good. Follies and nonsense, whims and inconsistencies do divert me; I own and laugh at them whenever I can.” (*Pride and prejudice* 57).

Darcy actually started the war with Elizabeth by degrading her. Darcy, being born into an aristocratic family, is spoilt by his parents because they “allowed, encouraged, almost taught me to be selfish and overbearing to care of none beyond my own family circle, to think meanly of all the rest of the world, to wish at least to think meanly of their sense and worth compared with my own” (*Pride and Prejudice* 369). Thus he is used to ignore other people's feelings and does not realize his mistreating and his mortification to Elizabeth, who is very proud of herself for many reasons. Lehtinen differentiates between self-respect (being proud because we, as persons, are valuable and have unconditional rights) and self-esteem (being proud because of our accomplishment, talents, skills, merits, wealth, beauty, position, behaviour, and

¹ Lehtinen, Ullaliina. *Underdog Shame: Philosophical Essays on Women's Internalization of Inferiority* University of Göteborg, 1998. 172-173.

² Lehtinen, Ullaliina. *Underdog Shame: Philosophical Essays on Women's Internalization of Inferiority* University of Göteborg, 1998.190-191.

successes). Self-esteem is not stable for it can be heightened by improvements and praise or lowered and broken by mischief's or insults or humiliations.¹

Thus we may say both Darcy's and Elizabeth's self-esteem is very high at the beginning then it wavers a bit till it becomes high again. Both of them have good reasons to have a high self-esteem for Darcy is witty, handsome, very rich, and from a noble family. Elizabeth's high self-esteem is justified because she is pretty and superior in understanding and judgment to all of the inhabitants in the neighbourhood. She has the ability of reading characters; she is a 'studier of character.' She can read her family and the Bingleys after a few meetings. She believes and trusts her judgment, though it appears in the end that she misjudged Wickam and Darcy. She is aware of her virtues and is proud for it. She confesses to Miss Lucas that she could have excused Mr. Darcy's pride if he had not mortified her own.

In a later gathering, Elizabeth's attitude therefore is one of "archness" aimed at using laughter to triumph over fear; Darcy's social superiority, his patriarchal haughtiness, cannot scare her while she laughs.² She achieves good distance from Darcy's initial insult by doing what witty heroines have always done: she enjoys the stupidity of a situation that would give pain by creating shame. She chooses the way of comic wisdom and plays with words. Elizabeth immediately compares her power with his: "He has a very satirical eye, and if I do not begin by being impertinent myself, I shall soon grow afraid of him" (*Pride and Prejudice* 24). Elizabeth's speedy wit assists her in carrying on her plans. She treats Darcy in a tricky way when she says: "you mean to frighten me, Mr. Darcy, by coming in all this state to hear me? But I will not be alarmed [...] there is a stubbornness about me that never can bear to be frightened at the will of others. My courage always rises with every attempt to intimidate me" (*Pride and Prejudice* 174). Elizabeth and Darcy have quickly developed an extremely frustrating relationship. He is attracted to her, but because he fails to go beyond stereotypes in approaching her environment and because of a combination of genuine objections to his behaviour and a similar weakness in her attitude to the aristocracy, there seems little chance that she will accept his advances.³

Being resolved to hate Darcy due to her first impression, Elizabeth is humiliated for the second time by his marriage proposal since he feels it would be undignified to connect himself with her family, "In vain have I struggled, it will not do. My feelings will not be repressed. You must allow me to tell you how ardently I admire and love you" (*Pride and Prejudice* 189). Darcy becomes

¹ Lehtinen, Ullaliina. *Underdog Shame: Philosophical Essays on Women's Internalization of Inferiority* University of Göteborg, 1998.171

² Castellanos, Gabriela. *Laughter, War and Feminism: Elements of Carnival in three of Jane Austen's Novels*, New York: Pete long publishing, 1994.133.

³ Monaghan, David. *Jane Austen Structure and Social Vision*, London: the Macmillan Press Ltd, 1980.71.

aware that he has disgraced Elizabeth through the manner of his proposal. She answers him directly "I have never desired your good opinion, and you have certainly bestowed it most unwillingly." For a man like Darcy, this affront is great so his 'complexion becomes pale with anger and the disturbance of his mind was visible in every feature.' This kind of anger has been classified by Lehtinen as 'object-hungry anger', which is caused by a slight of a certain kind in a specific manner, situation, and time. The slight is either directed at me or my kin.¹ Then Elizabeth actually embarrasses him and makes him be ashamed, even if it was for a short time, when she accuses him of destroying the happiness of her sister and Bingley, 'As she pronounced these words, Darcy changed colour; but the emotion was short.' This kind of shame that Darcy experiences is the aristocrat's shame, 'a painful event, a sudden unexpected change in the state of things.'² However, in the period of their acquaintance, Darcy experiences the feelings of shame and humiliation. But being a man, his reactions are different and even his sense or feeling of shame differs from that of Elizabeth. He said "these offences might have been overlooked, had not your pride been hurt by my honest confession [...] could you expect me to rejoice in the inferiority of your connections?" (*Pride and Prejudice* 192) As a reaction to these series of humiliations, Elizabeth becomes very angry (object-hungry anger because she and her relatives are slighted by Darcy) and scolds him for his ungentleman-like behaviour. Being resolved to hate him due to her prejudices increased by Wickham's lies, she rejects him totally "I had not known you a month before I felt that you were the last man in the world whom I could even be prevailed on to marry" (*Pride and Prejudice* 193). This refusal from Elizabeth is a shock to Darcy's dignity and conscience for his vanity assured him that Elizabeth would be flattered by his proposal. His real failing lies in his individualistic family pride.

After the climax of battle, fury and disgrace between both, their self-esteem wavers till they begin to realize their mistakes and regain their high self-esteem when a 'pattern of approach and acceptance prevails.'³ Elizabeth begins to see things from a different perspective. In their latter meeting at Pemberly, she is rejoiced to see Darcy's improvement "Elizabeth could not but be pleased, could not but triumph. It was consoling that he should know she had some relations for whom there was no need to blush" She is calmed down since she felt that her family are no longer looked at as inferior. As to Darcy who has never been humiliated in this manner, thought over all of Elizabeth's accusations, comments, insults and began to realize his mistakes. I would say he has experienced the Aristotle's shame. What he believed to be right appeared no longer like that. Thus he has reflected upon his former behaviour

¹ Lehtinen, Ullaliina. *Underdog Shame: Philosophical Essays on Women's Internalization of Inferiority* University of Göteborg, 1998. 85

² Lehtinen, Ullaliina. *Underdog Shame: Philosophical Essays on Women's Internalization of Inferiority* University of Göteborg, 1998. 110

³ Monaghan, David. *Jane Austen Structure and Social Vision*, London: the Macmillan Press Ltd, 1980.89.

and moral standards and began to perceive and comprehend the world in a different way, which has led to his improvement. Darcy says after their reconciliation, "I cannot be so easily reconciled to myself. The recollection of what I then said, of your conduct, my manners, my expressions during the whole of it, is now and has been many months, inexpressibly painful to me [...] you can scarcely conceive, how they have tortured me; though it was sometime, I confess, before I was reasonable enough to allow their justice" (*Pride and Prejudice* 368). As long as there is no humiliation and degradation, there would be no defence or reaction to it. Most of the time women feel themselves in situations, which force them to prepare to defend themselves from men's attack. Thus they may take the first action, i.e., start the war before being attacked to be in a more powerful position.

Elizabeth is also humiliated by Mr. Collins's proposal since he tells her that she should not expect any other marriage proposal and thinks he made her such an honourable offer that cannot be denied. She controls her self but Collins's behaviour made her 'so near to laugh' (*Pride and Prejudice* 105). However there is no war between them in the sense of Elizabeth-Darcy battle because they are not equal in understanding. Elizabeth is superior to him but with Darcy the war is more interesting for the reason that they use the discourse weapon in a very clever manner. In fact both suitors, Darcy and Collins, are blinded by their male dignity to imagine a sensible woman like Elizabeth would agree to a proposal of marriage just to be financially supported. Nevertheless, Darcy's proposal is in every respect much honourable because it has been inspired by his affection.

Another humiliation that faces Elizabeth is from Lady Catherine who wants to dissuade her from marrying Darcy. Elizabeth uses irony and reason as her argumentative weapons in defence of her dignity. Lady Catherine appeals to rank, social and financial power. Elizabeth tells Lady Catherine that she does not find herself inferior to Darcy for "If he is a gentleman, I am a gentleman's daughter, so far we are equal" She builds up terms of equality between Darcy and herself. They are equal in understanding and judgment; they both make mistakes at some points because they are prejudiced but they realize their mistakes and change radically. Through the course of their meetings, she teaches him that laughter might in fact improve and instruct.

Conclusion

Austen examines the relationship between the individual and society; her usual practice is to look at individuals from the point of view of society and to criticize code of manners and morality. *Pride and Prejudice* tends to look at society from the point of view of the individual and to criticize those institutions, conventions, and values, which hampers intercourse and abstract

happiness.¹ Austen treats the psychological line in the narrative in a very clever manner. Elizabeth and Darcy's behaviour throughout the novel seems realistic; each response to humiliation in a different manner according to their gender, social standards, understanding and personality. Both of them negotiate with their persecutors but use different weapons. Elizabeth's major weapon is laughter and witty critical remarks. Darcy is more conservative and in showing his feelings or his reactions. He celebrates his social rank and male power to overcome degradation. Through Elizabeth's provocation and the narrator's comments, we get hints of his inner feeling. Their pride has been wounded and they were put in a shameful humiliated position. They negotiated and used discourse weapons to overcome their embarrassment. They were successful in regaining their self-esteem.

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