ANALYSIS OF FEMININE DISCOURSE IN "PRIDE AND PREJUDICE"

Adela DUMITRESCU[*]

Abstract: *Language plays an important role in creating the gender. Women and men are constantly constructing their identities by means of their discourse which imposes a linguistic style. There is some research exploring how women, in particular, may enact and negotiate femininity. We have chosen to analyse the feminine discourse in "Pride and Prejudice" because Jane Austen made a lot of efforts to react against the patriarchal values of eighteenth century.*

Keywords: *feminine discourse, irony, identity, narrative voice.*

We are continually enacting aspects of feminity and masculinity in flexible, dynamic, indefinite, conventional and unconventional ways, a method whose precise achievement varies in interesting ways across different cultures and different communities. Gender and language are closely related and the some innovative researches consider that "people do gender" in different situations. In this point of view gender doesn't just exist, but is continually produced, reproduced, and indeed changed through people's performance of gendered acts, as they project their own claimed gendered identities, ratify or challenge others' identities, and in various ways support or challenge systems of gender relations and privilege (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2003: 4).

Researchers have found that women and men are constantly constructing their identities by means of their discourse which imposes a linguistic style. Language plays an important role in creating the gender. There is some research exploring how women, in particular, may enact and negotiate femininity in dynamic and varied ways in different social contexts (eg. Cameron and Kulick 2003; Coates 1997, 1999a, 1999b; Holmes and Schnurr 2006; Livia and Hall 1997; Mills 2003).

We have chosen to analyse the feminine discourse in *Pride and Prejudice* because Jane Austen made a lot of efforts to react against the patriarchal values of eighteenth century. All the novels of Austen depict social situations and institutions that are contrary to women's exercise of making full use of their abilities. Thus, the daily lives of women and their thoughts and emotions are the themes of her novels. She is a sympathetic judge of her own society and she evaluates mainly the social outlook of women and their position in the community. She uses satire in the sense of good humour and social irony to reflect her revolutionary ideas.

The female identity is not as obvious in the text as patriarchal values but readers often discover the masked female voice. This means that deep feminine voice is more significant and existent than what is seen on the surface of the text. Austen creates her characters precisely in order to reveal the full expression of this female voice.

Feministic Strategies in Jane Austen's Novels

The creator of feminist narratology is Susan S. Lanser, in the year 1981 who first combined narratology research with feminism. The purpose of feminist narratology

[*] University of Pitești, adela.dumitrescu@upit.ro

BDD-A29923 © 2017 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:54:51 UTC)

is to fight for the equality between women and men and changing the social and literary status of women writers. According to Lanser, feminist narratology analyses the role of gender in the construction of narrative theory and male writing styles and female writing styles can be distinguished so that sexual difference and discrimination can be revealed. Women writers employ different narrative styles from men writers to create their own narrative power and their own literary habit. This difference results from the social historical and cultural background: women's social status.

There are two levels of feminist narratology: *story* and *discourse*. At the level of story, feminist narratology is interested in differences in characters, events and contexts between women novelists and men novelists as well as social and historical reasons for the differences. At the level of discourse feminist narratology focuses on how the women novelists use narrative strategies to state their narrative power.

Jane Austen started her literary creation when self-awareness of women was awakened gradually in the late 18th century. In her works Austen fought for women's social position and the value of women in society and claimed for women's right to work. Her feministic strategies are illustrated in two ways, narrative content and characterization. In narrative content, Austen focuses on women's routine life, love and marriage. She writes about young girls, because she understands them amazingly well. The narrative ways used by male writers of her time are neglected. Austen concentrates on characterization, always making the female figures main characters of her novel. She describes women as what they really are and states a new idea of love and marriage. With her sensible female narrative strategies, Austen effectively gets rid of the control of masculine discourse and establishes feminist narrative power.

The Feminine Point of View in *Pride and Prejudice*

Austen is different not only from the male writers, but also from her contemporary women writers, because she does not passionately identify herself with any of her characters and none of her books are written in the first person. She provides her heroines an impersonal freedom. In her six completed novels, Austen is interested in describing intelligent young women, through whose eyes she presents women, men and the world.

In *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen's earliest novel, the novelist narrates the story mostly from the eyes of Elizabeth. Everything we know is from the heroine's eyes, ears and mind. In this novel, the readers are almost led by the heroines from the beginning of the story. The story is told from the internal perspective of a particular character. Austen's heroines are the focalizers of narration and they are also the reflectors, because the narrator lets them present the problems of the society. The third-person narration is one of Austen's innovations, a technique which create the impression of access into the consciousness of characters. The third-person point of view provides readers the female identity since each heroine has the power to examine other characters. Jane Spencer considers that using the third-person point of view, "women writers were developing their own distinctive use of narrative voice".

Austen's heroines are characterized in two ways: from the outside world, seen by an objective observer, and from the inside, through the character's own feelings and thoughts. This allows the narrator to have a close connexion with the heroine so as to expose the story's ideas successfully. Our novelist uses both omniscient and limited point of view in order to tell the readers the deep thought of all the characters and then she can exit from the characters' minds to present them objectively.

BDD-A29923 © 2017 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:54:51 UTC)

The narrator even steps in the story with personal point of view. This omniscient narrator has complete control over the narrative and presents between the readers and the story. As the story develops, the narrator limits her capacity to break into the minds of characters by selecting a single protagonist to act as the centre of disclosure. Thus, Austen effectively changes the position of female characters from being observed to observing others. By the change of narrative point of view, Elizabeth is no longer observed by others but an active observer. So women's marginal position is changed. The reader observes and knows the events by what Elizabeth knows or sees .Her mind and eyes become the angle of view and the point of entrance for the reader to know about the story. Those gentlemen, wise or unwise, rich or poor, both act as the ornament of the story.

This paper aims at investigating the feminist narrative techniques used by Jane Austen which have the purpose to establish feminist power. Different from the traditional male writing style, Austen regarded female as the centre part of the novel. She let her female characters describe the story as their daily life, transmit the information to the readers.

Another change in the writing style of the time is represented by the use of irony. Satire is a product of Austen's own life philosophy which entails an inequality between ideal and reality, social simulation and moral truth, and between the way people behave and the way they should act. As a result Austen develops the effect of irony by creating an artistic organization in her novels. For instance, the first two sentences of *Pride and Prejudice* is a brilliant example of Austen's ironic style.

> It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife. However little known the feelings or views of such a man may be on his entering a neighbourhood, this truth is so well fixed in the minds of the surrounding families, that he is considered as the rightful property of some one or other of their daughters. (Pride and Prejudice, 5)

Laughter is used by the writer as an instrument for condemning the society of her time giving the women self-consciousness in the society. It is well-known that women were not allowed to laugh in Austen's times, but our writer encourages both her heroines and the readers to laugh. Elvira Casal explains that many of Austen's contemporary writers regard laughter as vulgar since it is connected to a kind of contempt towards authority or a lack of self-control. Female laughter, mostly is associated with folly, therefore too much laughter makes a woman indelicate (Elvira Casal, *Laughing at Mr. Darcy: Wit and Sexuality in Pride and Prejudice*;1).

Jane Austen uses three different types of laugher in *Pride and Prejudice*. First, she employs laughter as a means of wit and ridicule which represent the results of social contradictions. The function of laughter in Elizabeth and Darcy's relationship indicates the change in their characters as the novel proceeds. For Elizabeth laughter represents a way of communicating with others. Thus, she says:

> Mr. Darcy is not to be laughed at! That is an uncommon advantage, and uncommon I hope it will continue, for it would be a great loss for me to have many such acquaintances. I dearly love a laugh! (Pride and Prejudice, 47)

The main feminine character thinks that laugher is so much important for her in a friendship relation and she cannot laugh at everyone as her laughter indicates that she feels familiarity towards a certain person. Thus, Elizabeth cannot laugh at a person like Mr. Darcy who seems humourless and serious, but, at the end of the novel, both

BDD-A29923 © 2017 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:54:51 UTC)

lovers discover the true nature of laugher. Elizabeth learns to laugh without prejudice and Mr. Darcy gains a sense of humour.

Elizabeth's irony is bright when Jane asks when she began to love Mr. Darcy. "It has been coming on so gradually that I hardly know when it began. But I believe I must date it from my first seeing his beautiful grounds at Pemberley." She can be bitterly critical, however, in her statement on Darcy's role in separating Bingley and Jane. "Mr. Darcy is uncommonly kind to Mr. Bingley and takes a prodigious deal of care of him."

Austen employs irony in the narrative parts for some of her own judgments. The Meryton community is glad that Lydia is marrying such a worthless man as Wickham:

> and the good-natured wishes for her well-doing, which had proceeded before from all the spiteful old ladies in Meryton, lost but little of their spirit in this change of circumstances, because with such a husband, her misery was certain.

Our novelist uses irony to both provoke laughter and to observations. In her hands, irony becomes an extremely successful instrument for moral evaluation.

Dialogue also represents a very an important technique in *Pride and Prejudice*. The novel opens with a talk between Mrs. Bennet and her husband which informs the reader about Mrs. Bennet's preoccupation with marrying off her daughters, Mr. Bennet's ironic and sarcastic attitude toward his wife, and her lamentation nature. The pieces of dialogue represent the most colourful and important parts of the novel. The dialogue is also used to communicate to himself/herself. For example, the intense inner change like Elizabeth's famous self-recognition scene ("How despicably have I acted!") is related as a person talking to herself. The characters' speeches reveal their character: Elizabeth's talk is forthright and sparkling, her father's is sarcastic, Mr. Collin's words are tedious and silly, and Lydia's speech is all frivolity and no substance.

The feminine discourse in *Pride and prejudice* is characterised by the third person point of view, the usage of irony and laughter. These techniques help our novelist impose a feminine original discourse in a period when the patriarchal values used to dominate the society. Through writing and powerful women characters, Jane Austen reacts against these prejudices and succeeds to make her voice be heard by the readers.

References

Castellanos, Gabriella. *Laughter, War and Feminism; Elements of Carnival in Three of Jane Austen's Novels*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1994.

Casal, Elvira. *Laughing at Mr. Darcy: Wit and Sexuality in Pride and Prejudice*. ASNA:Persuasions on-line Vol 22: no1 (2001) www. jasna.org/persuasions/onlive/vol22no1/index.html.

Eckert, Penelope, McConnell-Ginet, Sally, *Language and Gender,* Cambridge University Press, 2003

Kaplan, Deborah. *Jane Austen among Women*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992.

Kelly, Gerry. *Jane Austen, Romantic Feminism, and Civil Society. Jane Austen and the Discourses of Feminism*. Ed. Doveney Looser. NewYork: St. Martin's Press, 1995.

Kirkham, Margaret. *Jane Austen, Feminism and Fiction*. New York: Methuen, 1986.

Showalter, Elaine. *A Literature of their Own: British Women Novelists from Bronte to Lessing*. London: Princeton University Press, 1982.

BDD-A29923 © 2017 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:54:51 UTC)