

The Sisterhood in *Pride and Prejudice*

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Abstract: Although *Pride and Prejudice* is often read as a romance, its representation of sisterhood deserves closer attention. This essay argues that sisterhood operates not as an alternative to but as a support system within the marriage market. Through Elizabeth Bennet's relationships with Jane Bennet and Charlotte Lucas, Austen shows that genuine sisterhood requires trust and the capacity to tolerate disagreement. Set against Caroline Bingley's strategic sociability and the Bennet sisters' kinship without solidarity, these contrasts reveal that the marriage market makes women both allies and rivals, and that sisterhood is simultaneously enabled and constrained by the material pressures of marriage and status in a male-dominated society. Austen's description thus explains under patriarchy why sisterhood is fragile and how it can be maintained persistently.

Keywords: *Pride and Prejudice*; Sisterhood; Marriage; Jane Austen.

1. Introduction

Pride and Prejudice is a novel written by the British female writer Jane Austen (1775-1817), depicting the five unmarried daughters of the country squire Bennet, with his second daughter Elizabeth as the protagonist. The novel begins with the sentence "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife" [2] (Austen, 1). It is ironic, because it is women rather than men who are more eager to enter marriage. For the Bennet daughters, the pressure is not only social but material, because the family estate is entailed away from the female line. Mr. Bennet has no son, so his property will pass to his nearest male relative, William Collins, and the five daughters must secure their futures through marriage. The opening thus names the novel's organizing assumption: marriage is the institution through which women secure their futures. The marriage market simultaneously creates unity and competition. As a result, women are simultaneously driven toward one another as the only people who can share their vulnerability, and set against one another as competitors for a limited supply of eligible men. A considerable number of studies have examined Austen's views on marriage, but few have considered them together with her views on sisterhood.

Sisterhood is a common subject in 19th-century literature. Like other texts from the period, *Pride and prejudice* also pays much attention to female relationships. In corpus-stylistic terms, the word "sister" and its inflected forms appear nearly 300 times in the novel, making it one of the most frequently occurring words, second only to function words and character names. It has been proven that "sister" is significantly foregrounded in this novel. Existing criticism has recognized the construction and importance of sisterhood in the novel, though critics have their own particular focuses. Lamia Alafaireet puts forward that intelligent women must secure privacy in order to remain independent, freethinking individuals within a patriarchal society [1] (1-5). Michael Greaney argues that Jane Austen's fiction is characterized by escalating skepticism about the authenticity and durability of what passes for friendship in its social worlds [4] (641-661). These approaches complement one another and converge on the view that female relationships in *Pride and prejudice* are structured by social conditions, but they have rarely explored how sisterhood is affected by the competitive marriage market.

Although the term "sisterhood" did not officially become a theoretical term until nearly 200 years after the publication of

this novel, and it mainly focused on the movement for the liberation of black women, if we view this book from the perspective of 21st-century feminism and review the social background of Britain at that time, we will find that Austen's representation contains the concerns that later feminist criticism would theorize. This essay uses the term "sisterhood" broadly to mean supportive bonds among women, whether based on blood or friendship, and then draws a sharper distinction between genuine friendship and mere sociability. The research question is: In a society where women must obtain economic security through marriage, what kind of female relationship can be considered true sisterhood and what conditions are necessary for its survival? Austen answers this question through contrast. Elizabeth and Jane sustain intimacy through trust and mutual understanding, while Elizabeth and Charlotte preserve affection despite incompatible views about marriage. Against these cases, the Bennet sisters show that biological kinship does not guarantee solidarity, and Caroline Bingley shows that polished sociability can coexist with the complete absence of reciprocity. These contrasts reveal female friendship as both a product of the marriage market and a form of resistance to it.

2. Trust and Disagreement in Sisterhood

The female characters in *Pride and Prejudice* can be divided into two categories based on their age. This essay mainly focuses on Elizabeth's generation, but Mrs. Bennet deserves a brief word. Her frantic efforts to marry off her daughters are actually a kind of motherly, financially-driven solidarity among women. Returning to the research subject, this section argues that true sisterhood requires trust and the capacity to tolerate disagreement—conditions Austen tests in her central female relationships.

Jane Bennet and Elizabeth Bennet are the core sister relationships in the novel. They exemplify the necessity of trust in sisterhood. Their temperaments are different. Jane is charitable in her judgments, while Elizabeth is assertive and witty. Yet this difference never threatens their intimacy, because each trusts the other's good faith, always supporting each other emotionally and listening to each other's thoughts as trusted confidantes, even when they do not share a conclusion. Elizabeth's independent personality has a positive influence on Jane who sometimes seems passive. With Elizabeth's encouragement, Jane is more proactive in

expressing her feelings and pursuing her own happiness. Jane's kindness also helps Elizabeth in handling interpersonal relationships, especially when sometimes she is overly sharp. The dialogues and letters between the two sisters are repeatedly marked by the affectionate address "dear sister," a small linguistic signal that implies their closeness. Their sisterhood goes beyond mere words. When Elizabeth learns that her sister is ill, she walks three miles to Netherfield to take care of her, heedless of the long distance and the bad weather. Her concern is not about her decent appearance, but about her sister's health.

In *Pride and Prejudice*, "the fates of sisters are often connected" [5] (Hudson 126). One's actions, reputation and marital status often affect her siblings' social standing and marriage prospects. That episode also shows how sisterly care is entangled with the marriage plot. Jane's illness gives Elizabeth entry into the Bingley circle, and her conduct there shapes Darcy's perception of the Bennet family. After marriage, Mr. Bingley "bought an estate in a neighboring county to Derbyshire, and Jane and Elizabeth, in addition to every other source of happiness, were within thirty miles of each other" [2] (Austen, 328), so that sisterly companionship survives in their own marriages. At that time, many novels present the struggle for women who were forced to get married and be separated from their sisters. Barbara K. Seeber argues that "marriage is not the solution but part of the problem that results in loneliness" [6] (234) and concludes that marriage is precisely the main cause of Emma's loneliness because Emma loses her governess, Miss Taylor, who leaves Hartfield after marrying Mr. Weston. As a result, Austen's ending resists the marriage-as-separation pattern, constituting a deliberate narrative choice that keeps the sisters close to each other. Her innovation converts the sisterhood into a more durable structure and becomes precisely an attempt to mitigate that loneliness.

Such affection is not limited to sisters, but also exists between close friends. Charlotte Lucas, Elizabeth's intimate friend, is an important female character in the novel. Having grown up together as neighbors, they share a deep friendship and show that sisterhood can cross disagreement. Charlotte is practical and rational. She explains herself with disarming clarity: "I am not romantic, you know. I never was. I ask only a comfortable home" [2] (Austen, 111). Her views on marriage are more realistic—marriage primarily is a financial guarantee for women. Charlotte eventually marries Mr. Collins, a decision that disappoints and puzzles Elizabeth, who finds him pompous and absurd. However, Charlotte considers the match her best option. This outlook contrasts sharply with Elizabeth's more romantic idealism. It turns marriage into a question about the limits of sisterhood: can friendship survive when two women draw opposite conclusions from the same patriarchal predicament? The novel's answer is qualified. They maintain a degree of contact. Elizabeth is concerned about her domestic arrangements, so she visits Charlotte at Hunsford. Her willingness to sit in Charlotte's private sitting room—a space Charlotte controls within an otherwise restrictive marriage—emblemizes the partial autonomy a woman can preserve. In making allowance for Charlotte's difference of situation and temper, Elizabeth does not rebuke her friend. Their friendship survives not by resolving their disagreement, but by a tacit acceptance purchased at the price of emotional distance.

Austen not only suggests that friendship does not require moral agreement, but also reveals how patriarchal society

obstructs intimacy among women. Sisterhood could never exist freely in a male-centered structure, where women are forced into separation or competition. Charlotte cannot place sisterhood above economic survival, and Elizabeth cannot follow her friend into a marriage that would make her feel humiliated. Austen thereby subtly suggests that patriarchal society does not merely overlook women's intimate relationships, but also attacks and undermines women, making their sustained solidarity nearly impossible. Even if sisterhood may survive ideological rifts, it is not immune to the alienating effects of a marriage market.

3. Kinship and Sociability in Sisterhood

If the first two relationships define what sisterhood is, this part defines what it is not. Blood relation and social polish are both easily mistaken for sisterhood, but Austen distinguishes them carefully.

The Bennet sisters demonstrate that kinship does not automatically produce emotional solidarity. Within the Bennet family itself, sisterly intimacy is not evenly distributed. Rather, it follows a clear gradient shaped by age, temperament and intellectual affinity. The family conversation in the opening chapters reveals their different temperaments—Jane's composure, Elizabeth's wit, Mary's seriousness, and Lydia and Kitty's appetite for amusement. Jane and Elizabeth, the two eldest sisters, enjoy the closest bond, not simply because they are near in age, but because they share similar intelligence, moral seriousness and mutual respect. Their sisterhood rests on a foundation of genuine compatibility. By contrast, Elizabeth remains somewhat distant from Mary, whose rigid bookishness and self-righteous remarks strike Elizabeth as dull rather than profound. Mary, in turn, cannot appreciate Elizabeth's humor or wit, so the two sisters, despite living under the same roof, rarely achieve real intimacy. For Catherine, who enjoys attending balls and social events, Elizabeth seems to assume a "parental" responsibility toward Catherine, reminding her not to get too obsessed with the vain social life and to maintain a certain degree of moderation. Mary, Catherine, and Lydia often spend time together because their superficial interests are similar, yet this grouping hardly represents true emotional unity. Lydia's frivolity embarrasses Mary from time to time, while Catherine tends to follow Lydia blindly, suggesting that their association is based more on shared amusement than on deep understanding. Thus, the Bennet sisters demonstrate that kinship is only a starting point, not a guarantee of sisterhood. Without compatible temperament, comparable intelligence or shared experience, blood relatives may form only shallow, unstable alliances.

However, kinship truly makes their fates inseparable. The clearest test is Lydia's elopement with Wickham. Lydia's scandal threatens to destroy her sisters' prospects, because family reputation functions as a collective asset in the marriage market and one reckless act stains the whole family. Even if kinship does not produce emotional solidarity automatically, it can produce practical mutual aid when they are faced with crisis. After Lydia makes that mistake, Elizabeth does not abandon Lydia to her ruin. On the contrary, she does everything within her power to help restore her sister's respectability. Though Elizabeth is not the one who directly negotiates with Wickham, she relies on Mr. Darcy's intervention. The latter's secret arrangement of the marriage

and financial settlement proves decisive. Here Austen exposes how patriarchal society polices women through collective shame, as a sister's transgression is treated as a shared failure, punishing women as a group rather than as autonomous individuals.

There are hardly any villainous female characters in the novel, yet Caroline Bingley offers the clearest case of failed sisterhood. Austen uses her to show that social proximity does not automatically create sisterhood. She stays in the same social circles as Elizabeth and Jane, yet her interactions with them are marked by strategic courtesy and veiled contempt rather than mutual recognition. Her hostility toward Elizabeth is driven largely by romantic rivalry, since she perceives Darcy's growing admiration for Elizabeth as a threat to her own marital ambitions. She therefore tries to win Darcy's favor by belittling Elizabeth, but fails. However, her rivalry and failure are not purely personal. Indeed, Caroline's snobbery and vanity stem from a rigid class consciousness and prevents her from treating women like Elizabeth as equals. But this is one of the reasons. Austen "demonstrates the source of such rivalry: both individualism and traditional hierarchy lose sight of the internally motivated selflessness that Austen requires" [3] (Curtis, 65). Marriage, in Caroline's view, is less a bond of affection than a competition for status and security. Consequently, she experiences marriage as a zero-sum contest, where another woman's success must come at her own expense. This perception is precisely what disqualifies her from true sisterhood, for sisterhood requires women first to recognize their common interests and shared vulnerabilities. Caroline is best understood not as a villain but as a product of the marriage market that pressures every woman in the novel. As a negative example, she lacks precisely reciprocity, candor, and the willingness to recognize another woman as more than a competitor. What she demonstrates is that without mutual recognition, social contact produces only performance, competition and emotional isolation.

Sexism also plays a crucial role in shaping female relationships. Its most significant effect in the novel is to make sisterhood not merely desirable but necessary. As Venkatesh observed, sexism "made women feel threatened by each other, and perpetrated woman-hating, which was consciously and unconsciously acted out in daily interactions of women with each other" [7] (48). Sexism leads to discrimination, exploitation and oppression of women so that women have to depend on marriage to gain protection. On the other hand, it also prompts the formation of close emotional bonds among women to cope with the uncertainty of the marriage market. Sisterhood provides them with emotional support and practical guidance in the face of male-dominated institutions. As a vital form of solidarity, it enables women to survive and negotiate under the pressures of a patriarchal economy. Therefore, sisterhood in the novel should not be regarded as a kind of emotional connection subordinate to

marital love, but as an emotional pattern equal to heterosexual unions.

4. Conclusion and Discussion

This essay has argued that *Pride and Prejudice* does not treat female friendship as a natural given. Through analyzing the relationships between Elizabeth and Jane, Elizabeth and Charlotte, the Bennet sisters and Caroline Bingley, it can be concluded that sisterhood has degrees and thresholds. Bound by fate, women must cooperate in the marriage market, although the male-dominated society pushes them to compete with each other. Sisterhood can survive disagreement but dissolves where reciprocity and candor are absent. Kinship is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for sisterhood, as the Bennet sisters' emotional closeness remains uneven. Austen's representation thus explains why women's bonds are fragile under patriarchy, and it shows that under the conditions of trust, tolerance, and mutual recognition, they can nonetheless endure.

As one of the most frequently expressed themes in female-growth novels, sisterhood not only adds emotional depth to the novel, but also interweaves with themes such as love and marriage, revealing the way women supported each other in 19th-century British society, deepening the female consciousness of the novel, and providing an important perspective for the study of 19th-century British social culture.

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