

CHOICE OF PARTNERS

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ÖZET

Bu makalenin amacı Jane Austen'in altı romanında yer alan kadın karakterlerin ekonomik ve sosyal durumlarının eşlerini seçerken görüntüde onları nasıl etkileyip yönlendirdiğini ve bunun altında yatan gerçeği irdelemektir.

19. yüzyılda aile ve toplum tarafından hayattaki tek idealleri üst sınıftan zengin bir erkekle evlenmek olarak belirlenmiş genç kızların sahip oldukları servet ve kazandıkları gelir üzerinde hiçbir hakları yoktu. Evlendikten sonra mal varlıkları eşlerine devrediliyordu. Bu yüzden kimi kadın ve erkekler kişiliklerinden ödün vererek çıkarları için mutsuz evliliklere sürüklenmişler, kimileri toplum kurallarını çiğnedikleri için cezalandırılmışlar, kimileri ise ailelerinin desteği ve yönlendirmesi olmaksızın hem sevdikleri erkeklerin kendilerini gerçekleştirmelerini sağlayıp hem de toplumla çatışmaya girmeden mutlu ve doyumlu bir yaşam sürmüşlerdir.

ABSTRACT

It is the aim of this article to analyse the economic and social condition of Austen's young girls as far as it concerns their choice of partners and to show what lies beneath this process.

In the 19th century the only ideal, determined by both the family and the society, of a young girl was to find a rich man that belonged to the upper class. At that time the woman could not have control over her income or fortune since the man was entitled to all her property as soon as she accepted his proposal of marriage. For this reason, some women and men made concessions of their true nature and ended up in unhappy marriages, some were punished for they violated the codes of behaviour as regards marriage and some, without the support and guidance of their families, lead a happy and satisfactory life by both helping men to free themselves and reconciling the codes of behaviour with their own true nature.

Jane Austen lived between the years 1775-1817. During this time she wrote six novels. These are *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), *Mansfield Park* (1814), *Emma* (1816), *Northanger Abbey* (1818) and *Persuasion* (1818). As every student of Austen knows, all these six novels relate the process of the initiation of the young girl into society, or the process of the young girl choosing her marriage partner. It is the aim of this paper to analyse the economic and social condition of Austen's young girls as far as it concerns their choice of partners and to show what lies beneath this process.

Let us first take a look at the condition of the woman during Austen's time. Although Romanticism had already begun in literature, which meant that the first person came to the foreground and, hence, the individual was gaining importance, there was a long road to tread before any political, financial or educational rights were granted to women. In England, all women over twenty-one were only given the right to vote in 1928. Even as late as 1918, "... six million out of a total of thirteen million adult women who could vote had to be over thirty and householders or wives of men householders or have been to the university."¹ Unless things were arranged differently by means of a marriage settlement, the husband was entitled to all his wife's property, and he could claim any money she earned. Therefore, as soon as the woman accepted a proposal of marriage, her property belonged entirely to the man. She had to wait until the:

Married Women's Property Act in 1870 gave a married woman the right to her own income to her personal property as an heiress, but gave rights in other property to her husband. In 1882 came a further act of parliament, which gave a married woman 'all real and personal property' which belonged to her...²

In a society where a woman cannot have control over her income or fortune it automatically follows that girls, with any or, high financial prospects stand a better chance to find a husband. They are able not to only find husbands more easily but also to attract rich men. Yet, on the other side of the medallion is the fact that they stand a good chance to be a prey to fortune hunters. In the denizens of the country village all the parading heroines and minor characters are susceptible to this danger and are, at the same time, in a position to profit by

their financial situation. This dialectical relationship, the coexistence of things with their opposites finds its way into Jane Austen's novels in the form of the heroines having more than one choice on the road to matrimony.

For example, Emma Woodhouse in *Emma* starts off as the most advantageously placed heroine. Emma's elder sister is married to John Knightley, the brother of George Knightley whom Emma Woodhouse will marry at the end of the novel; she is companion and the mistress of Hartfield Estate for her widower father in the village of Highbury. She possesses wealth, beauty and intelligence. Thus, her prospects in the novel are three-fold. Eligible as husbands for Emma Woodhouse are the simpering Philip Elton, the well-bred Frank Churchill and the admirable George Knightley. Philip Elton, the rector of Highbury, has no real affection for Emma and wants only to enrich himself through her as an heiress of thirty thousand pounds. He functions in the novel as posing a threat for Emma Woodhouse to be "prey" to a fortune-hunting, unfeeling man. Whereas, a marriage between Emma Woodhouse and Frank Churchill would have social sanction with Frank being suitable both age-wise and his being Emma's social equal. He serves in the plot as a further source of complication and an option for marriage, which is the sole recognized vocation for the women of the nineteenth century. Finally comes George Knightley. Different from Frank Churchill, George Knightley is truly in love with Emma Woodhouse. He is the "correct" choice of a girl on the road to developing a mature sense of identity before she is subjected to childbearing. Emma Woodhouse has no external obstacles in uniting with George Knightley. By the mere fact of her social superiority she is Knightley's equal.

The heroines of *Pride and Prejudice*, *Persuasion* and *Northanger Abbey* are faced with counterparts of Philip Elton. These are William Collins, William Walter Elliot, and John Thrope respectively. Elizabeth Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice* and Anne Elliot in *Persuasion* have some other things in common as regards their options as well. Both meet their cousins who are heirs presumptive to the estates they are living in. Elizabeth Bennet's cousin, William Collins is a rector like Philip Elton. Elizabeth would conveniently be the mistress of Longbourn Estate and be a part of the inheritance when Mr. Bennet, her father, passes away if she were to accept William Collins's proposal. That he sees her as a commodity is accentuated when he first makes a move toward her elder sister, Jane Bennet but is discouraged by her mother. Elizabeth is never mistaken about her suitor whom she instinctively dislikes. Meanwhile, neither William Collins nor Philip Elton is a villain. They are merely pretentious and unwelcome characters, subjects of raillery in the novels. The danger that lurks behind the appearance presents itself in the persona of a George Wickam, an evil character who has tried to seduce the rich Georgina Darcy, the sister of the hero whom Elizabeth marries at the end of the novel. At one point in the story, Elizabeth says of George Wickam, "... he is the most agreeable man I ever saw."³ Events take such a turn that Lydia, Elizabeth's youngest sister, is victimized by George Wickam who is made to marry her by Mr. Darcy, the man Elizabeth finally marries. Elizabeth Bennet's third and final option is Mr. Darcy. Unlike Emma Woodhouse who has thirty thousand pounds, her situation is delicate in that she has a silly mother that shames her and a silly sister who elopes, which is a disgrace to the whole family. Yet, like all the heroines of Jane Austen, Elizabeth Bennet is able to marry her soul-mate, a man financially her superior but morally and socially her equal.

As to Anne Elliot of *Persuasion*, the two unsuitable choices given to Emma Woodhouse and Elizabeth Bennet are fused into one for her in the character of her cousin, William Walter Elliot. Thus, she has two options in the last analysis, as opposed to Emma Woodhouse and Elizabeth Bennet. Like Elizabeth, Anne Elliot considers her options for a while. Should she accept her cousin as a husband, she will be the mistress of Kellynch Hall. Furthermore, Lady Russell, her confidante and even her mentor, urges her strongly by saying:

I only mean that if Mr. Elliot should some time hence pay his address to you, and if you should be disposed to accept him, I think there would be every possibility of your being happy together. A most suitable connection everybody must consider it, but I think it might be a very happy one.⁴

These words coming from a person she loves and respects make Anne think:

For a few moments her imagination and her heart were bewitched. The idea of becoming what her mother had been; of having the precious name of 'Lady Elliot' first revived in herself; of being restored to Kellynch, calling it her home again, her home for ever, was a charm which she could not immediately resist.⁵

Yet, unlike Elizabeth who discovers the true identity of her alternative after a tragedy strikes, Anne Elliot learns the real character of William Walter Elliot from her former governess. He, too, is a calculating opportunist. His primary motive for marrying Anne is to prevent a marriage between Sir Elliot, Anne's father, and Mrs. Clay who is a widow staying long periods with the Elliot's and, thus, to secure his future as a Baronet. Not being a true villain, he is in the same group with Elizabeth Bennet's suitors. Just like Elizabeth and Emma, Anne unites with her soul mate Colonel Brandon.

Catherine Morland, the heroine of *Northanger Abbey* who encounters her future spouse before she does her inferior choice is also given only two options in the personae of Henry Tilney and John Thrope. Catherine is in Bath, invited by a Mr. and Mrs. Allen, a rich but childless couple from Catherine's hometown. The dialogue between Catherine and John Thrope shows us that he is interested in Catherine because he thinks Catherine is the heiress to the rich Allen's.

"Old Allen is as rich as a Jew-is not he?" Catherine did not understand him-and he repeated his question, adding in explanation, "Old Allen, the man you are with"

- "Oh! Mr. Allen, you mean. Yes, I believe he is very rich."

- "And no children at all?"

- "No-not any."

- "A famous thing for his next heirs. He is *your* godfather, is not he?"

- "My godfather-no."

- "But you are always very much with them?"

- "Yes, very much."

- "Aye that is what I meant." ⁶

Naïve and inexperienced as she is, Catherine is able to see through John Thrope who, ironically, helps her marry Henry Tilney by representing Catherine more wealthy than she is to Henry's father, General Tilney, and, thus, enables the General to consider Catherine a suitable choice for his son. That is why the General invites Catherine to the Abbey and Catherine has a chance to be close to Henry. Therefore, like Elizabeth and Emma, Catherine is also given more than one choice, but unlike them, the rival to her true love functions as a facilitator of her destiny.

While Emma, Elizabeth, Anne, and Catherine can boast of a sum of money, which puts them in an advantageous but at the same time a disadvantageous position, the heroines Marianne and Elinor Dashwood in *Sense and Sensibility* and Fanny Price in *Mansfield Park* start off as "poor". Hence, not only are there limited choices and stronger "rivals" for them, but their financial and social situation also makes them susceptible to emotional or sexual exploitation in that they can be chased by fickle or outright dishonest men and scoundrels or womanisers who have sinister designs. This is exactly the condition for the heroines of these two novels, namely for Marianne Dashwood and Fanny Price. Marianne is impoverished upon the death of her father. The family has to hand Norland Park over to her stepbrother to whom the former owner secured the estate; and thus being deprived of any extra income, she only has a thousand pounds to her name. It is exactly due to her financial situation that Willoughby, the man who falls in love with Marianna, decides not to marry her but a Miss Gray who has fifty thousand pounds. In Willoughby's words:

The struggle was great-but it ended too soon. My affection for Marianne, my thorough conviction of her attachment to me- it was all insufficient to outweigh that dread of poverty, or get the better of those false ideas of the necessity of riches, which I was naturally inclined to feel, and expensive society had increased. I had reason to believe myself secure of my present wife, if I chose to address her, and I persuaded myself to think that nothing else in common prudence remained for me to do. ⁷

Willoughby, whom Marianne cannot marry, is both a "true lover" in the sense that he really cares for Marianne, and a "villain" in the sense that he has been the cause of the ruin of two women who happen to be related to Colonel Brandon. Yet, the tradition of being given at least two choices intervenes, and Marianne ends up marrying Colonel Brandon who is her superior financially but equal morally.

Marianne's sister, Elinor Dashwood not only has one choice, but she also fancies a young man who is committed to another girl. In fact, Elinor has two rivals. These are Lucy Steele who is secretly engaged to Edward Ferrars and a Miss Norton, daughter of late Lord Norton with thirty thousand pounds. Edward's mother will give his son a thousand pounds if he marries Miss Norton. Furthermore, there is a strong objection in Edward's family against Elinor. But events take an unexpected turn when the artful and scheming Lucy Steele, one of Elinor's rivals, secretly marries Edward's brother to whom the family estate goes when Edward's mother learns of her son's engagement to Lucy, and Elinor unites with Edward in happy matrimony.

Fanny Price of *Mansfield Park* is the poorest and socially the most disadvantageously placed heroine among the seven heroines in the six novels Jane Austen has written. She is the eldest daughter of an improvident family who is brought up at Mansfield Park in the care of her maternal aunt, Lady Bertham and Sir Thomas. Fanny is entrusted in the care of the Bertham family because her mother is due to give birth to her ninth child, and her father is disabled for active service. Consequently, Fanny starts off her quest for a husband as somebody amply provided for but not the equal of the Bertham girls. In other words, she is a freeloader whose road to happiness is roughly paved. Deprived of *any* amount of money, she is not prey to fortune hunters, but with her only dowry, her chastity, she gets close to being victimized. In accordance with the tradition, two young men fall to Fanny's lot. The first is the womaniser, Henry Crawford. Fanny, to him, is a means to exercise his powers of charm over women. "My plan is to make Fanny Price in love with me", he says to his sister and adds, "But I cannot be satisfied without Fanny Price, without making a small hole in Fanny Price's heart", when his sister objects to his idea thinking that he "...ought to be satisfied with her (Fanny's) two cousins." ⁸ Thus, a long chase begins in the story. When Fanny does not reciprocate, this makes Henry Crawford want her the more. In his words again; "Her looks say, 'I will not like you, I am determined not to like you,' and I say, she shall." ⁹ In contrast to all the other heroines, Fanny Price never wavers in her thoughts. Despite heavy pressure from her uncle and her penurious aunt, Mrs. Norris, she will not give in to the demands made on her by those she loves for her heart is set on her cousin, Edward Bertham. Unfortunately, Edward is in love with Mary Crawford who has thirty thousands pounds. Fanny has a very strong rival. Mary is charming, active, and she has a strong sense of humour; Fanny knows her place in the scheme of things. However, with a twist of fate-a sort of deus-ex-machina for her, Edward's sister Maria, who is a married woman, elopes with Henry Crawford, who is not only the brother of Mary but also the womaniser after Fanny. This means that Edward has to give up Mary Crawford. Hence, with staunch determinism and perseverance to her true feelings, she reaches out for her reward and gets it in the end by marrying the only love of her life.

These seven heroines of six books all float in a rich social circle one way or another and can be divided into groups. Those in the first group, namely those in *Emma*, *Pride and Prejudice*, and *Persuasion*, operate in their own home atmosphere and in their own village. Those heroines in *Northanger Abbey*, *Sense and Sensibility*, and *Mansfield Park* who constitute the second group belong to the upper middle class by birth before they are impoverished for one reason or another. Furthermore, they have relations in the upper middle class; therefore, they are in a propitious situation to meet men and have the same chance with the heroines in the first group.

Let us take a closer look at these heroines. Be they rich or poor, they are *alone* as they go through an emotional, psychological and intellectual experience, which forms the process of choosing a mate that, in turn, constitutes the stories of the six novels. The mother of Emma Woodhouse (*Emma*) is dead. Her father is an indulgent but aging valetudinarian who is unable to help or guide her in any way. Emma's closest friend, her former governess has recently gotten married and moved out; and her elder sister is also married, busy with her own family. Like Emma, Anne Elliot (*Persuasion*) has also lost her mother. She has a vain father who is preoccupied with his own superiority, an equally vain elder sister who thinks Anne is just Anne and nothing else, and a younger sister who is married with two young children. Her closest friend and confidante, Mrs. Russel, has misguided her, and she is not to be heeded again. Elizabeth Bennet (*Pride and Prejudice*) has a brainless mother and a loving but incompetent father who, in his disillusionment in his marriage, has isolated himself from the affairs of the family, hence of his daughters. Fanny Price (*Mansfield Park*), like Elizabeth, has a brainless mother but, unlike Elizabeth, a drunkard of a father. She is consigned to the care of her maternal aunt who is wrapped up in her own world. As to Catherine Morland (*Northanger Abbey*), her parents are not with her. She is in Bath with the Allen's, a neighbouring family. Though kind hearted, the Allen's cannot guide her

either. The father of Elinor and Marianne (*Sense and Sensibility*) is dead, and they have a well meaning but a mistaken mother.

These girls are all faced with a heavy duty: to reach true personal integrity, thus *freedom* and privilege by reconciling the codes of behaviour with their own true nature. In doing this, they are both true to their nature and they also attain a love marriage that has social sanction. This is a true achievement as opposed to other marriages based on convenience or manipulation for these girls do possess spiritual perception and insight into human nature. As they make experiments in a game whose integral rule is romantic love, they embrace the reality of themselves and their partners by keeping all options open in an environment of prolonged indeterminacy. Within the fixed codes, these heroines are juxtaposed with other girls who have three options. These schemers will move away from their true nature or scheme, and violate the codes only to be punished.

What a girl's moving away from her true nature means is that she has to make concessions by giving up true love for security since "Marriage to a man of their own or a higher social grade is the only recognized vocation for women not compelled to earn their livelihood."¹⁰ Charlotte, in *Pride and Prejudice*, knows very well that she has to either stay home as an aging daughter or leave as a new wife. "Living under a pall of economic anxiety has withered every desire in Charlotte except the desire for security."¹¹ Mr. Collins, refused by Elizabeth, proposes to Charlotte immediately, and she accepts. In Jane Austen's words:

Her reflections were in general satisfactory. Mr. Collins to be sure was neither sensible nor agreeable; his society was irksome, and his attachment to her must be imaginary. But still he would be her husband. -Without thinking highly either of men or matrimony, marriage had always been her object; it was the only honourable provision for well-educated young women of small fortune, and however uncertain of giving happiness, must be their pleasantest preservative from want. This preservative she had now obtained; and at the age of twenty-seven, without having ever been handsome, she felt all the good luck of it.¹²

Lucy Steele in *Sense and Sensibility* is the example to a schemer. She is "illiterate, artful, and selfish."¹³ First, she is engaged to Edward Ferrars, the heir to the family estate; but when Edward is "dismissed from the notice of his mother forever" when the engagement is disclosed, Lucy manages to attract Robert Ferrars, Edward's younger brother who is now the sole inheritor of family property; when Robert goes to Lucy to persuade her not to give up the engagement, Lucy gives him hopes that his eloquence will convince her in time, and gradually Robert supplants his brother. Jane Austen accounts for Lucy's behaviour as follows:

The whole of Lucy's behaviour in the affair, and the prosperity which crowned it, therefore, may be held forth as a most encouraging instance of what an earnest, an unceasing attention to self-interest, however its progress may be apparently obstructed, will do in securing every advantage of fortune, with no other sacrifice than that of time and conscience.¹⁴

These girls move away from their true nature, or scheme to attain marriages of convenience. To the third group fall the girls who violate the codes of behaviour as regards marriage. Instead of securing a proposal and involving their families in the process of finding a partner for life, these girls elope. Leaving aside those whose stories of ruin are told by the characters in the novels, there are three important characters that elope. These are the two sisters Maria and Julia Bertram of *Mansfield Park* and Lydia Bennet of *Pride and Prejudice*.

Maria is married when she elopes, which makes her case the most serious. In hoping to repair her broken heart and be free of her strict father's control and to rule a home of her own, she acts against her own nature and marries a rich man she does not love. She is in love with Henry Crawford, the womaniser. Henry decides to go after Fanny Price, the heroine of the book, so Maria marries James Rusworth. However, Maria runs away to Henry Crawford when she is visiting a family during Easter in Twickenham and her husband is in Bath. The consequences of Maria's behaviour are quite severe. Her husband divorces her, and she separates from her lover for he will not marry her. Her father who only provides for her in a remote village with her aunt to live with her disowns her. In Jane Austen's words, "... she must withdraw with infinitely stronger feelings to a retirement and reproach which could allow no second spring of hope or character."¹⁵ As to her younger sister, Julia, she is forgiven on grounds that the Mr. Yates whom she elopes with is a bachelor with sufficient means.

Lydia Bennet, the sister of the heroine in *Pride and Prejudice* is the third character who violates the marriage code by running away with George Wickam. She is very lucky in that Mr. Darcy, the hero who is to be Lydia's brother-in-law interferes, literally bribing Wickam into a respectable marriage. He pays off Wickam's gambling debts, and Mr. Bennet, Lydia's father, agrees to make a settlement of five thousand pounds and to

give Lydia one hundred pounds every year after his wife's and his death. Lydia's punishment is an unhappy marriage. Jane Austen writes of Lydia and her husband:

Their manner of living, even when the restoration of peace dismissed them to a home, was unsettled in the extreme. They were always moving from place to place in quest of a cheap situation, and always spending more than they ought. His affection for her soon sunk into indifference; hers lasted a little longer; and in spite of her youth and her manners, she retained all the claims to reputation that her marriage had given her.¹⁶

Although each novel is an individual act and ends individually, there is a clear distinction between the girls whose priority is to find a husband at all costs and the heroines whose priority is to find personal satisfaction along with commitment to duty to society and to their parents.

The girls whose priority it is to find husbands at all costs are unable to take advantage of their virginity, which is the privilege of purity. They both consciously trade happiness for security and enter marriages of convenience, or they delude themselves and end up in perpetual unhappiness. Whichever road they take, it is not the road to happiness or self-realization. These girls serve as foil characters to the heroines that are the main concern of this study, and, hence, bring out the importance of the code.

In conclusion, the heroines of Jane Austen's six novels start off on the road to matrimony alone, go through partial self-delusion and finally, embrace the reality of themselves and their partners. In doing this, they not only rise in the wheel of fortune, but they also bring about change in their partners. They pass the test of character on the road to matrimony by being true to their own nature and obtaining a marriage which is based on love and which has social sanction. Unlike their foils, marriage of convenience is not enough for them. As they go through an emotional, psychological, and intellectual experience, they make experiments without risks and a cautious attempt to reach true personal integrity, thus freedom and privilege, by reconciling the codes with their true nature. This is a true achievement as opposed to other marriages based on convenience or manipulation for these girls are not able to change the role their society assigns to them. Therefore, what is left to them is to secure a change in men without violating the codes and thus to reach personal integrity. No, they do not change the male dominated world, but they either co-function with a male figure in whom they bring about a change, or they unite with one who has undergone a change. Thus, they marry a male who no longer represents the conventional man-made world of the pre Victorian period. Last but not least, they are instrumental in the men's reaching their true nature. Thanks to the heroines of these novels, men are also able to free themselves of the strict codes of society that forces them to make concessions of their true nature as well.

NOTES

- ¹ Joan Perkin, Victorian Women, p. 243.
- ² Ibid., p. 91.
- ³ Jane Austen, Pride and Prejudice, p. 121.
- ⁴ Jane Austen, Persuasion, pp. 157-158.
- ⁵ Ibid., p. 158.
- ⁶ Jane Austen, Northanger Abbey, p. 46.
- ⁷ Jane Austen, Sense and Sensibility, p. 322.
- ⁸ Jane Austen, Mansfield Park, p. 231.
- ⁹ Ibid., p. 214.
- ¹⁰ Joan Perkin, Victorian Women, p. 76.
- ¹¹ Marvin Mudrick, "Irony as Discrimination," Victorian Values, ed. TC Smout, p. 84.
- ¹² Jane Austen, Pride and Prejudice, pp. 104-105.
- ¹³ Jane Austen, Sense and Sensibility, p. 158.
- ¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 380-381.
- ¹⁵ Jane Austen, Mansfield Park, p. 430.
- ¹⁶ Jane Austen, Pride and Prejudice, p. 236.

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