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BASIC ANXIETY IN JANE AUSTEN'S PRIDE AND PREJUDICE AND EMMA

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Abstract

*This paper delves into the inner conflict of Elizabeth Bennet and Emma, the heroines of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma*. The study uses Karen Horney's psychoanalytic social theory of basic anxiety that emphasizes the influence of childhood experiences and the impact of socialization on an individual's psychological development. It examines certain instances in the heroines' early experiences that shape their adult identity and self-knowledge. The analysis reveals that those heroines are highly influenced by their parents or chaperones, who themselves may suffer from neurotic struggles that hinder their ability to properly provide care and support for their children. Therefore, an analysis of those parents and chaperones is provided to see to what extent their psychological conflicts preoccupy their behavior towards the heroines.*

Keywords:

Basic Anxiety, Childhood Experiences, Coping Strategies, Psychological Conflict, Parenting Influence, Character Development.

1. Introduction

This research explores the representation of basic anxiety in Elizabeth Bennet from “Pride and Prejudice” and Emma Woodhouse from “Emma”. The two characters are known to share notable parallels, such as being approximately the same age and being “outspoken and confident” (Lee 2000). They navigate their struggles in their relationships with their parents and society, which ultimately shape their personal opinions on relationships, marriage, and independence. Jane Austen attempts to depict both heroines as heavily affected by their parents who fail to properly provide for their psychological needs. Consequently, these heroines face psychological conflicts in their early stages of development, which then manifest as further problems in adulthood. In this paper, the selected heroines are analyzed using Karen Horney’s theory of basic anxiety that emphasizes the effect of social and cultural factors on individual psychology.

Horney’s concept of basic anxiety refers to the sense of insecurity that an individual experiences during childhood due to their inability to cope with the challenges of life. According to Horney (1946), as cited in Joy (2011), the neurotic overcomes the feeling of insecurity by adopting one or two of the three primary coping strategies: moving towards people, moving against people, and moving away from people (32). By using Horney’s theory to analyze the selected novels, one can gain deeper understanding of the motivations of complex characters like Elizabeth Bennet and Emma Woodhouse. The two characters are examined as individuals experiencing psychological issues that become evident in their interactions both within their families and with society.

Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* stands as one of her most beloved pieces. One contributing factor to this is the heroine’s captivating and multifaceted nature. The novel was originally named *First Impressions* but later underwent extensive revisions before its title was altered to *Pride and Prejudice*. The plot revolves around the evolving relationship between Elizabeth Bennet and Fitzwilliam Darcy, which initially starts with both characters making snap judgement about each other. However, as the story progresses, they begin to acknowledge their biases and appreciate each other’s true character. The title of the novel reflects the inclinations of both characters, with Elizabeth representing prejudice, while Darcy embodying pride.

According to Paris (1978) in his study on “Character and Conflict in Jane Austen’s Novels” provides a psychological understanding Jane Austen’s representation of her prominent

heroines, including those of “Mansfield Park”, “Emma”, “Pride and Prejudice”, and “Persuasion” using Karen Horney’s psychoanalytical social theory. On his examination of *Pride and Prejudice*’s Elizabeth Bennet, Paris suggests that both Elizabeth and Darcy adopt traits that could be interpreted through Horney’s lens as adopting aggressive personalities, which can be understood as responses to the social structures and expectations of their time. Paris claims that the union between Elizabeth and Darcy, conceals an ambiguity as Elizabeth’s decision to marry Darcy seems to be motivated by power and ego satisfaction rather than genuine affection.

In Austen’s “Emma”, Paris says that the heroine’s quest for glory lead to missteps. Emma is the fourth novel by Jane Austen to be published during her lifetime. Critics often refer to it as a masterpiece of social comedy. The novel is primarily about Emma Woodhouse’s blunders, imperfections, and psychological maturation. Emma undergoes a complex journey of psychological and moral growth. Being raised in a privileged environment, Emma’s narcissistic traits compel her to manipulate situations, especially when trying to arrange romantic matches. Although initially receiving approval from society, her craving for validation and desire for recognition result in errors that force her to question her own identity. Paris believes that Austen delves into Emma’s journey through highlighting her self-centeredness, pursuit of perfection, and complex bond with her father. This provides a deep exploration of personal development and maturation.

While the current research paper adheres to Paris’ belief that Elizabeth adopts the aggressive type and Emma embodies the compliant type of personality in Karen Horney’s premise, it takes into consideration the influence of parents on the construction of these personality. Following Horney’s presumption that parents themselves may undergo psychological problems that prevent or influence their ability to assist their children, this research provide an analysis of the heroines’ parents using Horney’s theory of basic anxiety and the three coping strategies.

2. Karen Horney Psychoanalytic Theory of Basic Anxiety

Karen Horney’s psychoanalytic theory of personality observes the way people develop psychological and interpersonal functioning in order to deal with the challenges of their psychological needs (Paris, 1978). Shokri, Noor, and Bahar (2016) argue that Horney considers that people who go through disturbed interpersonal conflicts during childhood, especially with parents or caregivers, are expected to engage in “profound insecurity and vague apprehensiveness”

(118). This profound insecurity is what the theorist calls “basic anxiety”. It refers to the feeling experienced by a child of being dependent and vulnerable in a world that may seem hostile. This feeling can be caused by various negative factors in the child’s environment, such as dominance, neglect, inconsistent behaviour, lack of respect for individual needs, inadequate guidance, critical attitudes, or excessive admiration. (118). Horney believes that these factors lead the child to doubt the sincerity of their parents’ expressions of love, generosity, or honesty as they distrust that they might be mere pretence. While some of these feelings may stem from actual hypocrisy, others may arise from the child’s observation of contradictions in parental behaviour (Horney, 1945)

Being overwhelmed by these adverse conditions, the child seeks ways to navigate and cope with this challenging world. These coping mechanisms or “neurotic trends”, according to Horney, are developed unconsciously and can manifest as enduring character traits. These trends shape the child’s personality and influence their behaviour in the long term, and are categorised into three movements: moving toward, against, and away from people. Moving toward people or the self-effacing solution involves craving validation and approval from other people. People with such attitude typically prioritize humility and modesty over self-promotion or seeking recognition. The aggressive or the expansive trend involves those who move against people by being dominant, manipulative, or opportunistic. Expansive personalities often enjoy being the centre of attention and are comfortable expressing their thoughts, feelings, and ideas openly. The third movement involves detachment or withdrawal from others which is characterised by people with reserved and introverted personality. They often seek to retreat from social interactions and may feel more comfortable in solitary activities or in small, intimate settings (Paris, 1997). According to Horney, engaging in this trend leads to “a feeling of security as long as they function and that, conversely, anxiety is aroused when they fail to function. As long as the detached person can keep at a distance he feels comparatively safe” (Horney, 1945).

These strategies form an individual’s personality, which in return determines the course of their lives. Therefore, the neurotic conflicts of Elizabeth and Emma are studied through highlighting the significant impact from their caregivers’ neurotic problems. This paper does not only attempt to scrutinise the origins of psychological conflict in both heroines, but to argue that the nature of coping strategies adopted by heroines reflects those of their parents. By employing Horney’s theory, this research clarifies that Elizabeth and Emma’s anxieties are rooted in the way of their nurturing with some influence from society and culture.

3. Results and Discussion

Elizabeth Bennet from "Pride and Prejudice" is widely known as one of the most iconic characters in English literature. Despite her independent and confident demeanor, she possesses flaws and deficiencies, as noted by critics like Marilyn Butler. She argues that Austen's novel serves as a critique of Elizabeth's misguided behavior. Butler believes that Austen's readers often overlook the author's condemnation of her heroine's actions because they admire Elizabeth's wit and spirited outlook (Butler, 1975).

Although readers initially idealize Elizabeth, she is ultimately revealed to be a fallible character who makes errors and later undergoes a process of self-realization and development. She tends to pride herself on her ability to be a discerning judge of herself and others. According to Mary Poovey (1984), as cited in Bolger (2017), "[Elizabeth's] quick wit and powerful feelings may be unreliable moral guides", and that she "is only able to have an advantageous marriage because Elizabeth is deprived of the power she wishes to obtain" (18). Indeed, the heroine's misjudgment has negative consequences as seen when she believes Wickham's account of Darcy's character without thoroughly investigating the matter. This misunderstanding tarnishes Darcy's reputation and causes Elizabeth to harbor unjustified hostility towards him and worsens the relationship between them. Similarly, Elizabeth's impression of Wickham blinds her to his true character, and which leads her sister, Lydia, into a scandalous elopement with him. This biased decision has serious consequences for Lydia, Wickham, and their families.

When Elizabeth later realizes her mistaken views of Wickham's deceitful nature and Darcy's honorable conduct after reading the latter's letter, she undergoes a profound transformation. She confronts the discrepancies between her biased perceptions and reality. She admits her partiality and prejudice telling herself that "Till this moment I never knew myself" (Austen, 1813). This moment of realization marks a turning point in Elizabeth's character development because she begins to challenge her preconceptions and strive for a more objective understanding of the world around her. Her admission of blindness and prejudice demonstrates her psychological development and evolving self-awareness.

While this paper argues that Elizabeth's flawedness is a result of her upbringing and environment, it is challenging to attribute it to specific stages in her earlier experiences. Nonetheless, the details provided regarding her limited education offer insight into the factors that contribute to the growth of her flaws. During a conversation with Lady Catherine, Elizabeth admits

that her sisters lack artistic skills, and only she and one other sibling possess musical talents. Furthermore, she reveals that they have never received formal education from a governess:

We never had any governess [...] Compared with some families, I believe we were neglected [...] We were always encouraged to read and had all the masters that were necessary. Those who chose to be idle, certainly might (Austen, 1813)

Consequently, Elizabeth and her sisters lack parental guidance and support, and are left to discover their talents and develop their self-esteem independently. This situation somewhat frustrates their tendency to vie with one another. With no mentor to counsel or enforce expectations upon them, they lack the inspiration to strive for greater accomplishments. This failure on the part of their parents to guide them through their education hampers the daughters' ability to mature and develop into well-adjusted individuals. Elizabeth's mother is portrayed as "a woman of mean understanding, little information, and uncertain temper" (Austen, 1813), and possibly lacking a proper education herself. Her main concern is marrying off her daughters to secure social status while disregarding their personal needs and education. She prioritizes advantageous marriages over their individual growth and achievements. Her husband, Mr. Bennet, is described as an "odd mixture of quick parts, sarcastic humor, reserve, and caprice, that the experience of three and twenty years had been insufficient to make his wife understand his character" (Austen, 1813). In spite of being the main source of knowledge in his family, he chooses to seclude himself in the library rather than spreading awareness and sharing his wisdom with them. He often makes quick assumptions about people and takes pride in his judgements. He ridicules others' irrationality except for his beloved Lizzy. He constantly shows evidence of poor parenting as he acts cold and unwilling to fulfil his duties as a husband and a father. Marvin Mudrick blames Mr. Bennet for being the main reason for Mrs. Bennet's enthusiasm to marry off her daughters. He states:

An inadequate mind to begin with, marriage to a man who treats her with contempt only, preoccupation with the insistent material concerns imposed by society upon woman of her class, they have all combined in Mrs. Bennet's single operating motive: to be herself secure and comfortable, and to fortify her own security by getting her daughters settled in prudent marriage, that condition symbolic of material well-being (Mudrick 1968).

Mudrick's condemnation of Mr. Bennet indicates his empathizing with Mrs. Bennet. Mrs. Bennet feels concerned about the prospect that none of her daughters will inherit their father's

estate or secure a steady income. This drives her to work tirelessly to ensure their futures. She takes on the responsibilities of both parents. She does what she knows best, urging her daughters to find suitable suitors. Yet, both parents are constricted by their own failings to be a good example for their daughters. As their marriage is the model that the daughters have to follow, it leads to unpleasant experiences for them. June Sturrock discusses parenting in *Pride and Prejudice* and explains how the elder Bennets' relationship to their daughters affect the latter in a negative way: their "failings as individuals and more especially as parents and as spouses are apparent throughout the novel." (Sturrock 33). Considering their toxic relationship, the Bennet parents are not the most compatible couple as they possess different approaches to life. Mr. Bennet patently does not respect his wife, whom he perceives as foolish, and Mrs. Bennet spends much of her time trying to understand her withdrawn husband. Hazel Jones states that "Mr. Bennet has no respect for his wife, having been initially dazzled by youth, vivacity and beauty, but very soon made painfully aware of her lack of sense and intelligence" (Jones, 2009). Their relationship seems to be based upon tolerance rather than admiration and partnership.

To some extent, parents may sometimes neglect their children's needs due to their inability to deal with their own problems. According to Karen Horney, parents' attitudes towards the child "are determined by own neurotic needs and responses" (Horney, 1945), which prevent them from providing their child with sufficient love and care. Mr. Bennet adopts the resignation solution that "means for him simply the absence of all troubles, irritations, and upsets" (Austen, 1813). His withdrawal tendencies align with Horney's premise that the resigned individual "wants neither to belong nor to fight but keeps apart" (Austen, 1813). According to Bernard Paris, the detached person "worships freedom [...] He pursues neither love nor mastery; he wants rather to be left alone, to have nothing expected of him and to be subject to no restrictions" (Paris, 1997). Mr. Bennet tends to go for the option which costs him the least trouble. He refuses to take Elizabeth's advice to prohibit Lydia's trip to Brighton, which brings about the near disaster of Lydia running away with Wickham:

We shall have no peace at Longbourn if Lydia does not go to Brighton. Let her go then. Colonel Forster is a sensible man, and will keep her out of any real mischief; and she is luckily too poor to be an object of prey to anybody. At Brighton she will be of less importance even as a common flirt than she has been here. The officers will find women

better worth their notice. Let us hope, therefore, that her being there may teach her own insignificance. (Austen, 1813)

Elizabeth Bennet is keenly aware of her parents' failure in marriage and declines her mother's views on matrimony. Instead of viewing marriage as a means to obtain social status or financial security, she believes in mutual respect and affection. Drawing from Horney's theory, Elizabeth's upbringing influences her psychological and mental growth, particularly in her understanding of herself and others. Her parents' failure to positively influence her mindset contributes to her aggressive tendencies. According to Horney, individuals with aggressive personalities are skeptical of others' intentions and often adopt an authoritarian attitude to protect themselves emotionally. They seek success, superiority, and prestige to bolster their confidence. Her behavior reflects her internal conflict between her neurotic desires and her true understanding of others' motives. She grapples with her tendency to rebel against societal expectations while also seeking validation and respect which in return impacts her relationships and interactions.

Another heroine who tends to pride herself in her ability to discern people and situations is Emma Woodhouse. Like Elizabeth, Emma is charming, intelligent, and confident, however, she has flaws in her character. In the opening lines of the novel, the narrator introduces Emma as "handsome, clever, and rich," and seems to combine "some of the best blessings of existence" (Austen, 1816). Yet, "the real evils, indeed, of Emma's situation were the power of having rather too much her own way, and a disposition to think a little too well of herself" (Austen, 1816). She believes that she has the discernment to arrange people's fates and prides her role as matchmaker. However, these beliefs are rooted in her upbringing. Austen tells the reader that her heroine is a mistress of her father's house since the age of fourteen due to her mother's death and her sister's marriage. Her only companions are her elderly father, her governess, Miss Taylor, and a family friend, Mr. Knightley. The novel begins recounting how Miss Taylor's instruction shapes the person Emma eventually becomes. Emma views Miss Taylor as a companion rather than a mentor allows her to remain unchallenged and undisciplined. Miss Taylor's tendency to defend Emma motivates her conceit, as Emma believes, "She had such affection for her as could never find fault" (Austen, 1816). Miss Taylor fails in her role as a governess. The relationship between Emma and her tutor becomes reversed. Like the Bennet girls, Emma faces no condemnation for neglecting piano lessons. She feels no pressure to develop abilities and grows overconfident, thinking too highly of herself. The fact that her governess fails to get her to take her seriously encourages the

latter to do “what she liked, highly esteeming Miss Taylor’s judgment, but directed chiefly by her own” (Austen, 1816).

Moreover, after Miss Taylor’s marriage, Emma takes on grown-up duties too soon. In a time when she is supposed to be developing more skills to prepare her for future, she is obliged to run the house and care for her aged father instead: “she was now in great danger of suffering from intellectual solitude. She dearly loved her father, but he was no companion for her. He could not meet her in conversation, rational or playful.” (Austen, 1816). Kathleen Anderson says that Emma functions as her father’s parent (Anderson, 2000). She feels obligated to him and obliged to integrate his attitude into her own, as Elizabeth does with her father’s. However, while Mr. Bennet’s indifference influences Elizabeth’s insights, Mr. Woodhouse’s constant interference obscured Emma’s view of herself and those around her. Mudrick argues that Emma’s tendency to bring together suitable partners for a marriage also originates from her commitment to Mr. Woodhouse: “Accustomed to look after her father’s every whim and to forestall his every possible discomfort, she tries to extend his duty over her circle of friends and acquaintances as well” (Mudrick, 1974). Unlike Paris’ decision to place Emma in the compliancy trend, the present study argues that the heroine adopts the expansive solution in Horney’s classification of neurotic behaviour. This solution is illustrated in her need for power and her endeavour to exploit others and manipulate their actions. For both heroines, their family circumstances impact their perspectives towards prospective marriage and relationships in general.

4. Conclusion

Though readers are introduced to Elizabeth and Emma in early adulthood, their behaviours and worldview are shaped by their early experiences, particularly their interaction with their parents. In both novels, the relationship each heroine has with her father particularly shapes her beliefs, judgements, and formation of ideals. Both of their fathers fail to be good examples to their daughters and continue to negatively influence their decisions. As the heroines observe the behaviours of their fathers and interact with them, they develop neurotic strategies to cope with their internal struggles, which lead them to move against others by being hostile and manipulative. Studying *Pride and Prejudice*’s Elizabeth and *Emma*’s Emma through the lens of the psychoanalytic theory of basic anxiety offers a comprehensive approach into the reasons of

neurotic development, the influence of parents' psychological state on this development, and the interpersonal strategies that individual's exhibit to deal with discomfort.

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