The theme of money and marriage in Pride and Prejudice

Love and marriage are the chief themes in Jane Austen’s Pride and Prejudice. This is nothing novel as the themes had been a matter of concern to many playwrights and novelists ever before. Of them, Shakespeare is there, handling the theme of love and marriage in their multifarious dimensions. What is important is that Jane Austen, unlike Shakespeare, handles themes as ground reality, in the context of social environs in the late 18th century. Shakespeare also does not evade the question of money in a marriage, and the best example is The Merchant of Venice which is markedly different from The Midsummer Night’s Dream. The criticism that Austen moves within a two-inch box of ivory is invalid as the box may be two-inch in size, but it is not made of ivory. Austen’s world is the world she lived in and knew, and she made no attempt to flint her imagination beyond the boundary line. The middle class society in its necessary intercourse with the aristocracy and the tension that necessarily springs out in a classified society constitute the workshop of Austen. Naturally, the themes of love and marriage as handled by her have their own sociological, psychological and artistic implications. Hence, marriage which is a social institution is not handled by Austen as the ultimate result of love however it generates. Matrimony in Pride and Prejudice always involves the role of money.

Austen’s main subject in PP is courtship and marriage, and not love leading to marriage. The motive force is the sternly real and universally acknowledged fact that the mother, and the father, of three marriageable daughters, must be in search for young men of good fortune for their daughters. In the novel, there are seven marriages ( Mr. & Mrs Bennet; Bingley & Jane; Elizabeth & Darcy; Charlotte & Collins; Lydia & Wickham; the Lucases; the Gardiners ), five of them very important, (and the marriages) as they provide perspectives to judge what are the requirements of a good marriage. It is obvious that in Jane Austen’s view a marriage based on pure economic considerations is a bad marriage. Charlotte Lucas, in her bid to find security, binds herself with Collins who is not an ‘eligible’ bachelor. The background was the inequitable law of succession that gave no girls the right of inheritance. Again, in a comparatively feudal world, with little growth of capitalism, employment opportunities for womenfolk from decent families were nil. Collins’ eligibility consists in his being under the patronage of Lady Catherine in Hunsford, where he has a very good house and sufficient income. He intends to marry into the Bennet family in order to inherit some fortune, and so he shifts his attention from Elizabeth to Jane very quickly. Charlotte accepts Collins as she is a woman of small fortune, and seeks a preservative from want. Moreover, she marries Collins despite his stupidity because she does not wish to die an old maid. The second marriage, exemplified in the marriage between Lydia and Wickham, being based on physical charms is also an example of an unhappy marriage. This kind of marriage, where infatuation plays a greater role than love, is bound to be burdened with strain, and this is evident in the kind of life that Lydia leads in London where Wickham merrily and irresponsibly prances about caring little for the family. They both are dependent on Elizabeth for financial support. A marriage without financial soundness backing it is an aerial castle that takes little time to wither. Mae West reminds us of this peril when he says that ‘love conquers all things – except poverty and toothache’. Physical attraction that formed the foundation of the marriage between Lydia and Wickham and that was so strong, is seen to disappear before long. They remind us of Pope’s words: “They dream in courtship but in wedlock awake.” The marriage between Mr. And Mrs. Bennet is far from being ideal. It is almost parallel to or acts
as the model of the relationship between Lydia and Wickham. Both the partners in the marriage are silly and superficial, and their relationship is based on forbearance rather than love. Mr Bennet’s financial strength is the buttress of the relationship. Mr. Bennet is a subject of inexplicable indifference to the cause of the girls and is a foil to his wife, who while being silly and shallow, is desperate and overenthusiastic about finding husbands for their daughters. He is a specimen of Helen Rowland (1875-1950) who in A Guide to Men said: “A husband is what is left of a lover, after the nerve has been extracted.” Little wonder that Wickham is Mr. Bennet’s ‘favourite son-in-law’.

By the side these three imperfect marriages, we have two marriages that may called ideal in the context of the circumstances. These are the marriages between Bingley and Jane, and Darcy and Elizabeth. The Jane-Bingley relationship is ‘rationally founded’ and has ‘for basis the excellent understanding and super-efficient disposition of Jane, and a general similarity of feeling and taste between her and himself (Bingley).’ This union draws Elizabeth’s admiration and receives her appreciation as it is rationally founded on mutual understanding and feeling. Here both the brain and the heart work. This is a question of time and cannot be earned in haste. Even Shakespeare’s Rosalind, while being over head and ears in love with Orlando, does not rush to a hasty marriage and employs all her skill to test the solidity of Orlando’s love. Orlando’s financial condition, she knew, would change today or tomorrow, and the marriage takes place only after restitution of Orlando’s lost rights. It would be good to remember Thomas Hardy who speaks of such admirable relationship in Far from the Madding Crowd: “This good fellowship – camaraderie – usually occurring through similarity of pursuits, is seldom superadded to love between the sexes, because men and women associate, not in their labours, but in their pleasures only. Where, however, happy circumstance permits its (camaraderie’s) development, the compounded feeling proves itself to be the only love which is as strong as death – that love which many waters cannot quench nor the floods drown, beside which the passion usually called by the name is evanescent as steam.” The Jane-Bingley episode is solidly based on strong economic foundation, for Bingley is an eligible bachelor, a single man with a large fortune. Elizabeth would not have approved of their marriage, had there been any possibility of her sister falling in economic hardship.

The best relationship is that between Darcy and Elizabeth, which is the main theme of the novel. This relationship sprouts in negative circumstances, through mutual dislike. Darcy, a very self-conscious man, declines to dance with Elizabeth on the ground of her lower social status. This attitude of Darcy reflected in his words that Elizabeth overhears hurts Elizabeth’s natural feminine vanity and makes her prejudiced against Darcy. (Thus while Darcy is prejudiced against Elizabeth on account her inferior social position, Elizabeth becomes prejudiced against Darcy on account of his pride.) The course of events leads to self-discovery on the part of both, and the re-discovery of the opposite character. Darcy comes to understand the worth of Elizabeth and Elizabeth comes to know Darcy as a basically generous man who, though for his own sake, saves the Bennet family from a disastrous social scandal. The marriage between the two partners will be based on times-tested love and is, therefore, likely to be stable. The relationship is focussed by Austen as the ideal relationship, confirming what Sheridan says in The Rivals: “’Tis safest matrimony to begin with a little aversion.” It is no gainsaying that Darcy is a man of large fortune, with an annual income of ten thousand pounds a year, and Elizabeth has no iota of doubt in her mind that her future marital life would not suffer owing to hardship even if Darcy’s income was not boosted by inheritance from the Bennets.

Love in Austen’s novels is not handled as the intercourse between two persons of the opposite sex, but in the context of the society. Love, at first sight or second sight, is supposed to lead to
A marriage, and a marriage is a social institution with important social implications. Even it is not an affair restricted to the two immediate families but to more distant relations as well. So rushing headlong into a relationship that would jeopardize social fabric and consequently personal lives is not approved of by Austen. That is why she does not endorse the elopement of Lydia and Wickham, that, owing to ignoring the need of money in a marriage, suffers terribly. The wedlock, in the words of A P Herbert (1890-1971), becomes a ‘deadlock’.

Curiously, while Austen gives weight to the social importance of the personal relationship, she does not seem to advocate that society should be deciding force in love and marriage, not that only money, as Mrs Bennet believes, should be the prime consideration for a good marriage. After all, it is heart that matters, and after the hearts are mutually responsive, the social factor is taken into consideration. Darcy and Elizabeth mate up in spite of Darcy’s family obligations which Lady Catherine always presses upon him. And Austen tactfully keeps Darcy safe from unfaithfulness. And Bingley and Jane also settle their affair first between themselves before bending themselves to accommodate the interests of the families. Thus almost in the spirit of Twelfth Night and As You Like It, Pride and Prejudice achieves the concord in a complex pattern that began in an atmosphere of discord and divergence. Austen is not a romantic novelist who ignores the stomach while feeding heart; she is a sober authoress writing about personal relationships in a society whose principal aim is to see people living happily. And the source of happiness is primarily money, not withstanding the importance of a good marriage that would produce ideal citizens.