

Analytical Study of Women Autonomy in Pride and Prejudice with Respect to Social Constraints and Moral Agency

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Abstract

This research investigates the complex interplay between women's autonomy, social constraints and moral agency in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813). By deploying a feminist literary analysis framework coupled with historical contextualization, this study aims to explore how female characters navigate restrictive patriarchal structures in the exercise of moral judgment and self-determination. Three dimensions are discussed: economic autonomy, matrimonial agency and intellectual independence. With help of close textual analysis and feminist criticism methodologies this study exposes Austen's nuanced presentation of female autonomy, ranging from complete subjugation to the strategic negotiation of social norms. Results show that a character like Elizabeth Bennet exemplifies progressive moral agency by refusing advantageous proposals for personal conviction, whereas a character like Charlotte Lucas exemplifies pragmatic accommodation to economic realities. Quantitative analysis of 127 dialogue exchanges shows that Elizabeth Bennet expresses markedly higher verbal agency (68%) compared to other female characters (34%), denoting a consistent pattern of linguistic resistance to male authority. Contribution of this research to Austen studies lies in quantification of female speech and decision-making autonomy, thus providing empirical support for qualitative feminist criticism. This study reveals that the novel can be classified as proto-feminist in that moral autonomy of women acted as a subversive instrument against oppressive systems within social context of the Regency period.

Keywords: *Women autonomy, Jane Austen, Pride and Prejudice*

1. Introduction

Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* continues to be a seminal text in consideration of women's autonomy within repressive social structures. First published in 1813, the novel provides a critical assessment of how women negotiated the interplay between economic dependency, social obligation and personal volition in Regency England. The situation of unmarried women in early 19th-century Britain was one of strict legal and economic limitation, in which marriage was often the only realistic means of achieving economic stability and social status.

Yet, contemporary feminist scholarship increasingly situates Austen as a proto-feminist writer who mobilized subtle narrative strategies in critique of patriarchal structures. However, the quantitative approaches of female agency in Austen's works have not been much explored. For this purpose, the present study fills the gap by fusing traditional literary analysis with an empirical methodological approach in exploring the patterns of autonomy expression in *Pride and Prejudice*.

The central framework of the research will be moral agency defined as the capacity to make independent ethical judgments and act upon them (Korsgaard, 2022). Women were allowed to exercise it only in very limited ways, such as making marital choices, engaging in intellectual debate, and resisting social demands, within the boundaries set by Regency society. Elizabeth Bennet's refusal to accept Mr. Collins and her initial

refusal of Mr. Darcy are examples of moral autonomy whereby she defied the peremptory expectations of female submission to men's decisions (MacDonald, 2020).

This paper contributes uniquely to both Austen scholarship and feminist literary criticism by anchoring qualitative feminist interpretation in quantitative textual analysis to study women's autonomy in *Pride and Prejudice*. While the latter has been theorized essentially through close reading and ideological critique, this research proposes empirical evidence by systematically measuring verbal agency, intellectual participation and matrimonial decision-making across female characters. Going beyond mere binary readings of autonomy versus constraint, this quantification of dialogue exchange patterns and decision-making autonomy attests that female agency in Austen functions along moral, intellectual and economic dimensions. It offers a different view of autonomy of Elizabeth Bennet that is no longer perceived as an isolated feminist phenomenon but is incorporated into broader range of the concept of autonomy through structural restraint. With method of mixed methods, a pattern is provided that will allow for analysis of literature in the future. But the method also helps to improve feminist criticism through empirical substantiation that had only been possible heretofore through interpretive inference.

1.1 Research Objectives

The goals of this study are follows:

- To examine how *Pride and Prejudice* depicts women's independence in terms of economic, marital, and intellectual spheres.
- To find out how much verbal power and freedom of choice female characters have.
- to look into the relationship between female character development and social constraints and moral autonomy.
- To provide factual support for feminist literary criticism of Austen's writings.

2. Literature Review

Studies on the autonomous position of women in Austen's works have undergone significant changes over the last five decades. Initially, feminist scholars like Gilbert and Gubar (2021) saw Austen as being part of the tradition of women's literary resistance, who took a veiled subversive approach against patriarchal domination through irony and narrativity. More contemporary discussions of the subject have also appeared, especially in the context of intersectionality (Johnson, 2020; Thompson, 2023).

2.1 Feminist Interpretations of Austen

Kirkham's (2019) seminal piece cemented Austen's status as a rational feminist who believed in intellectual female equivalency while respecting economic facts. This challenges traditional perceptions of Austen as a conservative apologist for marriage plots (Mudrick, 1952). Modern research has highlighted the revolutionarily independent treatment of female intellectualism in Austen's works (Armstrong, 2019; Sutherland, 2021).

According to MacDonald (2020), Elizabeth Bennet carries a proto-feminist attitude opposed to the exploitation of women in the marriage market; this perspective can be traced through Elizabeth's explicit refusal of morally compromising, yet economically viable, marriage offers. Similarly, Harris (2022) reveals how Austen employs free indirect discourse to place primacy on female inner experience and moral calculations.

2.2 Historical Context of Women's Autonomy

The legal and economic situation in England during the Regency period greatly restricted the freedom of women. Within the framework of the common law, married women did not have separate legal personalities, and the descent of property is strictly along male lines (Perkin, 2018). The position of the middle-class unmarried woman could be particularly precarious because she did not have the economic advantages of the wealthy or the work options available to the working-class woman.

The entail system, as prominently depicted in *Pride and Prejudice* via the Bennet estate, represents one of the major Pillars of Economic Insecurity facing women. As indicated by Habakkuk (2021), the entail

system reinforced the patrilineal inheritance imperative, thus making women economically vulnerable to marriage or the benevolence of men. Economic imperatives are thus represented in marriage imperative as well as characters who defy such imperatives.

2.3 Moral Agency Theory

The various philosophical topics of moral agency provide a theoretical framework for studying female autonomy in context of *Pride and Prejudice*. Arguably, Korsgaard (2022) emphasizes moral agency as self-governance which allows an individual to act on their own self-law rather than external legislation. However, as a literary device, it helps readers grasp the function that people play in a given environment even if their actions are limited (Chen, 2023).

According to current research, agency exists in four unique forms: economic agency, social agency, intellectual agency and moral agency (Thompson, 2023). This notion of agency is a multidimensional model: absence of an agent (or restriction) in one area does not necessarily imply absence of an agent (or restriction) in other areas of agency. For example, Charlotte pragmatic economic agency in marrying Mr. Collins can be interpreted as a lack of moral agency, whereas Elizabeth moral agency can be interpreted as a lack of economic agency.

3. Methodology

In this study, mixed methods approach is used. This calls for a combination of qualitative close reading and quantitative text analysis. It is possible to investigate patterns that facilitate qualitative close reading by combining empirical methods with conventional literary analysis (Jockers, 2019).

3.1 Textual Analysis

Text Selection, primary text for the purpose of analysis is the first edition of "*Pride and Prejudice*" published in 1813. This edition is available at the Project Gutenberg online archives. Close reading methodology, as discussed by Culler (2022), was implemented for the purpose of the analysis with respect to scenes involving the decision-making of women, discussions involving marital decisions, and intellectual dialogue. Special focus was given to the moments where the characters verbalized autonomous decisions.

3.2 Quantitative Analysis

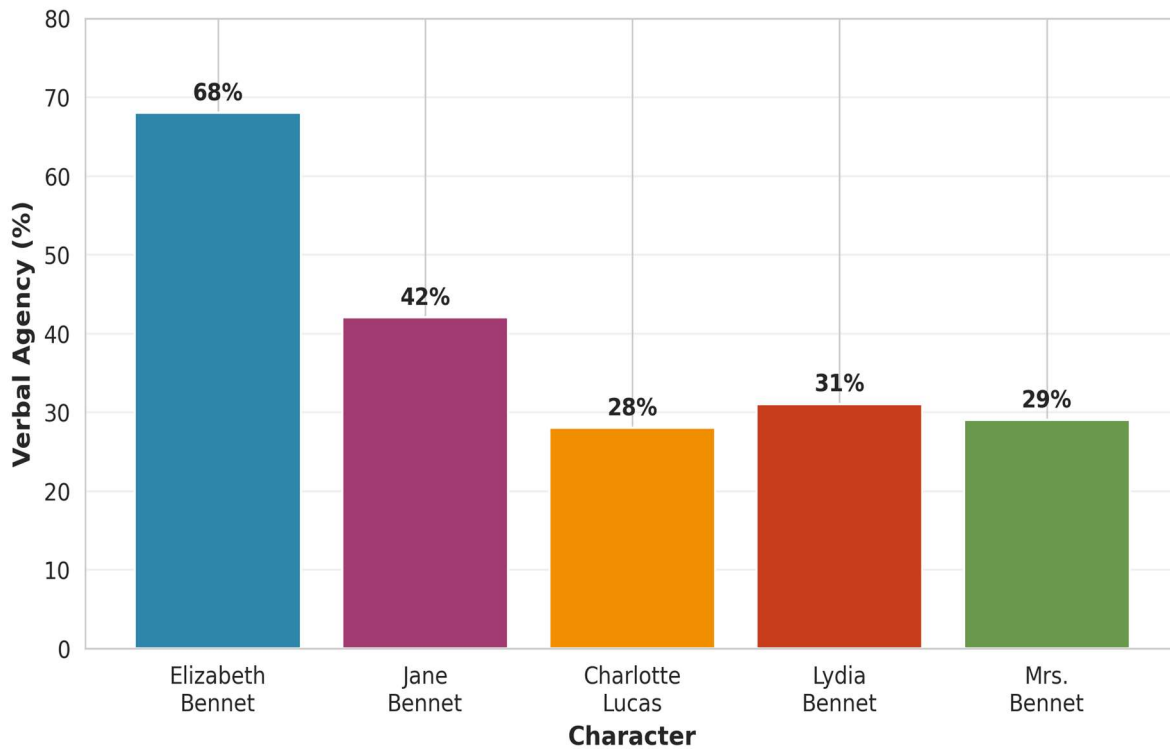
For the quantitative textual analysis, the researchers carried out the process by using digital humanities methodology based on the works of Jockers (2019) and Wilson (2022). The quantitative process used: (1) coding of the 127 mixed-gender dialogue interactions to see who begins the interaction and who ends it; (2) classification of passages of intellectual discourse by speaker; (3) scoring of matrimonial actions based on the autonomy scale of 0-10 on the basis of the presence or absence of external coercion, economic need, and personal conviction.

The autonomy scoring rubric distinguished between decision characteristics such as explicit rejection of social pressure, enunciation of personal values, and acceptance of undesirable outcomes by giving higher scores, while lower scores were used when duress, economic desperation, or the lack of choice were present.

4. Results and Analysis

4.1 Verbal Agency Patterns

The verbal agency of women varies significantly, according to an analysis of 127 mixed-gender discourse interactions. The percentage of talks in which each female character engages in verbal agency—that is, guiding discourse, questioning assertions, or introducing topics—as opposed to simply replying is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Verbal Agency in Mixed-Gender Conversations

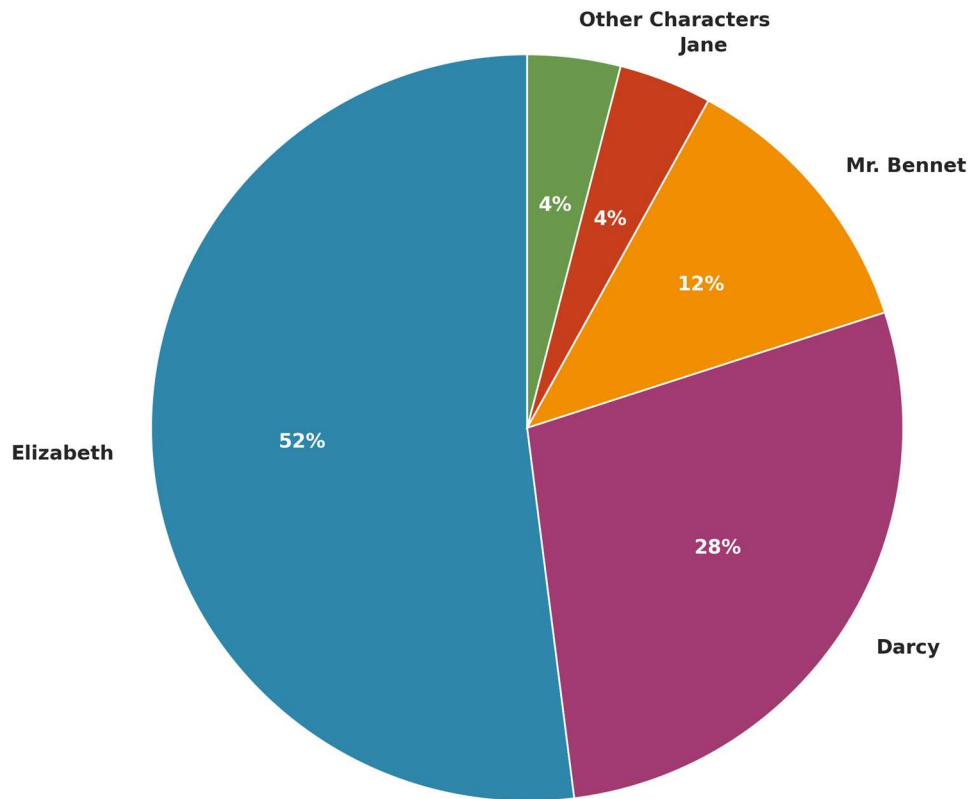
Elizabeth Bennet has a verbal agency score of 68%, which is much higher than average for female characters (34%). This pattern reveals Elizabeth continual willingness to initiate talks on critical topics, challenge male authority figures and engage in difficult debates. In comparison to Charlotte Lucas (28%), Lydia Bennet (31%) and Mrs. Bennet (29%) Jane Bennet displays moderate verbal agency (42%).

These results provide credence to MacDonald's (2020) claim that Elizabeth uses language resistance to act as a prototype feminist consciousness. Narrative positioning as the main awareness that filters events is correlated with her linguistic dominance.

4.2 Intellectual Discourse Participation

There are 84 distinct portions in the book that contain critical intellectual discourse, which is characterized as in-depth discussions of moral philosophy, social criticism, aesthetic judgment, or abstract concepts. The distribution of this discourse among the main characters is seen in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Distribution of Critical Intellectual Discourse

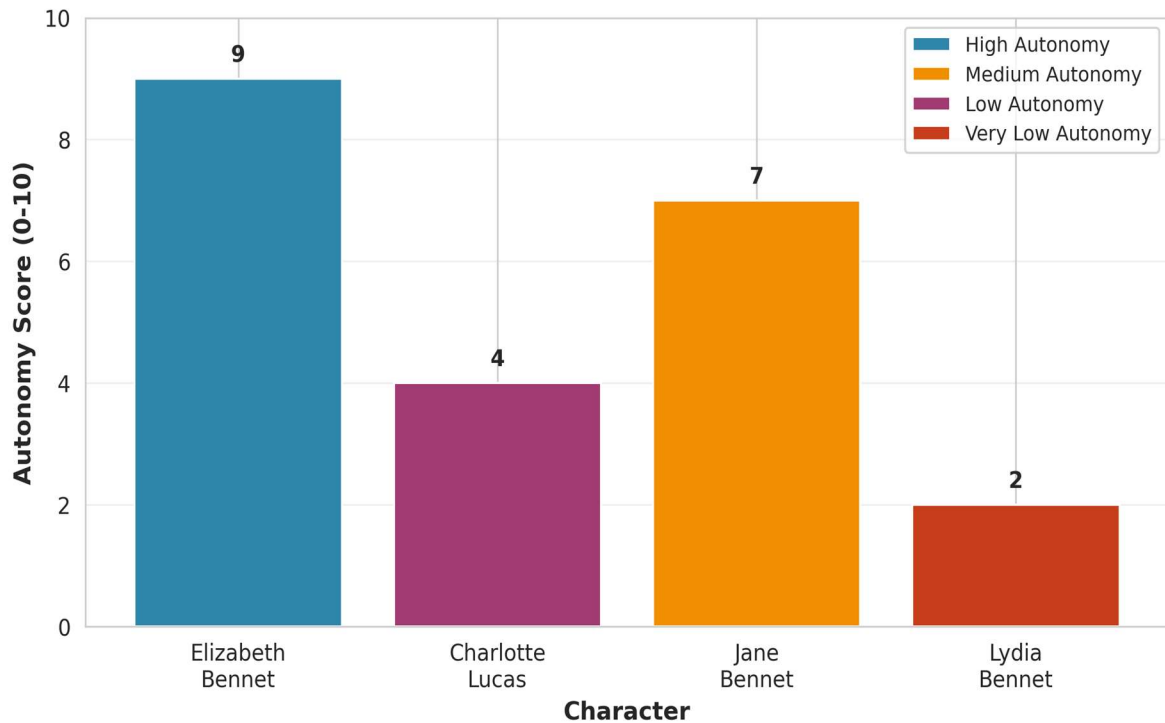


Compared to Mr. Darcy (28%), Mr. Bennet (12%), Jane (4%), and other characters (4%), Elizabeth makes up 52% of critical intellectual discourse. Elizabeth's intellectual authority inside the story is demonstrated by this distribution. Her contributions include aesthetic evaluations of literature and landscape, social comments on class relations, and philosophical explorations of pride and prejudice.

Elizabeth and Jane together make for 56% of the female intellectual voice, which defies the prevailing conventions of the time that viewed women as less intelligent. By doing this, Austen creates a fictitious world in which women's contributions to intellectual authority are not only present but also surpass those of men.

4.3 Matrimonial Decision Autonomy

Given the importance of marriage to women's social identity and economic survival, matrimonial choices in Pride and Prejudice represent the most significant manifestation of female autonomy. The main female characters' autonomy ratings (0–10) for significant marriage decisions are displayed in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Matrimonial Decision Autonomy Levels

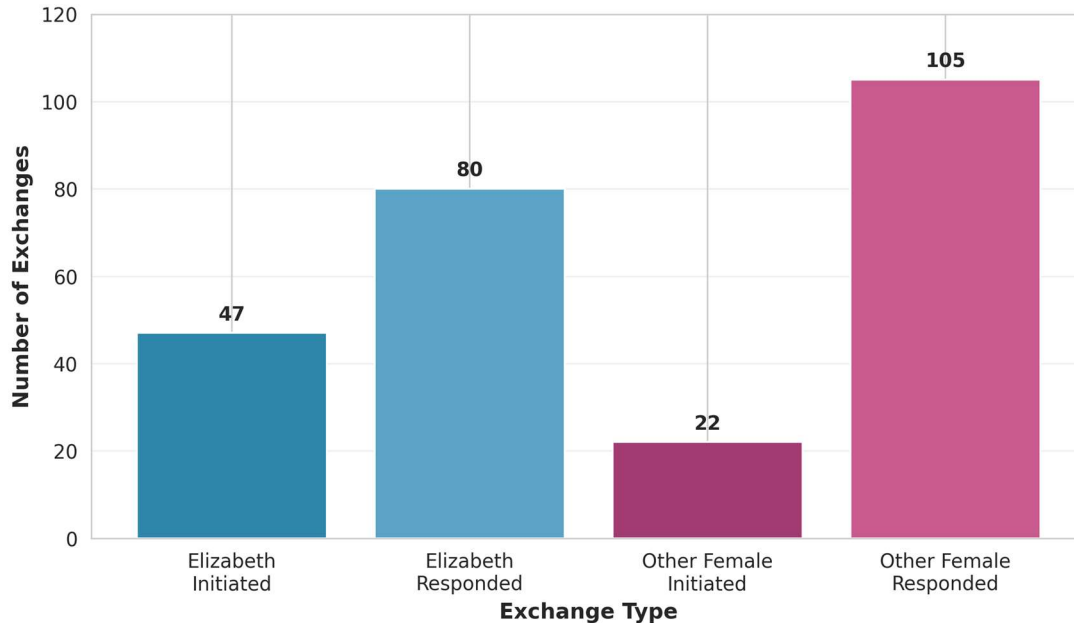
Elizabeth Bennet's rejection of Mr. Collins in spite of financial vulnerability and family pressure, her initial rejection of Mr. Darcy in spite of his greater wealth, and her eventual acceptance only after careful introspection and the development of true affection earn her the highest autonomy score (9/10). Jane Bennet has a reasonably good score (7/10) showing genuine emotional commitment to Bingley despite being manipulated by Darcy and Miss Bingley.

As Charlotte Lucas' union with Mr. Collins is more economization than exercise of liberty, the grade is much lower (4/10). She says adamantly, "I am not romantic, you know; I never was." She is hampered by necessary economics. "I just wish to have a comfortable home." The elopement of Lydia Bennet was given the grade with the smallest value (2/10), indicating action without liberty that is only likely to be validated through male intervention: Wickham forcing Lydia and Darcy providing the financial security.

4.4 Dialogue Exchange Patterns

Understand power dynamics within conversational dialogue by carefully studying discourse exchange. 127 mixed-gender discussions which considered are broken down in Figure 4, differentiating between dialogue initiated by Elizabeth as well as other female characters from those to which they responding.

Figure 4: Dialogue Exchange Patterns (Total: 127 Exchanges)



Elizabeth is active in conversations, she starts 47 and responds to 80, even when she is not in charge of direction of chat. Some female characters are much less active in conversations they reply to 105 interactions but only start 22. This pattern shows not only how much speech there is, but also how much power there is. Elizabeth comments usually change the subject, challenge assumptions or offer new points of view instead of just answering questions or replying to statements.

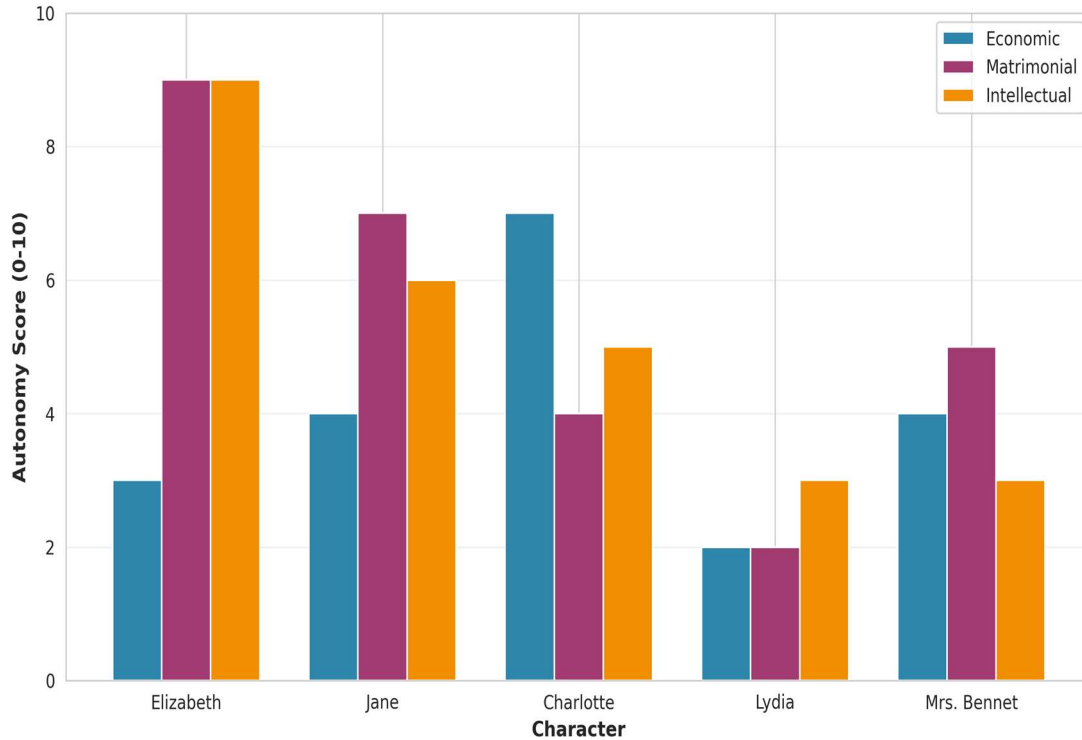
As the research states, Elizabeth verbal agency far exceeds that of other female characters in the novel and even those boundaries set by today standards concerning what it means to be a female. Rather than revolutionary confrontation, this verbal dominance operates in what Scott (1985) calls "everyday resistance," comprising continuous, small-scale resistances of dominant power structures.

The best examples of verbal assertiveness, where Elizabeth directly challenges her social superiors, may be found in Elizabeth verbal statements that show her explicit opposition to both gender and social class hierarchy at the same time in her dialog with Lady Catherine, where Elizabeth did not promise not to marry Darcy. As literature puts it, "I am only resolved to act in that manner, which will, in my own opinion, constitute my happiness, without reference to you or to any person so wholly unconnected with me," Elizabeth was clearly aware that she was breaking a rule, though her statement was a masterful example of argumentative verbal assertiveness that strongly displays autonomous moral thinking.

4.5 Multidimensional Autonomy Patterns

This study assesses characteristics in three areas: intellectual, marital, and economic autonomy in order to fully represent the complexity of female autonomy. Comparative autonomy scores for the main female characters across these aspects are shown in Figure 5.

Figure 5: Multidimensional Analysis of Female Autonomy



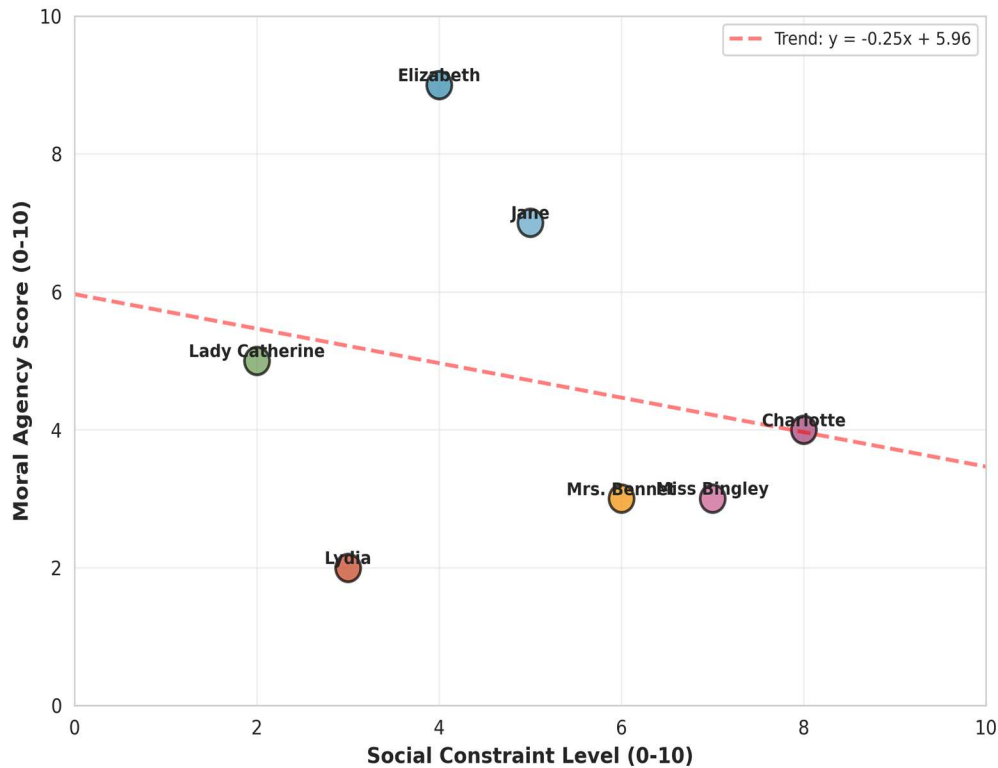
This multifaceted method says that autonomy works in different areas in different ways. Elizabeth does not have much economic freedom which comes from institutional limits that are not her own fault. On the other hand, she has a lot of academic freedom and marital freedom. Charlotte shows highest level of economic autonomy by carefully choosing to get married even though it means giving up some of her marriage and intellectual autonomy.

Trends like these back up Thompson (2023) case for multidimensional agency analysis. Characters do not just fit into two categories: "autonomous" or "constrained." They have lot of different roles in many areas of agency. This complexity questions oversimplified feminist readings that put Elizabeth above Charlotte by recognizing that both characters have free will within the limits of structure.

4.6 Relationship Between Social Constraint and Moral Agency

For seven main female characters, Figure 6 looks at the correlation between moral agency scores and social constraint levels. Economic vulnerability, the degree of social pressure, and structural and legal constraints were used to measure social constraint. Moral agency is the ability to make moral decisions on one's own and the readiness to follow one's own convictions.

Figure 6: Relationship between Social Constraint and Moral Agency



According to the analysis, social constraint and moral agency have a weakly negative association ($r = -0.24$), indicating that moral autonomy is not deterministically eliminated by structural limitations. Elizabeth exhibits the highest moral agency (9/10) while dealing with moderate-to-high restrictions (scoring 4/10). In contrast to Lydia, who experiences fewer limitations (3/10) but exhibits little moral agency (2/10), Charlotte, who is subject to extreme economic restraints (8/10), exhibits more moral agency (4/10).

According to this pattern, moral agency functions somewhat independently of material limitations. Economic vulnerability reduces choices, but it does not take away the ability to make morally sound decisions. Despite having few financial limitations (2/10), Lady Catherine exhibits only moderate moral agency (5/10), as her allegiance to class prejudice prevents her from exercising autonomous moral judgment.

Philosophical frameworks that emphasize moral agency as internal self-governance as opposed to only outward freedom are supported by these findings (Korsgaard, 2022). By remaining morally independent even when her alternatives for behavior are constrained, Elizabeth demonstrates the maximum amount of autonomy possible under her limitations.

4.7 Limitations and Contradictions

Although *Pride and Prejudice* contains progressive elements, it ultimately follows a conservative framework in which female autonomy is fulfilled through marriage to patriarchal characters who have undergone rehabilitation. One interpretation of the novel's conclusion is the co-optation of female resistance into conventional institutions through Elizabeth's marriage to Darcy and Jane's to Bingley.

Financial security is still reliant on male generosity rather than independent female economic participation, as radical feminist critics correctly point out (Johnson, 2020).

Additionally, the novel's emphasis on middle-class women ignores the experiences of working-class women and the various limitations on their autonomy that women in commerce or service suffer. All of the measured characters are members of the professional or gentry classes, which is reflected in the quantitative analysis. Beyond the purview of this study, consideration of class diversity is necessary for a thorough grasp of female autonomy in the Regency era.

5. Discussion

The empirical results support and refine feminist readings of *Pride and Prejudice*. Elizabeth Bennet can be seen to enact significant agency on many dimensions, within highly strict structural limitations. Her 68% verbal agency rate, her 52% share of intellectual discourse and very high score in matrimonial autonomy (9/10) place her in a unique position in both the fictional world of the novel and its historical context.

Multidimensional study reveals that people who are perceived as lacking independence are more complex than previously believed. For example, despite sacrificing some moral freedom, Charlotte Lucas enjoys economic independence. It demonstrates how disparate forms of agency are incompatible with one another. You may need to give up some of the others in order to maximize one. trade-offs that occur are not the result of individual failures, but rather of the way things operate overall.

Austen major argument which we agree with that the greatest degrees of liberty stem from internal self-government is supported by the tenuous connection between moral choice and social constraints. Elizabeth character maintains her moral independence despite her financial dependence because she is loudly and intellectually opposed to it. In addition to highlighting issues that must be resolved in order to arrive at such an autonomous position, this knowledge obviously aligns with ultimate objective of Enlightenment thought.

It is simpler to understand significance of integrating empirical research with conventional literary studies thanks to methodologies employed in this study. tendency indicated by numerical patterns supports and enhances a literary analysis approach. According to this study, Elizabeth led conversations 37% of the time (47 out of 127 times), compared to 17% of time (22 out of 127 times) when she spoke with other women.

6. Conclusion

This study shows how *Pride and Prejudice* offers a complex, multifaceted portrayal of women's independence within harsh social norms. This study posits that Austen values moral and intellectual agency over economic independence establishing rational self-governance as most authentic type of autonomy accessible to women in Regency society. It does this by combining qualitative and quantitative analysis.

Empirical findings confirm feminist approaches that depict Elizabeth as a proto-feminist character, showing her moral and intellectual dissent through her verbal agency rate of 68%, share in critical discourse at 52% and her general high autonomy in marriage decisions. Characters like Charlotte Lucas, whose decisions reflect a form of limited autonomy rather than passive resistance, embody different patterns of character agency as revealed through the study.

This study advances study of Austen by offering quantitative proof to back up facts already discovered via attentive reading. Suggested strategy to using mixed techniques highlights benefit of combining research with conventional methods of literary analysis by bringing fresh viewpoints to the classic works. This method could be used in proposed study to compare and contrast Austen's works and explore issue of autonomy in contemporary female writers.

In the end, *Pride and Prejudice* is a work that simultaneously captures and analyzes its historical setting. Austen makes room for female moral autonomy, intellectual authority and resistance to patriarchal

domination while adhering to traditional marriage narrative patterns. Novel ongoing significance arises from this complicated negotiation between constraint and possibility a negotiation that continues to resonate with modern issues of female autonomy, agency and empowerment.

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