

# The Gaze Reframed: Feminist Film Theory and Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*

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## 1. Introduction

One of the most highly acclaimed developments and classics in modern literature is "*Pride and Prejudice*" by Jane Austen, which still leaves a lot of readers spellbound by this intelligent book. Although the novel touches upon such themes as love, class, and mobility, feminist interpreters find gender dynamics of much more interest, especially in its film adaptations (Salem Mirete et al., 2022). Feminist film theory, particularly Laura Mulvey's gaze theory, allows us to see these adaptations differently. These gender performances can be regarded as modern reinterpretations of "*Pride and Prejudice*" that not only go counter with traditional gender norms but, above all, allow female characters to develop their agency and emancipate themselves in terms of equality. The traditional gaze is of the man who dictates what he sees in the portrayal of the female characters in this story.

On the contrary, modern adaptations, embodied by Joe Wright's 2005 film, destroy this pattern through ground-breaking camera angles and views (Coons et al., 2022). Such a shift enables female characters, such as Keira Knightley's Elizabeth Bennet, to become strong and independent figures, reflective of modern mentality. More importantly, such adaptation often transcends the limits of societal constraints, which help female characters transgress the boundaries of normative behaviours asserting the autonomy of will. For instance, the 1995 BBC series adaptation shows the pragmatically achieved marriage partner for Charlotte Lucas which contradicts the idealistic, stereotypical elements of romance. This essay will reiterate that "*Pride and Prejudice*" is a work that people should further analyse to discover possible gender and class imbalances (Temple et al., 2023). Using feminist film theory reinterpretation of the gaze in cinematic adaptations, these contemporary versions critique certain gender stereotypes and grant the female protagonists the male roles, mirroring the narrative in the frame of modern ideas about agency and equality while keeping Jane Austin's classic actual.

## 2. Traditional Cinematic Gaze and Its Limitations

The gaze, discussed in feminist film theory, mainly criticises how the visual arts have historically served a male audience, developing these women as objects and supporting an inequitable gender paradigm (Biesen et al., 2017). In the context of *Pride and Prejudice*, many early cinematic adaptations unknowingly perpetuated this dynamic; female protagonists were portrayed as objects of matrimonial lust, not subjects of the narrative. For example, the film version of 1940 is very funny in its depiction of the rituals of courtship and the manners of that era, but she does it regularly reduces Elizabeth Bennet to her destiny that is hinging on her romantic relationships; the subtle implication of the virgin that the female gaze places on the value of female's relational rather than as theorised by Laura Mulvey, the traditional cinematic gaze objectifies women, making them passive objects to be desired by the male spectator (Kohls). Evoked, in earlier screen incarnations of '*Pride and Prejudice*,' as cinematography, frame, and interaction. For instance, the camera constantly highlighted Elizabeth Bennet's physical traits, paying close attention to her beauty and dress, thus building the idea that her cost was her beauty in the eyes of prospective husbands. This portrayal type of a woman has relegated Elizabeth to a passive role, where her agency and intelligence are bottled up in the name of marriageability.

Moreover, the changes specified in the traditional adaptations stressed that marriage was the end of women, making them something up for sale on the market. In the films, the female characters had one single role: getting marriages of convenience, and that is why their actions and choices all centred on this purpose (Kelsey et al., 2023). This standpoint supports gender stereotypes and helps to unbalance the female character's agency.

The classic example of these challenges posed by the traditional cinematographic gaze is provided by the 1940 movie *Pride and Prejudice*, directed by Robert Z. Leonard (Nachumi et al., 2022). Although the film immortalises the flirtatiousness and refinement of Regency, Elizabeth Bennet is frequently portrayed in a fashion that is somehow male-oriented. The camera frequently objectifies Greer Garson by focusing on her appearance and clothes, targeting her as the recipient of desire by the male characters and the audience. Additionally, the film underscores Elizabeth's romantic troubles and her wish for a careful husband, masking her wit, intelligence, and self-sufficiency. Nevertheless, it should be noted that film adaptations of "*Pride and Prejudice* have

changed throughout history. As feminist standpoints have become much more common and people's ideas about what is proper have altered, filmmakers and audiences have become considerably more sensitive to the limitations of the conservative gaze (Milton et al., 2023).

On the contrary, modern adaptations have consciously striven to play with these conventions and undermine them for a more complex portrayal of the characters. Modern versions, including the 2005 film by Joe Wright, have considerably developed in remoulding the cinematic gaze. In this version, Keira Knightley as Elizabeth Bennet has an empowered agency-driven portrayal. An unprecedented brilliance of the cinematography technique frames a privileged vision of Elizabeth above a multitude of admirers willing to capture her in a single, generalising look, turning her into a stationary view object of desire (Litvak et al., 2023). Shattered into fragments through varying view angles, the main heroine remains optimally the intellectual leader and impressive expression of an independent, spectacular woman; her physicality is de-emphasised and instead interpreted as part of the character and her actions, affirming the feminist perspective of the value of individuality and agency of women.

In addition to redirecting the gaze, modern versions of the novel also subvert the convention of characterisation that marriage is merely the end game for all female characters (Shachar et al., 2019). These adaptations underline the significance of self-development, self-awareness, and emotional satisfaction for women outside marriage. In the 2005 version, Elizabeth Bennet emphasises her happiness and well-being more than the one dictated by society. Thus, she is seen as her own master and mistress in determining her destiny. In addition, modern remakes depict the subtle details of female relationships and women's relations, showing them as women's sources of spiritual support. The sisterhood between Elizabeth and Jane Bennet which is shown in the 1995 BBC series adaptation, is a good illustration of the importance of women bonding and how that helps in working against the prevailing gender inequality (Matthew et al., 2023). Finally, in conclusion, this gaze in feminist film theory provides glimmers to the shortcomings of early film versions of *'Pride and Prejudice'* in reinforcing traditional gender relations and objectifying female characters. Such adaptations degraded women into mere sexual objects and viewed them exclusively in terms of their marriage ability as their main value. But modern adaptations have achieved unprecedented results in the refinement of the cinematographic look taking into account female characters who are agents, clever, and autonomous. They contradict the focus on marriage and show that women should discover themselves and develop rather than marry and become someone's property (Litvak et al., 2023). Through these transformations, *"Pride and Prejudice"* provides these viewers with a much richer and empowered depiction of its female characters, reflecting the changes in the perceptions of engaging in gender and feminism.

### **3. Feminist Reframing in Modern Adaptations**

On the other hand, modern adaptations have attempted to change this centred pose, using different feminist filmmaking techniques to discern female power and viewpoint. The most notable version of this adaptation, directed by Joe Wright in 2005, is also the most revolutionary in narrative and visual storytelling (Temple et al., 2023). By employing intimate cinematography in terms of close-ups and point-of-view shots, the film manages to allocate the audience to Elizabeth's perspective, almost reframing the basis of the gaze from objectification to identification. With this approach, Elizabeth's autonomy goes up and allows viewers to interact with Elizabeth's intellectual maturation and emotional progress on a more intimate level (Kelsey et al., 2023). Joe Wright's 2005 adaptation of *'Pride and Prejudice'* uses feminist reframing to strengthen the viewers' engagement with Elizabeth Bennet. The audience is almost transported into the story through Elizabeth's eyes by utilising various intimate cinematography techniques such as close-ups and point-of-view shots. This change from the object to the identification can change how the audience interrelates with the figure, thereby highlighting her will and distinctiveness. Close-ups allow the viewers to study the subtleties of Elizabeth's expressions and emotions in detail. The close-ups manage to present the depth of the portrayal of Elizabeth by Keira Knightley (Gilbert et al., 2023). She appears as her intelligence, intellect, and resistance, numbers that break away from the usual scopic gaze that had reduced her to a mere romantic pursuit.

Elizabeth's world becomes further understood through the use of point-of-view shots. Viewers who watch the events from her standpoint get actively involved in her intellectual and emotional adventures. This movie crafting method manages to bring out the merits of the character and transcendence from the character to the audience, striking a bond that is more profound and compassionate (Shachar et al., 2019). In addition, the 2005 version calls into question the conventional representations of masculinity and femininity, emphasising the feminist understanding of partnership as equal through its depiction of Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy's relationship. Their exchanges are shown not as a battle of two minds between a superior and an inferior but as a conversation between equals, both sharing the same moral and intellectual credentials. This interpretation departs significantly from earlier adaptations of Darcy's character, written as a symbol of dominance, with Elizabeth as his target of desire. The relationship between Elizabeth and Darcy is prone to involve verbal duels as well as

intellectual engagement (Justin et al., 2021). They confront each other's projected prejudices and biases, and their relationship is underpinned by sincere respect for each other's intellect and character. This focus on equality of the relationship, however, is wholly feminist and defects traditional gender roles through the notion of partnership based on equal partners. However, one should note the BBC's 1995 miniseries adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice*, which does focus on characterisation and setting. By presenting ample detail to the way Elizabeth interacts with her immediate environment and other characters in a series, the narrative constructed is a complex one that emphasises and highlights Elizabeth's voice—an agent of resilience (Scupham et al., 2022). This an attempt through thorough character studies that can be seen in the series to show the barrier of society and the societal aspects imposed on women and how defying this societal perspective can be a secret resistance to feminism.

Langton's 1995 miniseries adaptation gives a higher level of information and immersion into the reality of *Pride and Prejudice*. Because of the character improvement and setting, the series defines an exposition of Elizabeth Bennet's effective woman and strength (Kelsey et al., 2023). The series dives into the complications of how Elizabeth navigates her relationship with her family, specifically her mother and father, to show Elizabeth's difficulties in the relationship between her family and how society presents itself. It also focuses on her and her sisters with an insight into sisterhood and female cooperation. In addition, the miniseries underlines the importance of the natural environment and the architecture of the age, a visual background that shows both the constraints and opportunities in Elizabeth's world (Milton et al., 2023). This emphasis on detail thus also reveals the socially constructed aspects of women in the early 19th century and Elizabeth's power to deal with the boundaries and transcend them as a form of feminist resistance.

In summary, contemporary reflections on '*Pride and Prejudice*' have surpassed feminist reframings by using cutting-edge cinematography technologies that shift the view from the audience's position to Elizabeth's, criticising traditional gender norms and focusing on equal partnerships. This adaptation is achieved in the 2005 version directed by Joe Wright via close-up cinematography, while the BBC 1995 miniseries heightens the narrative via better-developed characters and settings (Draxler et al., 2019). Both adaptations applaud Elizabeth Bennet's willpower and endurance and show that *pride and prejudice* are timeless works with the appeal to modern audiences as a basis of feminist power.

#### **4. Elizabeth Bennet as a Feminist Icon**

This character, central in these feminist reinterpretations, is Elizabeth Bennet herself. As portrayed by Elizabeth, she appears not as an ordinary romantic heroine but as a female figure representing feminist opposition to the restrictive social order that dominated her age (Olson et al., 2021). Her unwillingness to marry for lack of affection, her confident independence, and her actual sharp intellect is a sort of critique of the limited female roles of early nineteenth-century England. With the help of Elizabeth, adaptations of '*Pride and Prejudice*' provide readers with a story of female liberation, where a woman has her way around the rules and norms of society, illness, and suffering, and ultimately fights for the right to love and joy, on her terms (Sproles et al., 2019). Elizabeth Bennet, the main character of the novel '*Pride and Prejudice*', written by Jane Austen is one of the characters that has managed to break away from the book and become a popular symbol, representing feminism not only for the past centuries but also for the future ones. This is a feminist spirit evident in her character, a spirit that seeks to break away from the high and mighty rules of oppressor people who love to assume their superiority and superiority. An impressive act of feminist resistance of Elizabeth is her insistence on affection before marriage. Elizabeth's demand to marry because of love was radical in a society where marriage was mostly a transaction based on financial considerations. Her value for relationships and professionalism as well as a result of money, has been purposely reflected (Lennon et al., 2023). Her desire to look for a partner who would admire her as a person capable of winning desires and ambitions makes her a true girlfriend in the struggle for female agency in love matters.

Elizabeth's lively autonomy is also among the characteristics of her feminism. In a society where women are normally docile and submissive, she is a strong woman who decisively refutes the imposed model. Instead, she expresses her opinion when it is appropriate, stands up against the authorities if necessary, and makes her own decisions (O'Malley et al., 2018). Her resistance to being silenced or controlled by the male characters of her environment highlights her assertion to live life on her terms significantly contrasted to the submissive roles constructed for ladies in her time. Besides, the intellectual acuity of Elizabeth is the girl's tramp feminist character. In essence, her sharp wit, keen observation, and caustic commentaries on the social dynamics that confined her and her female counterparts in the epoch place her as a woman, who both observes and criticises the boundaries placed upon her. Her interactions with Mr. Darcy, full of battle of words and mental jousting, attest not only her capabilities for intellectual parity with men but also prohibitively debunk the perceived notion that women were intellectually inferior. Adaptations of "*Pride and Prejudice*" have taken up her feminist inclinations and magnified it further (Lennon et al., 2023). Elizabeth, played by Jennifer Ehle in the 1995 BBC

miniseries, is also defined as a determined and resilient character, who can overcome and cope with the society of which she is a part. The interactions with Mr. Darcy display intellectual equality between the two, demonstrating more profound attraction to each other than they initially appear to have.

The film adaptation of 2005, directed by Joe Wright and starring Keira Knightley as Elizabeth, also brings out her feminist aspects. Through its cinematography and narration, the film points to the independent spirit of Elizabeth. It re-focuses the conventional gaze through which the audience can relate with Elizabeth on a personal level (Coons et al., 2022). It draws the focus of agency and individuality at this point. In addition, these adaptations reveal the social limitations and gender norms that Elizabeth has to face. They refer to the limitations of women in early 19th-century England and channels towards her becoming a wife and the consumer of the husband's labour. Thus, Elizabeth revolutionarily steps out of the shrouded rooms, refusing to enter the cage of control created by these pressures, which liberates other dreamers of release from the chains of old and even brings those dreamers out of those rooms. The inherent nature of Elizabeth Bennet's struggle to acquire love and the desired form of happiness only adds to the attractiveness of the feminist audience and underlines her feminist nature. The absence of a caricatured resignation to a loveless union, her resistance to the chains of her era, her clever boldness, and her supreme intellectual trek all make Anne a symbol of a man's footprint in the soil. Elizabeth Bennet is a great role model for feminists who are bigger than her physical form (Kelsey et al., 2023). Within an early 19th-century novel, she rejects marriage without love, refuses to listen to dire premonitions of the villainous Lady Catherine De Bourgh, displays freedom as her strength, and is intellectually sharp. Adaptations of the novel further enhance her feministic characteristics, reflecting her as the embodiment of female freedom and inspiration for feminine generations. Elizabeth Bennet remains a recognised heroine who successfully went through society's walls with humour and drive as she declared her right to love and happiness on her terms; hence, she is an icon of feminist defiance and tenacity.

## 5. Conclusion

By utilising the concept of feminist film theory in modern adaptations of "*Pride and Prejudice*", the narrative perspective shifted from objectifying the female characters to elevating them. These adaptations reorient the gaze, highlighting the female reason for pursuing their ways of life. In the same capacity, Elizabeth Bennet, portrayed by Keira Knightley in the 2005 movie and Jennifer Ehle in the 1995 miniseries, compels the audience to see her as a feminist heroine who deals with social norms and advocates for empowerment and independence. Similarly, they re-focus on personages such as Charlotte Lucas and Lydia Bennet by reconsidering the constrictions that early 19th-century female characters could restrict. These adaptations go beyond the bit of historical boundaries and appeal to the present-day audience, reflecting a newer perspective more in tandem with evolving values and feminist ideals. To conclude, contemporary rewrites of the novel '*Pride and Prejudice* change women's agency, question conventional gender norms, and enable modern audiences to talk about the concepts of agency and gender equality while discussing the status of women in society.

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