



**WOMEN'S POSITION AND AGENCY IN VICTORIAN SOCIETY:  
A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF "PRIDE AND PREJUDICE" BY JANE  
AUSTEN AND "MIDDLEMARCH" BY GEORGE ELIOT**

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### **Abstract**

This comparative study examines women's positions and agency in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) and George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871–72), analyzing how each novel reflects the social and cultural constraints of its era. Austen's work, set in the early nineteenth-century Regency period, portrays marriage as a necessary instrument for women's economic survival and social stability, while showcasing proto-feminist resistance through characters like Elizabeth Bennet who assert intellectual autonomy within a patriarchal society. *Middlemarch*, set in the mid-Victorian period, expands this critique by depicting the intellectual frustrations and limited opportunities confronting women like Dorothea Brooke, whose ambitions are constrained by societal norms and the ideology of separate spheres. Drawing on feminist criticism, this paper highlights both the continuity and evolution of gender discourse from Austen's satirical critique of marriage to Eliot's complex exploration of women's roles.

### **Аннотация**

Данное сравнительное исследование рассматривает положение женщин и степень их агентности в романах Джейн Остин «Гордость и предубеждение»



(1813) и Джордж Элиот «*Мидлмарч*» (1871–72), анализируя, каким образом каждое произведение отражает социальные и культурные ограничения своей эпохи. Роман Остин, созданный в период английского Регентства начала XIX века, изображает брак как необходимый инструмент экономического выживания и социальной стабильности женщин, одновременно демонстрируяprotoфеминистское сопротивление через таких персонажей, как Элизабет Беннет, утверждающих интеллектуальную самостоятельность в рамках патриархального общества. «*Мидлмарч*», действие которого разворачивается в эпоху середины Викторианского периода, расширяет данную критику, показывая интеллектуальную неудовлетворённость и ограниченные возможности женщин, подобных Доротеи Брук, чьи стремления сдерживаются общественными нормами и идеологией «раздельных сфер». Опираясь на феминистскую критику, статья подчёркивает как преемственность, так и эволюцию гендерного дискурса — от сатирической критики брака у Остин до сложного осмысления женских ролей у Элиот.

### Annotation

Ushbu qiyosiy tadqiqot Jane Austenning *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) va George Eliotning *Middlemarch* (1871–72) asarlarida ayollarning jamiyatdagi o‘rni va faoliyat (agentlik) darajasini tahlil qiladi hamda har bir roman o‘z davrining ijtimoiy va madaniy cheklovlarini qanday aks ettirishini ko‘rsatadi. XIX asr boshlaridagi Regentlik davrida yaratilgan Austen asarida nikoh ayollar uchun iqtisodiy yashab qolish va ijtimoiy barqarorlikning zarur vositasi sifatida tasvirlanadi, shu bilan birga Elizabeth Bennet kabi qahramonlar orqali patriarxal jamiyatda intellektual mustaqillikni himoya qiluvchi protofeministik qarshilik namoyon etiladi. O‘rta Viktoriya davrida kechadigan *Middlemarch* romani esa bu tanqidni yanada kengaytirib, Dorothea Brooke kabi ayollarning intellektual intilishlari jamiyat me’yorlari va “alohida sohalar” mafkurasini tufayli qanday cheklanib qolishini



tasvirlaydi. Feministik tanqidga tayangan holda, ushbu maqola Austenning nikohga oid satirik tanqididan Eliotning ayollar roliga doir murakkab tahliligigacha bo‘lgan gender diskursidagi uzviylik va taraqqiyotni yoritib beradi.

## Introduction

The nineteenth century in England was marked by profound social, economic, and intellectual transformation. Industrialization altered class structures, educational reforms broadened access to knowledge, and political and philosophical movements challenged traditional authority. Despite these developments, women experienced limited progress in comparison to men. Their lives remained governed by rigid class hierarchies and deeply entrenched patriarchal ideologies that restricted access to formal education, professional employment, property ownership, and legal independence. Social norms encouraged women to define themselves primarily through marriage, domestic responsibility, and moral virtue rather than through intellectual or professional achievement.

Literature of the period provides a crucial site for examining these gendered constraints and the subtle strategies of resistance women employed within them. The novel, in particular, offered writers a powerful means to explore the tension between individual desire and social expectation. Jane Austen and George Eliot, writing in the Regency and Victorian periods respectively, are especially significant in this regard. Both authors present psychologically nuanced female characters who navigate social, economic, and moral limitations, yet they do so within different historical and ideological frameworks.

Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) portrays marriage as the primary means through which women could secure financial stability and social respectability. Through characters such as Elizabeth Bennet and Charlotte Lucas, Austen interrogates the relationship between love, morality, and economic necessity.



George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871–72), by contrast, expands this inquiry beyond marriage to include women's intellectual, moral, and emotional aspirations. Dorothea Brooke's thwarted ambitions reveal how even educated and idealistic women were constrained by Victorian social structures and the ideology of "separate spheres."

By comparing *Pride and Prejudice* and *Middlemarch*, this study aims to illuminate both continuity and change in the representation of women's agency across the nineteenth century. Such a comparison reveals how women's roles evolved over time while also exposing the persistent limitations imposed upon them, offering insight into the complex relationship between gender, society, and literary form.

## Methodology

This study employs a **qualitative comparative literary analysis**, drawing primarily on **feminist literary criticism** and **historical contextualization**. Close textual analysis is used to examine character development, narrative voice, and thematic concerns related to marriage, education, intellectual agency, and moral influence. The research is informed by the work of feminist critics such as **Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar**, who emphasize women's resistance within patriarchal literary traditions, as well as scholars like **Elaine Showalter**, who situates women's writing within broader cultural and ideological frameworks.

Secondary critical sources are used to contextualize Austen's and Eliot's works within their respective historical moments and to support interpretations of women's agency and constraint. By juxtaposing the two novels, the study highlights both individual and systemic dimensions of gender inequality and traces the evolution of feminist consciousness from the early to the late nineteenth century.



## Results and Discussion

### **Marriage and Economic Necessity**

Both *Pride and Prejudice* and *Middlemarch* present marriage as a central institution shaping women's lives, yet they differ significantly in tone and implication. In Austen's novel, marriage functions primarily as a mechanism of economic survival in a society where women lack access to inheritance and independent income. The entailment of the Bennet estate to Mr. Collins underscores the precarious financial position of women and the urgency of securing a suitable match.

However, Austen complicates this reality by allowing room for personal choice and moral judgment. Elizabeth Bennet's refusal of Mr. Collins, despite the economic security he offers, exemplifies what Gilbert and Gubar describe as Austen's "contained rebellion"—a subtle assertion of female autonomy within acceptable social boundaries. Elizabeth's eventual marriage to Mr. Darcy suggests a cautiously optimistic vision in which love, mutual respect, and moral growth coexist with economic necessity.

In contrast, *Middlemarch* offers a more critical and disillusioned portrayal of marriage. George Eliot presents marriage not as a solution to women's vulnerability but as a potential site of oppression. Dorothea Brooke enters her marriage to Casaubon with idealistic expectations, believing it will enable intellectual fulfillment and moral purpose. Instead, the marriage silences her ambitions and reinforces her dependency. Casaubon's emotional coldness and intellectual insecurity illustrate how patriarchal authority within marriage can suppress female autonomy.



As Sanju Yadav and other critics note, Eliot's portrayal reflects Victorian anxieties about women's education and independence, emphasizing the psychological consequences of restricted agency. Unlike Austen, Eliot shifts the focus from individual negotiation to structural limitation, revealing marriage as a systemic barrier to women's development.

### **Education, Intellectual Agency, and Moral Influence**

Education and intellectual agency are central to both novels' exploration of women's social positions. Austen's heroines display intelligence, wit, and moral discernment, yet their education is limited to "accomplishments" designed to enhance marital prospects rather than intellectual growth. Elizabeth Bennet's sharp judgment and verbal agility demonstrate how individual agency can function within constraint, allowing her to challenge social pretensions without fundamentally disrupting the social order.

Eliot extends this critique by exposing the systematic suppression of women's intellectual potential in Victorian society. Dorothea Brooke's hunger for knowledge and meaningful engagement reveals deep structural inequalities. Despite her education and idealism, Dorothea lacks legitimate avenues for intellectual fulfillment, illustrating the limitations imposed by the ideology of separate spheres.

The contrast between Elizabeth and Dorothea highlights differing feminist implications. Elizabeth successfully balances individual spirit with social conformity, achieving personal happiness within her world. Dorothea, however, confronts emotional disillusionment and institutional barriers that thwart her aspirations. While both women exercise moral influence, Eliot emphasizes that moral and intellectual capability alone cannot overcome entrenched social structures.



## Conclusion

*Pride and Prejudice* and *Middlemarch* offer complementary yet distinct insights into women's agency in nineteenth-century England. Austen presents a world in which limited autonomy is achievable through wit, moral integrity, and strategic resistance. Her proto-feminist vision suggests the possibility of negotiation and compromise within patriarchal norms.

George Eliot, by contrast, provides a more sobering and psychologically complex portrayal of women's lives under patriarchy. *Middlemarch* exposes the emotional and intellectual costs of systemic inequality, revealing how social institutions—particularly marriage—can stifle women's ambitions and sense of purpose. Dorothea Brooke's experience underscores the frustration and moral disillusionment produced by idealism constrained by convention.

Taken together, these novels illuminate both the persistence of patriarchal constraints and the gradual evolution of literary representations of women's consciousness and agency across the nineteenth century. While Austen reflects the possibilities of resistance within established norms, Eliot exposes the deeper injustices embedded in those norms. This comparative analysis demonstrates how literature not only mirrors social reality but also participates in an ongoing critical dialogue about gender, autonomy, and social reform.

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