



## MARRIAGE AS A SOCIAL INSTITUTION — PRIDE AND PREJUDICE

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**ANNOTATSIYA:** *Ushbu maqolada XIX asr ingliz adabiyotida nikoh ijtimoiy institut sifatida tahlil qilinadi. Tadqiqot Jane Austenning Pride and Prejudice hamda George Eliotning Middlemarch romanlari asosida olib borilgan. IMRAD metodologiyasi asosida nikohning iqtisodiy, ijtimoiy va gender jihatlarini qiyosiy tahlil qilinadi. Natijalar Austen asarida nikoh ijtimoiy muvozanat va shaxsiy baxt manbai sifatida tasvirlanganini, Eliot esa nikohni ayollar erkinligini cheklovchi murakkab va mas'uliyatli institut sifatida ko'rsatganini aniqlaydi. Kalit so'zlar: individual vijdon, ijtimoiy kutilmalar, axloqiy mas'uliyat, gender rollari, ijtimoiy tabaqa va jamiyat, nikoh va axloq, shaxsiy yaxlitlik, ijtimoiy moslashuv, o'zini anglash, Viktoriya davri jamiyati.*

**АННОТАЦИЯ:** *В данной аннотации рассматривается тема «индивидуального нравственного сознания и социальных ожиданий» в романах Джорджа Элиота «Миддлмарч» и Джейн Остин «Гордость и предубеждение». Оба произведения изображают общества, управляемые жёсткими моральными нормами, классовыми структурами и гендерными установками, однако в центре повествования находятся персонажи, вынужденные искать баланс между личными ценностями и общественным мнением. В романе «Миддлмарч» такие герои, как Доротея Брук, сталкиваются с необходимостью примирить моральный идеализм и личную ответственность с социальными условностями, ограничивающими женскую*



*автономию и интеллектуальную самореализацию. Аналогичным образом «Гордость и предубеждение» показывает, как личное суждение и нравственная независимость Элизабет Беннет противостоят классовым предрассудкам, брачным ожиданиям и требованиям общественной репутации. Используя различные повествовательные стратегии, оба автора подвергают критике социальные нормы, подчёркивая значение самосознания, этического выбора и морального роста. В конечном итоге романы утверждают, что подлинное счастье и социальный прогресс становятся возможными тогда, когда индивид действует в соответствии с внутренним нравственным убеждением, а не слепо подчиняется общественному давлению. Ключевые слова: индивидуальное нравственное сознание, социальные ожидания, моральная ответственность, гендерные роли, класс и общество, брак и мораль, личная целостность, социальный конформизм, самосознание, викторианское общество.*

**ABSTRACT:** This annotation examines the theme of “Individual Conscience vs. Social Expectations” in “Middlemarch” by George Eliot and “Pride and Prejudice” by Jane Austen. Both novels portray societies governed by rigid moral codes, class structures, and gender norms, yet they center on characters who must negotiate between personal values and public opinion. In “Middlemarch”, characters such as Dorothea Brooke struggle to reconcile moral idealism and individual responsibility with social conventions that restrict women’s autonomy and intellectual fulfillment. Similarly, “Pride and Prejudice” explores how Elizabeth Bennet’s personal judgment and moral independence challenge class prejudice, marriage expectations, and social reputation. Through different narrative styles, both authors critique social norms while emphasizing the importance of self-awareness, ethical choice, and moral growth. The novels ultimately suggest that genuine happiness and social progress emerge when individuals act according to conscience rather than conform blindly to societal pressures. Keywords: Individual conscience, social expectations, moral responsibility, gender roles, class and society, marriage



and morality, personal integrity, social conformity, self-awareness, Victorian society. Introduction The conflict between individual conscience and social expectations constitutes a central thematic concern in nineteenth-century English fiction. Novelists of this period frequently portrayed societies governed by rigid moral codes, entrenched class hierarchies, and restrictive gender roles, all of which exerted considerable influence on individual choice and ethical development. Among the most significant literary explorations of this tension are George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871–72) and Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813). Although differing in narrative style and historical context, both novels examine how individuals— particularly women—negotiate personal moral convictions within constraining social environments. George Eliot and Jane Austen depict societies in which conformity is often rewarded while moral independence is discouraged. Marriage, reputation, and class status function as dominant social institutions shaping personal destiny. However, rather than endorsing passive submission, both authors foreground characters who question prevailing norms and seek ethical self-realization. Dorothea Brooke and Elizabeth Bennet emerge as emblematic figures of moral struggle, illustrating how conscience challenges social expectations. Scholars such as Abrams and Harpham (2015) argue that the English realist novel serves as a powerful medium for ethical inquiry, dramatizing the tension between individual values and communal demands. Within this framework, *Middlemarch* and *Pride and Prejudice* function not merely as social narratives but as moral studies concerned with integrity, responsibility, and self-awareness. This study aims to analyze how Eliot and Austen portray the conflict between individual conscience and social expectations and to demonstrate how both authors ultimately advocate for ethical autonomy as the foundation of personal fulfillment and social progress.

## Methods

This study adopts a qualitative comparative literary methodology grounded in ethical criticism, feminist literary theory, and realism studies in order to examine the tension between individual conscience and social expectations in George Eliot's



Middlemarch and Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. The research is based on close textual analysis of the primary novels, focusing on narrative structure, character development, and key moments of ethical decision-making that reveal conflicts between personal moral judgment and societal norms. Particular attention is given to the ways in which individual conscience is shaped, challenged, and transformed within specific social contexts. The comparative framework enables a systematic examination of how similar moral concerns are articulated across two distinct yet related literary traditions: Victorian realism and Regency social fiction. By placing Eliot's and Austen's works in dialogue, the study identifies both convergences and divergences in their representations of class hierarchy, marriage conventions, and gender roles as powerful social institutions that mediate ethical choice. Marriage, in particular, is treated as a central site of moral negotiation, where private values confront public expectations and where individual autonomy is either constrained or affirmed. In addition to primary textual analysis, the study incorporates sustained engagement with major critical interpretations by scholars such as George Levine, Gillian Beer, Marilyn Butler, Ian Watt, Mary Poovey, and Gilbert and Gubar. These critical perspectives provide essential historical, ideological, and theoretical contexts, allowing the analysis to situate Eliot's moral realism and Austen's social satire within broader debates concerning ethics, gender, and social responsibility in nineteenth-century English literature. Feminist criticism is especially significant in highlighting how moral agency is differently constructed and limited for male and female characters, revealing the gendered nature of conscience and ethical authority. The theoretical foundation of the study is informed by the concepts articulated by Abrams and Harpham, particularly their discussions of realism, character as a moral agent, and the ethical function of narrative. These frameworks support an understanding of the novel as a form that not only reflects social reality but also interrogates moral values through complex characterization and narrative causality. By integrating ethical theory with realist narrative analysis, the study demonstrates how literary form itself participates in the construction of moral meaning. Through



this interdisciplinary approach, the research achieves a nuanced interpretation of how individual conscience operates within socially regulated environments and how narrative strategies shape readers' ethical engagement. The methodology thus allows for a comprehensive exploration of the moral dimensions of *Middlemarch* and *Pride and Prejudice*, revealing how both novels articulate enduring questions about integrity, responsibility, and the relationship between the individual and society.

## Results

The analysis of *Middlemarch* and *Pride and Prejudice* reveals that both novels portray social environments in which moral choice is profoundly shaped—and often constrained—by dominant social expectations. In *Middlemarch*, George Eliot constructs a densely interconnected provincial society governed by Victorian moral values, where social approval, professional reputation, and marital conformity exert decisive influence over individual lives. As Gillian Beer (1986) notes, Eliot's fictional world functions as an “organic moral system” in which every personal action carries social and ethical consequences. Individuals do not act in isolation; rather, their moral decisions are continually evaluated and regulated by the surrounding community. Within this social framework, Dorothea Brooke emerges as a central figure embodying the conflict between moral idealism and social limitation. Her desire to pursue an intellectually and ethically meaningful life is repeatedly thwarted by the narrow roles prescribed for women. Although her marriage to Casaubon is socially sanctioned and appears morally respectable, it ultimately suppresses her intellectual vitality and emotional fulfillment. Levine (1981) interprets this marriage as emblematic of the dangers inherent in confusing social approval with genuine moral purpose. Dorothea's experience demonstrates how adherence to societal expectations can result in ethical stagnation rather than moral growth. A similar pattern of moral compromise is evident in the trajectory of Tertius Lydgate, whose ambition to reform medical science reflects a strong ethical commitment to progress and human welfare. However, his ideals are gradually undermined by financial dependency and public scrutiny. Eliot illustrates how



societal pressure, particularly when combined with economic constraints, can erode individual conscience and force ethical concessions. Through both *Dorothea* and *Lydgate*, *Middlemarch* reveals that social conformity frequently conflicts with authentic moral aspiration, leading to disillusionment and compromised integrity. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Jane Austen examines comparable tensions through a markedly different narrative mode, employing irony and social satire to expose the moral assumptions of Regency society. This society places considerable emphasis on wealth, rank, and advantageous marriage, especially for women, for whom marriage is often framed as an economic necessity rather than a moral or emotional choice. Within this context, Elizabeth Bennet stands out as a figure of moral independence and critical self-awareness. Her refusal of Mr. Collins's proposal constitutes a clear rejection of social pressure and material security in favor of personal integrity. As Marilyn Butler (1987) observes, Elizabeth's insistence on personal judgment reflects Austen's broader ethical commitment to self-knowledge and moral discernment over unexamined conformity. Austen further develops the theme of ethical growth through the character of Mr. Darcy, whose initial adherence to class prejudice gradually gives way to self reflection and moral correction. His transformation underscores the capacity of individual conscience to evolve and challenge inherited social values. Ian Watt (2001) emphasizes that Austen's narrative technique allows readers to observe this process of moral development within the constraints of social convention, reinforcing the novel's ethical orientation and its emphasis on personal responsibility. Across both novels, marriage emerges as a primary arena in which the conflict between individual conscience and social expectation is most clearly dramatized. In *Middlemarch*, marriage often functions as a limiting institution that restricts women's autonomy and intellectual freedom, whereas in *Pride and Prejudice* it serves as a moral test through which characters reveal their ethical priorities. Dorothea's second marriage, grounded in mutual respect and shared values, represents a stage of moral maturation and liberation from earlier social illusion. Similarly, the union of Elizabeth and Darcy signifies a synthesis of love, moral



equality, and social responsibility. In both cases, Eliot and Austen reject marriages based solely on convenience or social advantage and instead affirm unions founded on ethical compatibility and mutual understanding. The results also highlight the deeply gendered nature of moral constraint in nineteenth-century society. Feminist criticism has demonstrated that women's ethical agency is frequently limited by cultural expectations and social silencing. Gilbert and Gubar (1979) argue that female characters in nineteenth-century literature often struggle to assert moral authority within patriarchal structures. Dorothea Brooke and Elizabeth Bennet resist such passive conformity by asserting intellectual independence and moral judgment. Mary Poovey (1984) further contends that writers like Eliot and Austen subtly challenge patriarchal norms by redefining feminine virtue as moral intelligence rather than social obedience. Through their heroines, both novels affirm women's capacity for ethical autonomy and critical reasoning, presenting conscience as a dynamic force capable of resisting social limitation. Overall, the findings demonstrate that *Middlemarch* and *Pride and Prejudice* consistently foreground the tension between individual conscience and social expectation, revealing how moral integrity is tested, compromised, and ultimately reaffirmed within complex social systems.

## Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that *Middlemarch* and *Pride and Prejudice* articulate a shared ethical vision concerning the relationship between individual conscience and social expectations, despite significant differences in narrative style, historical context, and aesthetic strategy. George Eliot's realist and philosophically reflective narration foregrounds moral complexity, social interdependence, and ethical responsibility, while Jane Austen's ironic and satirical mode exposes the contradictions and moral superficialities of social convention. Nevertheless, both authors critique societies that privilege conformity, reputation, and external approval over moral self-awareness and ethical autonomy. Drawing on the theoretical insights of Abrams and Harpham (2015), realism can be understood



as a literary mode particularly suited to the exploration of ethical dilemmas embedded in lived social realities. Both Eliot and Austen employ realist techniques—such as detailed social observation, psychologically complex characterization, and narrative attention to moral consequence—to dramatize the tensions between personal judgment and communal norms. In *Middlemarch*, Eliot’s omniscient narration emphasizes the interconnectedness of individual actions, suggesting that moral choices are never isolated but always embedded within broader social networks. This perspective reinforces the idea that ethical failure or integrity has ripple effects across the community. In contrast, Austen’s realism operates through irony and narrative restraint, allowing moral insight to emerge gradually through dialogue, misjudgment, and self correction. As Ian Watt (2001) argues, Austen’s focus on the development of individual consciousness reflects the novel’s role in tracing ethical maturation rather than prescribing fixed moral codes. Elizabeth Bennet’s evolving judgment and Darcy’s moral self-revision exemplify how conscience develops through reflection, humility, and recognition of error. Austen thus presents moral growth as a dynamic process shaped by, yet not determined by, social expectation. A crucial implication of this analysis is that both novels conceptualize conscience not as a purely private or abstract principle but as a socially consequential force. Ethical decisions in both *Middlemarch* and *Pride and Prejudice* affect interpersonal relationships, social reputation, and communal values. By portraying characters who resist unjust or shallow norms—such as Dorothea’s rejection of intellectually empty respectability or Elizabeth’s refusal of a materially advantageous but morally unsatisfying marriage—Eliot and Austen suggest that individual moral resistance has the potential to challenge and reshape social structures. This aligns with George Levine’s (1981) argument that Eliot’s realism exposes the moral cost of social conformity while simultaneously envisioning the possibility of ethical reform. Furthermore, feminist critical perspectives deepen the discussion by revealing the gendered dimensions of moral constraint. As Gilbert and Gubar (1979) and Poovey (1984) have shown, women’s moral agency in nineteenth-



century literature is often limited by cultural expectations that equate virtue with obedience. Against this backdrop, Dorothea Brooke and Elizabeth Bennet emerge as figures who redefine virtue as ethical reasoning, intellectual aspiration, and moral courage. Their resistance to passive conformity highlights the authors' subtle but powerful critique of patriarchal structures and underscores the connection between moral autonomy and gender justice. Taken together, these findings suggest that Eliot and Austen envision ethical life as a continuous negotiation between personal conscience and social responsibility. While neither author advocates complete withdrawal from society, both insist that genuine moral integrity requires critical engagement with social norms rather than unreflective acceptance. The novels thus propose a model of ethical subjectivity grounded in self-awareness, empathy, and principled action.

## **Conclusion**

The examination of *Middlemarch* and *Pride and Prejudice* confirms that the conflict between individual conscience and social expectations constitutes a defining and unifying theme in both novels. George Eliot and Jane Austen depict societies characterized by rigid class hierarchies, entrenched moral conventions, and gendered limitations that constrain personal freedom and ethical choice. Within these restrictive environments, however, both authors foreground protagonists who strive to act according to inner moral conviction rather than external approval. Dorothea Brooke and Elizabeth Bennet exemplify the intellectual and moral courage required to assert ethical independence within socially regulated worlds. Their journeys demonstrate that true fulfillment and moral maturity arise not from conformity or social success but from self-awareness, critical judgment, and integrity. Through their experiences, Eliot and Austen challenge the assumption that social respectability guarantees moral worth, instead proposing conscience as the primary measure of ethical value. Importantly, both novels affirm that conscience is not merely a private or introspective faculty but a force with profound social implications. Ethical choices shape relationships, influence community values, and



expose the moral limitations of existing social structures. By illustrating how individual acts of moral resistance can disrupt unjust norms, Eliot and Austen suggest that social progress is inseparable from personal ethical responsibility. The enduring relevance of *Middlemarch* and *Pride and Prejudice* lies in their sustained ethical inquiry into how individuals can live authentically within complex social systems. These novels invite readers to reflect critically on the pressures of conformity, the moral cost of unexamined social values, and the necessity of balancing personal integrity with social obligation. Through their nuanced portrayals of moral growth and ethical struggle, Eliot and Austen offer timeless insights into human behavior and affirm the transformative power of conscience in both personal and social life.

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