



Class Privilege and Female Autonomy: Economic Independence as Feminist Resistance in *Pride and Prejudice* and *Unmarriageable***Irfan Ali Soomro¹, Suhail Ahmed Solangi²**

¹ M.Phil. Research Scholar, Department of English, Faculty of Social Sciences & Humanities, Hamdard University, Karachi. Email: ifisoomro@hotmail.com

² Senior Lecturer, Department of English, Faculty of Social Sciences & Humanities, Hamdard University, Karachi.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.70670/sra.v4i1.1532>**Abstract**

This article examines how class privilege mediates women's capacity for resistance in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) and Soniah Kamal's *Unmarriageable* (2019), analyzing the complex relationship between economic resources and feminist autonomy. Through comparative textual analysis grounded in Marxist feminist and intersectional frameworks, the study demonstrates that while both Elizabeth Bennet and Alys Binat employ intellectual resistance against patriarchal marriage pressures, their ability to sustain such resistance depends fundamentally on class advantages unavailable to less privileged women. The analysis reveals that Charlotte Lucas's pragmatic marriage and the employment constraints faced by the Binat sisters illustrate how economic vulnerability forecloses genuine choice, making resistance a luxury of the relatively privileged. By comparing Regency England's entailment system with contemporary Pakistan's dowry culture, the article shows that despite temporal and cultural differences, economic dependence remains the primary mechanism through which patriarchy constrains female agency. The findings contribute to comparative feminist literary criticism by demonstrating that representations of female autonomy must account for class stratification; protagonists' triumphant endings depend on fortunate circumstances that most women do not enjoy, revealing the limitations of individualist feminist resistance without systemic economic change.

Keywords: Feminist Literary Criticism, Class Privilege, Economic Autonomy, Comparative Literature, Marxist Feminism, Intersectionality

Introduction

The relationship between economic resources and women's capacity for resistance against patriarchal structures has long occupied feminist literary criticism, yet comparative analyses across temporal and cultural contexts remain underexplored. When Elizabeth Bennet refuses Mr. Collins's marriage proposal in *Pride and Prejudice*, declaring "You could not make me happy, and I am the last woman in the world who could make you so," her ability to maintain this principled stance rests on assumptions about her marriageability that her friend Charlotte Lucas cannot afford to share. Two centuries later, Alys Binat in *Unmarriageable* articulates similar resistance—"I will not marry for security, because it would make me a prisoner who had shut the door myself"—yet her teaching income, however modest, provides material foundation for this ideological position that unemployed genteel women in Austen's era entirely lacked.

These parallel moments of resistance, separated by 206 years and vast cultural distance, invite examination of how class privilege enables or forecloses women's capacity to refuse patriarchal expectations. Both novels

critique marriage as an economic institution that disguises material necessity as romantic choice, yet both also feature protagonists whose relative advantages—Elizabeth's youth and beauty, Alys's education and employment—allow them freedoms unavailable to women differently positioned in class hierarchies. This article argues that while both texts offer sophisticated feminist critiques of gender oppression, they simultaneously reveal how class stratification creates differential access to the resources necessary for resistance, making female autonomy itself a privilege unevenly distributed across social hierarchies.

The comparative framework employed here illuminates both continuities and cultural translations in how patriarchy operates across contexts. Austen's Regency England and Kamal's contemporary Pakistan represent vastly different societies, yet both novels demonstrate that women's economic dependence on marriage persists as the fundamental mechanism of gendered subordination. The specific legal and cultural apparatuses differ—entailment laws versus dowry systems, individual reputation versus collective family honor—but the structural result remains constant: women lacking independent economic resources must marry for survival, not choice. By examining how protagonists navigate these constraints through different combinations of intellectual resistance, strategic compliance, and fortunate circumstance, the analysis reveals the complex interplay between agency and structure, individual resistance and systemic oppression.

This study contributes to feminist literary criticism by demonstrating that representations of female autonomy must be read intersectionally, accounting for how class position mediates women's capacity for resistance. The protagonists' happy endings—marriages to wealthy men who respect their intelligence—depend on confluences of privilege and fortune unavailable to most women in their societies. Reading these texts comparatively thus reveals not only the persistence of patriarchal economic structures across time and culture, but also the limitations of individualist models of feminist resistance that do not address the material conditions enabling or foreclosing women's choices.

Research Objective

To examine how class privilege enables women's resistance against patriarchal marriage pressures in *Pride and Prejudice* and *Unmarriageable*.

Literature Review

Feminist literary criticism has long grappled with how to read texts that simultaneously critique gender oppression and feature protagonists whose class privileges enable resistance unavailable to less advantaged women. Early feminist readings of Austen emphasized her proto-feminist critique of marriage markets and property law, with scholars like Gilbert and Gubar (1979) positioning her within a tradition of women writers who used irony and wit to subvert patriarchal literary conventions. Poovey's (1984) influential work on "the proper lady" demonstrated how Austen's heroines navigate between economic necessity and moral principle, revealing marriage as the primary economic institution governing women's lives.

More recent scholarship has applied Marxist feminist frameworks to illuminate the material foundations of gender oppression in Austen's work. Johnson's (1988) political readings show how limited economic options shape women's choices, while feminist critics have increasingly emphasized the intersection of class and gender in determining female agency. As Delphy and Leonard (1992) argue, marriage functions as a mode of production extracting unpaid domestic and reproductive labor from women, disguised by romantic ideology that obscures these economic relations. This framework proves particularly relevant for reading both *Pride and Prejudice* and *Unmarriageable*, as both texts expose the gap between romantic discourse and material reality.

Postcolonial feminist scholarship has complicated universalist feminist readings by demonstrating how colonial histories and local patriarchies intersect to create culturally specific forms of gender oppression. Mohanty's (2003) critique of Western feminism's tendency to homogenize "Third World women" emphasizes the necessity of examining women's experiences within specific historical, cultural, and economic contexts.

Spivak's (1988) question "Can the subaltern speak?" raises critical issues about representation and voice, particularly relevant for analyzing Kamal's English-language novel written for international audiences about Pakistani women's experiences.

The concept of intersectionality, originated by Crenshaw (1989) to analyze how race and gender create distinctive oppressions irreducible to either category alone, provides essential theoretical tools for comparative analysis. Collins's (2000) "matrix of domination" framework illuminates how economic, political, cultural, and interpersonal systems of power mutually reinforce gender subordination. Applied to literary analysis, intersectionality reveals how protagonists like Elizabeth and Alys occupy complex positions—marginalized by gender yet privileged by class, education, and family status—that shape both their experiences of oppression and their capacity for resistance.

Recent work on Austen adaptations in postcolonial contexts has explored how canonical Western texts are reinterpreted to address local concerns while maintaining universal feminist themes. Hutcheon's (2006) adaptation theory emphasizes that adaptations are creative interventions, not derivative copies, reinventing earlier narratives within new cultural and ideological environments. Kamal's *Unmarriageable* exemplifies this process, translating Austen's critique of marriage and class to illuminate how colonialism's legacies intersect with indigenous patriarchies in contemporary Pakistan. The novel addresses English-medium education as class marker, dowry systems, and family honor codes, showing both parallels to and differences from Austen's context.

Comparative feminist literary criticism increasingly emphasizes the necessity of culturally specific analysis that neither imposes Western frameworks uncritically nor treats all women's experiences as utterly incomparable. McCall (2005) argues that intersectional analysis must examine relationships between social categories rather than treating them as additive, avoiding reductionist comparisons while revealing both shared patterns and cultural particularities. This approach proves essential for reading Elizabeth and Alys comparatively, as their experiences of patriarchal marriage markets reflect both universal structures of gender oppression and culturally specific mechanisms through which these structures operate.

Methodology

This study employs qualitative textual analysis grounded in comparative close reading of *Pride and Prejudice* and *Unmarriageable*. The research design follows feminist literary criticism's emphasis on examining how texts represent, reproduce, or resist gender ideologies, while incorporating Marxist feminist attention to material conditions and economic structures. The analysis draws on intersectional frameworks to examine how gender and class interact to shape protagonists' experiences and resistance strategies, recognizing that neither category operates independently.

Close reading techniques examine specific passages where class privilege becomes visible in protagonists' capacity for resistance, paying attention to language, narrative voice, and characterization. The comparative method identifies both structural parallels—how marriage functions as economic institution in both texts—and cultural translations—how entailment differs from dowry systems, individual reputation from family honor. This approach follows Bassnett's argument that comparative literary analysis requires attention to both universal patterns and culturally specific expressions.

The theoretical framework integrates three strands of feminist thought. Feminist literary criticism provides methodological approaches for analyzing gender representation and female agency. Marxist feminism illuminates economic foundations of marriage and how class stratification creates differential experiences of gender oppression. Postcolonial feminism ensures attention to cultural specificity, avoiding universalist assumptions while recognizing shared structures of patriarchal power. This integrated approach enables nuanced analysis of how class privilege mediates female autonomy across different cultural contexts, revealing both the persistence and cultural specificity of economic constraints on women's choices.

Textual Analysis

The Privilege of Refusal: Elizabeth Bennet's Class Position

Elizabeth Bennet's celebrated refusals of marriage proposals demonstrate intellectual and moral independence, yet close reading reveals how her capacity to maintain these principles depends on class advantages not universally available. When she rejects Mr. Collins, asserting "I am not to be intimidated into anything so wholly unreasonable" (p. 91), her resistance appears purely principled. However, the narrator's earlier observation that "Her fortune is five thousand pounds, and she is a nobody" (p. 62) contextualizes her position within rigid class hierarchies where economic capital determines social value and marriageability.

Elizabeth's refusal strategy relies on several forms of privilege. Her youth and acknowledged beauty create assumptions about future suitors that older or less attractive women cannot share. Her father's genteel status, despite economic precariousness, grants social access to wealthy men like Darcy and Bingley—access entirely unavailable to women of trade or laboring classes. Most crucially, her belief that she can refuse unsuitable offers without facing destitution depends on optimistic assumptions about the marriage market that Charlotte Lucas, at twenty-seven without fortune or beauty, cannot afford.

The novel explicitly contrasts Elizabeth's idealism with Charlotte's pragmatism. Charlotte's declaration "I am not romantic, you know. I never was. I ask only a comfortable home" (p. 96) strips away sentimental ideology to reveal marriage's economic foundation. Her assertion that "Happiness in marriage is entirely a matter of chance" (p. 97) constitutes a Marxist feminist insight: if marital satisfaction is random, rational choice dictates prioritizing material security over romantic compatibility. Charlotte's decision to marry the ridiculous Mr. Collins demonstrates not personal failing but clear-eyed recognition of limited options. Her justification—"I am convinced that my chance of happiness with him is as fair as most people can boast on entering the marriage state" (p. 98)—suggests that most marriages involve similar compromises, challenging the novel's romantic plot even as that plot unfolds.

Elizabeth's privilege becomes most visible in her judgment of Charlotte's choice. While the narrator notes Charlotte's pragmatism had "always been her natural defence against Elizabeth's lively mind," the text allows readers to question whose perspective better captures women's material reality. When Elizabeth visits the Collins household and observes Charlotte managing her situation—"her home and her housekeeping, her parish and her poultry and all their dependent concerns, had not yet lost their charms" (p. 102)—the phrase "not yet lost" foreshadows eventual disappointment while acknowledging Charlotte's present accommodation. Charlotte purchases security and social respectability at the cost of intellectual companionship and affection, but the novel presents this as rational calculation given her alternatives.

The entailment system provides structural foundation for women's economic vulnerability. The narrator explains that Longbourn "was entailed, in default of heirs male, on a distant relation" (p. 22), legally excluding daughters from inheritance regardless of merit or need. Mrs. Bennet's obsessive attention to marrying her daughters, often dismissed as vulgar social climbing, emerges as rational response to genuine economic threat. Her lament that Mr. Collins "may turn you all out of this house as soon as he pleases" (p. 23) articulates real material insecurity. The conditional "may" highlights women's dependence on male relatives' goodwill, a position of profound structural vulnerability.

Elizabeth's refusal of Darcy's first proposal demonstrates her principled independence: "I am not to be intimidated into anything so wholly unreasonable" (p. 91). However, her ultimate acceptance after his reform reveals limits to this independence. While she grows to respect and love Darcy, the novel's ending provides her with both emotional fulfillment and economic security through his enormous wealth. The narrator's comment that Elizabeth became mistress of Pemberley only after genuine affection developed obscures the fact that without Darcy's wealth and status, Elizabeth's idealistic insistence on marrying for love might have led to Charlotte's fate or worse. Her happy ending depends on fortunate circumstances—Darcy's attraction to her wit, his willingness to reform, his continued admiration despite her lower status—that cannot be replicated by most women.

Economic Independence and Its Limits: Alys Binat's Teaching

Unmarriageable features a protagonist with access to economic resources entirely unavailable in Austen's era: paid employment. Alys's teaching provides both income and psychological autonomy, as the narrator observes: "Alys loved teaching; it gave her a sense of control in a world where so little else belonged to women" (p. 27). The phrase "so little else" acknowledges pervasive gender inequality while suggesting employment offers partial escape. Teaching becomes both material reality and symbolic resistance: "In her classroom, Alys felt truly free—a freedom she could never express within her own family's walls" (p. 30). However, the novel carefully circumscribes this freedom's extent. The teaching position is precarious, poorly paid, and low-status. The narrator notes that "The school van drove into a lower-middle-class ramshackle neighbourhood... Yet their jobs provided a necessary contribution to the family income... and afforded them a vital modicum of independence" (p. 31). The term "modicum" signals limited autonomy; the word "necessary" indicates family dependence on their income, not individual self-sufficiency. When Mrs. Kaleen dismisses Alys as "a teacher, you are a governess with a better vocabulary" (p. 120), she articulates class hierarchies that render professional women socially inferior to women secured through wealthy marriages. Alys's resistance to marriage-as-security employs explicitly feminist language unavailable to Elizabeth: "I will not marry for security, because it would make me a prisoner who had shut the door myself" (p. 45). The metaphor of self-imprisonment recognizes how accepting economic security through marriage constitutes complicity in one's own subordination. Her assertion to her sisters—"the worth of a woman cannot be measured in rings on her finger, or we will all be beggars forever" (p. 47)—universalizes the condition, suggesting marriage reduces all women to economic dependence regardless of whether they accept this condition.

Yet Alys's ability to maintain these principles depends on her employment, however precarious. When family finances deteriorate following her father's losses, even her modest income proves insufficient to sustain the family. The novel suggests that without eventual marriage to wealthy Darsee, Alys's ideological commitments would face severe material testing. Like Elizabeth, her happy ending provides both emotional satisfaction and economic security through marriage to a wealthy man who respects her intelligence—a fortunate confluence unavailable to most women in her society.

The novel's portrayal of Alys's students illuminates class stratification's extent. She observes students from "cramped, chaotic homes" (p. 120) who are "resolved to study, find jobs and become something more" (p. 120). The phrase "become something more" articulates education's promise of upward mobility through individual effort. However, the systemic barriers these students face—poverty, family obligations, gendered expectations—suggest limits to how many can actually achieve such mobility. Alys's own precarious position, despite education and employment, demonstrates that individual achievement provides incomplete protection against economic insecurity in systems structured around gender and class inequality.

Pragmatic Marriage and Economic Necessity

Both novels feature secondary characters whose choices illuminate protagonists' privileges through contrast. Charlotte Lucas's marriage to Mr. Collins demonstrates economic rationality divorced from romantic ideology. At twenty-seven without fortune or beauty, Charlotte faces realistic prospect of permanent economic dependence on her family, a burden becoming heavier as she ages. Her acceptance of Collins within days of Elizabeth's refusal reveals not desperation but calculation: Collins offers security, social position, and independent household management—more than most women in her position could expect.

Charlotte's defense of her choice articulates Marxist feminist insight into marriage's economic foundations: "considering his character, connections, and situation in life, I am convinced that my chance of happiness with him is as fair as most people can boast on entering the marriage state" (p. 98). The legalistic language—"considering," "connections," "situation in life"—emphasizes rational assessment over romantic sentiment. The phrase "as fair as most people" suggests that few marriages offer genuine happiness; Collins represents

average, not exceptional, marital prospects. This cynicism challenges the novel's romantic plot, suggesting that Elizabeth and Jane's love matches are exceptions proving the rule of economic marriage.

When Elizabeth visits the Collins household, she observes Charlotte's management strategies: "her home and her housekeeping, her parish and her poultry and all their dependent concerns, had not yet lost their charms" (p. 102). Charlotte finds satisfaction in domestic management and social position, the novel's phrase "not yet lost" acknowledging this may not last while conceding present accommodation. Charlotte purchases economic security and social respectability with intellectual companionship and affection as costs—a transaction the novel presents as rational given her alternatives without glorifying or condemning it.

In *Unmarriageable*, the rishta (matchmaking) system makes marriage markets more explicitly transactional. Sherry's sardonic description of rishta rituals reveals their dehumanizing nature: "I'll wheel out the rishta trolley with the expected cake, fruit chaat, and shami kebabs... and pretend to be a shy, opinionless dummy" (p. 50). The metaphor of woman-as-trolley alongside refreshments reduces women to objects displayed for male assessment. The requirement to "pretend to be a shy, opinionless dummy" demonstrates how marriageability requires performance of submissive femininity regardless of actual personality. Sherry recognizes this as performance—"pretend"—yet has no choice but to comply, as refusing would render her unmarriageable.

The age and power dynamics in rishta culture appear in Sherry's sarcastic description of her sixty-one-year-old suitor: "Pigeon I am, nubile I'm not, but Rishta Aunty believes this one is my stud of a Prince Charming" (p. 50). Her self-description as "pigeon" suggests both foolishness and entrapment. The vast age gap reveals that male economic stability outweighs age compatibility in determining men's marriageability, while women's value decreases with age regardless of other qualities. This double standard structures marriage markets to men's advantage, providing them expanded choices while constraining women's.

Sherry's elopement with Kaleen reveals how economic anxiety drives romantic choices. When Kaleen promises marriage, "Sherry's knees nearly buckled... Would she truly never have to work again...?" (p. 170). The physical reaction suggests relief more than passion; the question about never working reveals financial insecurity motivating acceptance. Unlike Lydia's thoughtless passion in *Pride and Prejudice*, Sherry's decision combines romantic fantasy with economic calculation—marriage as escape from family financial obligations and uncertain employment prospects.

Collective Honor versus Individual Reputation

The novels' treatment of sexual scandal reveals cultural differences in how patriarchy operates while demonstrating similar consequences for women's economic security. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Lydia's elopement endangers primarily her own future, with collateral damage to her sisters' reputations. Mr. Collins's hysterical declaration that "The death of your daughter would have been a blessing in comparison" (p. 259) articulates extreme consequences while focusing on individual loss. The narrative emphasizes that "loss of virtue in a female is irretrievable" (p. 261), marking Lydia permanently regardless of subsequent marriage.

The language emphasizes individual moral judgment. Mary Bennet warns that Lydia's situation demonstrates "that loss of virtue in a female is irretrievable; that one false step involves her in endless ruin" (p. 268). The terms "virtue," "false step," and "endless ruin" construct female sexuality as individual moral property that, once lost, cannot be recovered. While the scandal affects her sisters' prospects, the primary focus remains Lydia's individual punishment for transgressing sexual norms. Darcy's financial intervention to secure Wickham's marriage to Lydia repairs most damage, suggesting individual disgrace can be remedied through proper economic arrangements.

In *Unmarriageable*, Sherry's elopement threatens collective family honor (izzat) rather than primarily individual reputation. The response reveals collectivist cultural frameworks: "Lady may get what she deserves, but I'm heartbroken for what that means for the rest of you girls... A woman is nothing and no one without her virtue" (p. 182). While virtue language parallels Austen, the emphasis shifts to collective

consequences—"the rest of you girls"—showing how one daughter's actions affect the entire family's social standing. The extreme statement that "One should pray for Lady's death before we should have to suffer such humiliation" (p. 183) values family honor over individual life, revealing how women's sexuality becomes liability to families in cultures where collective reputation determines social status.

The language consistently emphasizes communal suffering: "we should have to suffer such humiliation" (p. 183) rather than individual sin. Sherry's agency is not solely personal but consequential for the entire family network. This represents fundamental cultural difference: in individualist Western societies, moral calculus prioritizes individual actors; in collectivist societies, families constitute primary moral units with individual identities bound to family status. Both systems subordinate women—virtue ideology making women responsible for their own marriageability, honor ideology making families responsible for managing women—but through different mechanisms with different implications for female agency.

The Limits of Individual Resistance

Both novels conclude with protagonists marrying wealthy men who respect their intelligence, providing both emotional satisfaction and economic security. These endings reward heroines for maintaining principles against pressure to accept unsuitable matches, yet they also reveal limitations of individualist resistance models. Elizabeth and Alys achieve happy endings through fortunate combinations of personal qualities (intelligence, wit, moral integrity), class privileges (genteel status, education), and circumstances beyond their control (Darcy's and Darsee's attractions to them, their willingness to reform, their continued regard despite initial rejections).

The endings invite critical reading of what they suggest about feminist resistance. On one hand, they validate protagonists' insistence on autonomy, demonstrating that refusing economically advantageous but personally repugnant marriages can lead to better outcomes. Elizabeth's rejection of Darcy's first proposal prompts his reform; her eventual acceptance occurs only after genuine respect develops. Alys similarly refuses matches based purely on economic advantage, maintaining that "I do not need to prove that I am right, just live as though I were free" (p. 292). Their happy marriages represent compromises between feminist principles and material realities—partnerships combining emotional connection, intellectual respect, and economic security. On the other hand, the endings depend on circumstances unavailable to most women. Not every woman who refuses Mr. Collins encounters someone like Darcy; not every teacher who resists family marriage pressure meets a reformed, wealthy Darsee. Charlotte Lucas and the Binat sisters' less affluent neighbors face marriage markets without such options. The protagonists' happy endings thus reveal class privileges enabling their resistance: youth, beauty, education, social access to wealthy men, and—crucially—fortunate attraction from men capable of providing both emotional partnership and economic security.

Alys's final reflection suggests awareness of structural limits: "She hoped the world would not change, but she would continue teaching as though it can" (p. 290). The grammar—"as though it can"—acknowledges doubt while maintaining commitment to action despite uncertainty about systemic transformation. This represents mature feminism recognizing that individual resistance cannot dismantle patriarchy but remains necessary nonetheless. Her teaching becomes political practice: "Her students were her revolution. If they learned to question, even a little, she had won" (p. 37). The modest goal—"question, even a little"—acknowledges how incremental consciousness-raising constitutes feminist work within structures that cannot be immediately overthrown.

Both novels thus present sophisticated feminist critiques recognizing that individual autonomy operates within structural constraints. The protagonists' resistance is real but circumscribed; their agency is actual but not absolute. They choose suitors rather than whether to enter marriage markets at all. They achieve happiness through fortunate convergences of privilege and circumstance that most women cannot replicate. Reading these endings critically reveals that feminist autonomy depends on material resources and social positions unequally distributed across class hierarchies—a reality the novels themselves expose through contrasts

between protagonists and secondary characters differently positioned in systems of gender and class oppression.

Conclusion

This comparative analysis demonstrates that while *Pride and Prejudice* and *Unmarriageable* offer sophisticated feminist critiques of marriage as economic institution, they simultaneously reveal how class privilege mediates women's capacity for resistance against patriarchal pressures. Elizabeth Bennet's and Alys Binat's intellectual independence and principled refusals of unsuitable marriages depend fundamentally on advantages unavailable to less privileged women: youth, beauty, education, social access to wealthy men, and—in Alys's case—employment providing modest economic independence. The secondary characters Charlotte Lucas and Sherry illuminate how economic vulnerability forecloses genuine choice, making pragmatic acceptance of unsatisfying marriages rational response to limited options rather than personal failing.

The comparison reveals both structural continuities and cultural translations in how patriarchy operates across temporal and geographical contexts. Austen's entailment system and Kamal's dowry culture represent different mechanisms producing similar results: women's economic dependence on marriage, which transforms what patriarchal ideology presents as romantic choice into material necessity. The novels differ in whether oppression operates primarily through individual reputation (Austen's individualist framework) or collective family honor (Kamal's collectivist context), yet both systems ultimately subordinate women by denying them direct access to economic resources and making marriage the primary route to security and social legitimacy.

The protagonists' happy endings—marriages to wealthy men who respect their intelligence—provide both validation of their resistance and revelation of its limits. These conclusions depend on fortunate circumstances beyond the heroines' control: Darcy's and Darsee's attractions to women of lower status, their willingness to reform, their continued regard despite initial rejections. Such convergences of emotional compatibility and economic security represent exceptions rather than norms in marriage markets structured by class and gender hierarchies. Charlotte Lucas and women like Sherry's rishta prospects face markets without such options, their choices constrained by age, economic necessity, and limited access to suitable partners.

The comparative approach illuminates how feminist literary criticism must read representations of female autonomy intersectionally, accounting for how class position enables or forecloses resistance. Both novels expose marriage as economic institution disguised by romantic ideology, yet both also feature protagonists whose relative privileges allow them forms of agency unavailable to women differently positioned in class hierarchies. This reveals limitations of individualist feminist resistance models that do not address systemic economic inequalities. Individual women may achieve autonomy through combinations of principle, talent, and fortune, but such achievements do not transform structures that make marriage economic necessity for women lacking independent resources.

These findings contribute to comparative feminist literary criticism by demonstrating that postcolonial adaptations can illuminate both universal patterns of patriarchal oppression and culturally specific mechanisms through which these patterns operate. Kamal's translation of Austen to contemporary Pakistan reveals how colonialism's legacies intersect with indigenous patriarchies to create locally specific forms of gender subordination, while also showing that fundamental structures—women's economic dependence on marriage, class stratification creating differential access to autonomy—persist across vast cultural differences. The comparison thus validates Mohanty's call for feminist analysis that recognizes shared contexts of struggle without homogenizing women's experiences or ignoring cultural particularities.

Ultimately, both novels suggest that genuine female autonomy requires not merely individual resistance but systemic transformation addressing economic foundations of gender oppression. The protagonists' intellectual and moral independence provides psychological freedom within structures of constraint, their wit and

principles creating spaces for dignity and self-respect even when material conditions limit choices. However, their happy endings depend on fortunate circumstances most women cannot access, revealing that sustainable autonomy requires economic resources enabling women to refuse unsuitable marriages without facing destitution. Until such resources become universally available, resistance remains privilege of the relatively advantaged—a reality both novels expose through contrasts between protagonists and secondary characters differently positioned in intersecting hierarchies of gender and class.

References

- Austen, J. (2003). *Pride and Prejudice*. Penguin Classics. (Original work published 1813)
- Bassnett, S. (1993). *Comparative literature: A critical introduction*. Blackwell.
- Collins, P. H. (2000). *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A Black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1989(1), 139–167.
- Delphy, C., & Leonard, D. (1992). *Familiar exploitation: A new analysis of marriage in contemporary Western societies*. Polity Press.
- Gilbert, S. M., & Gubar, S. (1979). *The madwoman in the attic: The woman writer and the nineteenth-century literary imagination*. Yale University Press.
- Hutcheon, L. (2006). *A theory of adaptation*. Routledge.
- Johnson, C. (1988). *Jane Austen: Women, politics, and the novel*. University of Chicago Press.
- Kamal, S. (2019). *Unmarriageable: Pride and prejudice in Pakistan*. Ballantine Books.
- McCall, L. (2005). The complexity of intersectionality. *Signs*, 30(3), 1771–1800. <https://doi.org/10.1086/426800>
- Mohanty, C. T. (2003). *Feminism without borders: Decolonizing theory, practicing solidarity*. Duke University Press.
- Poovey, M. (1984). *The proper lady and the woman writer: Ideology as style in the works of Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley, and Jane Austen*. University of Chicago Press.
- Spivak, G. C. (1988). Can the subaltern speak? In C. Nelson & L. Grossberg (Eds.), *Marxism and the interpretation of culture* (pp. 271–313). University of Illinois Press.