

Literature And Caste: Austen's Class Hierarchies And The Indian Social System

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the intersections between the class hierarchies represented in Jane Austen's novels and the caste dynamics prevalent in the Indian social system. By juxtaposing Austen's depiction of social mobility, class consciousness, and economic dependence with the rigid and often oppressive structures of caste in India, this study seeks to highlight the universal nature of social stratification and its implications for individual agency. While Austen's works reflect the British Regency era's preoccupation with social class and marriage as a means of economic security, parallels can be drawn to the ways in which caste operates as a determinant of socio-economic mobility in Indian society. The analysis demonstrates that despite the differing cultural contexts, both systems reveal the entrenchment of privilege and systemic inequality.

Introduction:

Social hierarchies have long been a central theme in literature, reflecting the rigid structures that govern human interactions. Jane Austen, one of the most celebrated authors of English literature, often addressed class dynamics and their implications on relationships, aspirations, and identity. Similarly, the Indian caste system—a deeply ingrained social hierarchy—defines access to resources, opportunities, and social mobility. By analyzing Austen's class hierarchies in the context of the Indian caste system, this paper aims to draw parallels between two distinct yet comparable structures of stratification.

Jane Austen and the Class Hierarchies of the Regency Era

Austen's novels, such as *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma*, portray a society where class and wealth dictate relationships and social interactions. The landed gentry, represented by characters like Mr. Darcy and Emma Woodhouse, enjoy privileges rooted in birth and inheritance. However, Austen's nuanced depictions also reveal cracks in this system, with characters such as Elizabeth Bennet and Jane Fairfax navigating social mobility through intelligence, wit, and resilience.

Austen's exploration of class consciousness often critiques the limitations imposed on women by these hierarchies. Marriage becomes a transactional arrangement, as seen in Charlotte Lucas's pragmatic decision to marry Mr. Collins. This reflects the dependency of women on male economic power, mirroring a system where mobility and security are contingent upon alliances rather than merit.

The Indian Caste System: A Comparative Lens

The Indian caste system, rooted in ancient Vedic traditions, functions as a rigid hierarchical framework dividing society into distinct groups based on birth. Unlike Austen's class system, which allows for limited mobility through marriage or wealth acquisition, caste is often immutable, dictating one's occupation, social interactions, and access to education.

Yet, parallels emerge in how both systems institutionalize privilege and marginalization. For instance, the economic dependence of lower-caste groups in India mirrors the struggles of Austen's lower-class characters. The rigidity of caste is also reflected in the social expectations placed upon individuals, much like the pressures experienced by Austen's heroines to conform to societal norms.

Intersectional Analysis: Gender, Class, and Caste

Both Austen's society and the Indian caste system reveal the compounded challenges faced by women. In Austen's works, women's opportunities are restricted by their gender and class, leading to a lack of autonomy

and economic dependence. Similarly, Indian women from marginalized castes experience a double burden of oppression, as they navigate both patriarchal and caste-based discrimination.

The character of Fanny Price in *Mansfield Park*, for example, can be likened to Dalit women in India, who, despite their capabilities, often remain relegated to subordinate roles. Fanny's struggles to assert her worth in a household that undervalues her contributions parallel the systemic undervaluation of Dalit women's labor and identity.

Points of Divergence: Fluidity and Rigidity

A critical difference between the two systems lies in their degree of fluidity. Austen's class hierarchies, while restrictive, allow for limited upward mobility. Elizabeth Bennet's marriage to Mr. Darcy exemplifies how intelligence and charm can bridge class divides. In contrast, the caste system's rigidity often precludes such movement, with inter-caste marriages still being a source of social stigma and violence in many parts of India.

Conclusion

By examining Austen's class hierarchies through the lens of the Indian caste system, this paper underscores the universality of social stratification and its impact on individual agency. While the two systems differ in their cultural and historical contexts, both reveal the entrenched nature of privilege and the systemic barriers faced by those at the margins. Austen's works thus serve as a lens through which the dynamics of caste in India can be better understood, offering insights into the ways literature reflects and critiques societal structures.

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