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Jane Austen 250: Un classico tra passato e presente

A cura di Carlotta Farese

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Sommari | Abstract

Gilberta Golinelli, *"I must refer the reader to Shakespeare's plays": Austen come critica shakespeariana*

Il saggio esamina il rapporto di Jane Austen con Shakespeare per dimostrare come la scrittrice, pur non entrando esplicitamente nel merito delle opere del drammaturgo, si accorge del complesso processo di appropriazione e trasformazione subito da Shakespeare tra la fine del Settecento e i primi anni dell'Ottocento. Austen non solo legge Shakespeare in modo trasformativo, dunque nel suo ruolo di scrittrice, ma anche di vera e propria critica letteraria, interessata alla appropriazione culturale, politica e sociale di Shakespeare, delle sue opere e dei suoi personaggi.

This essay examines Jane Austen's engagement with Shakespeare, arguing that although she did not directly participate in the critical debates surrounding his plays, she was nonetheless aware of the complex processes of appropriation and transformation his works underwent between the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Austen engages with Shakespeare not only in a transformative way, in her role as a writer, but also as a literary critic interested in the cultural, political, and social appropriation of Shakespeare, his works, and his characters.

Franca Dellarosa, *«The girls were now hunting for the Laconia»: Male Vanity and the Royal Navy in Jane Austen's* Persuasion

Nei romanzi di Jane Austen, la Royal Navy appare come una forza vitale, espressione di una classe sociale nuova e dinamica, contrapposta alla futilità di un sistema in via di estinzione, incarnato

nell'ultimo romanzo, *Persuasione*, nel personaggio di Sir Walter Elliot. L'analisi di una serie di situazioni narrative rivela tuttavia come anche gli eroi siano oggetto dello sguardo penetrante di Austen, che ne svela debolezze spesso connesse ai ruoli di genere, come nel caso del protagonista maschile, il capitano Frederick Wentworth.

The Royal Navy is represented as a shaping, vital force in Jane Austen's fiction, embodying its power as a new and dynamic social class, set against the futility of a vanishing system, as personified, in Austen's last novel *Persuasion*, in the character of Sir Walter Elliot. Close analysis of a number of narrative situations in the novel reveals that even the true romantic heroes are the object of Austen's sharp perceptiveness of the weaknesses that often pertain to gender roles, as is the case with the male protagonist, Captain Frederick Wentworth.

Gioia Angeletti, *Reading* Pride and Prejudice *in Tehran: Jane Austen, Azar Nafisi, and Women's Agency*

L'articolo analizza il modo in cui Azar Nafisi si appropria di *Pride and Prejudice* di Jane Austen per promuovere l'emancipazione femminile nell'Iran post-rivoluzionario, sostenendo che la narrativa austeniana configura uno spazio capace di favorire lo sviluppo del giudizio critico e dell'autonomia individuale, incarnati dalla figura di Elizabeth Bennet. L'articolo mostra, inoltre, come Nafisi, attraverso un'analisi delle tecniche narrative e stilistiche di Austen, quali l'ironia e il discorso indiretto libero, insegni alle sue alunne che lo studio della letteratura può diventare una forma di libertà interiore in contesti autoritari, sfidando, al contempo, letture dicotomiche del rapporto tra Oriente e Occidente.

This article examines how Azar Nafisi draws on Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* to empower women in post-revolutionary Iran. It

argues that Austen's fiction creates an environment that encourages the development of discernment and autonomy, as demonstrated by Elizabeth Bennet's interactions, which exemplify consent and self-determination. Ultimately, the article demonstrates how Nafisi uses an analysis of Austen's literary techniques, such as irony and free indirect discourse, to show her female students how literary study can foster internal freedom in authoritarian regimes while challenging oversimplified East/West interpretations.

Elena Spandri, *Jane Austen in Pakistan: Soniah Kamal's* Unmarriageable

I temi "universali" di Jane Austen possono essere tradotti in qualsiasi contesto culturale? Cosa comporta la riscrittura di una storia ambientata nell'epoca della Reggenza sullo status delle donne nel mercato matrimoniale nel Pakistan moderno, ancora alle prese con il proprio retaggio coloniale? L'articolo legge il romanzo di Soniah Kamal *Unmarriageable* (2019) come un'esplorazione delle condizioni del romanzo di costume sulla scena letteraria pakistana contemporanea. Con una prosa arguta che rende omaggio allo stile sontuoso e ai dialoghi sofisticati di Jane Austen, la versione di *Orgoglio e pregiudizio* offerta da Kamal affronta questioni di genere e classe in una società postcoloniale in cui, da passiva imitazione, la mimesi culturale diventa appropriazione creativa.

Can Jane Austen's "universal" themes be translated into any cultural environment? What is implicated in replotting a Regency story about women's status in the marriage market in modern-day Pakistan, still coming to terms with its colonial legacy? The article reads Soniah Kamal's novel *Unmarriageable* (2019) as an exploration into the viability of the novel of manners in contemporary Pakistani literary scene. In a witty prose that pays tribute to Austen's sumptuous style and sophisticated dialogues, Kamal's version of *Pride and*

Prejudice tackles issues of gender and class in a postcolonial society in which cultural mimesis has shifted from passive imitation to creative appropriation.

Maria Elena Capitani, *"The thing is – Jane Austen isn't just any author": Contemporary British Women Playwrights Re-Envisioning Austen's Novels for the Stage*

Il presente articolo esplora la riappropriazione teatrale di una delle scrittrici maggiormente iconiche della storia della letteratura, Jane Austen, la cui figura e il cui universo narrativo tuttora imperversano sull'immaginario culturale, sia a livello nazionale che globale. Drammaturghe britanniche contemporanee quali Isobel McArthur e Laura Wade rielaborano creativamente e traspongono Austen, 'liberando' i suoi (ipo)testi e creando fusioni sovversive tra Romanticismo e contemporaneità. Al contempo, entrambe le autrici rinegoziano la posizione delle donne nel mondo in quanto scrittrici, personaggi femminili e lettrici, offrendo al pubblico elaborati paesaggi meta-teatrali.

This article explores the stage appropriation of one of the most iconic female writers in literary history, Jane Austen, whose figure and narratives still haunt the cultural imagination, both nationally and globally. Contemporary British women playwrights such as Isobel McArthur and Laura Wade remix and remediate Austen by unleashing her (hypo)texts and creating subversive concoctions of Romanticism and contemporaneity. At the same time, they renegotiate women's position in the world as writers, characters, and readers, while providing the audience with elaborate theatrical metascapes.

Carlotta Susca, *The Other Bennet Sisters. Transmedia Fanfiction of* Pride and Prejudice *in the Twenty-First Century*

Il contributo analizza la fortuna transmediale di *Pride and Prejudice* attraverso una selezione della fanfiction contemporanea dedicata alle sorelle minori Bennet: Lydia, Kitty e Mary. Prendendo in esame *Lydia's Story* di Jane Odiwe, *What Kitty Did Next* di Carrie Kablean e *The Other Bennet Sister* di Janice Hadlow, l'articolo mostra come questi romanzi espandano il mondo narrativo austeniano oltre i confini del canone. Inquadrate tra riscrittura, sequel e invenzione, tali opere rivelano come la fanfiction partecipi della logica transmediale, valorizzando la molteplicità e il desiderio di "sapere cosa accade dopo".

This article explores the transmedia afterlife of *Pride and Prejudice* through contemporary fanfiction novels centered on the lesser-known Bennet sisters: Lydia, Kitty, and Mary. By analyzing Jane Odiwe's *Lydia's Story*, Carrie Kablean's *What Kitty Did Next*, and Janice Hadlow's *The Other Bennet Sister*, the paper investigates how these texts expand Austen's storyworld beyond the canonical ending. Positioned between rewriting, sequel, and homage, these works exemplify fanfiction as a form of transmedia storytelling grounded in multiplicity, participatory culture, and the enduring desire to extend fictional worlds beyond narrative closure.

Valerio Cordiner, *Judas ou Job? Barrès juge de Dreyfus*

Barrès ha fama di essere il portavoce dell'antidreyfusismo più virulento, settario e razzista. Dopo aver precisato tempistiche, modalità e soprattutto motivazioni profonde dell'impegno barresiano nell'Affaire Dreyfus, ci si propone di leggere con attenzione e senza pregiudizi, ma anche fuori da ogni logica revisionista, i suoi numerosi interventi consacrati alla questione, raccolti in *Scènes et Doctrines*

du Nationalisme (1902). Da un'analisi accorta di questi articoli, senz'altro faziosi, diffamatori e imbevuti di retorica antisemita, emerge tuttavia, sottotraccia, una segreta, inconfessata ammirazione per l'imputato, per la sua statura umana fuori dal comune e soprattutto per il suo imperturbabile contegno marziale. Paradossalmente, dopo le delusioni cocenti del boulangismo, è proprio questo oscuro e perseguitato capitano ebreo a fornire suo malgrado a Barrès un modello tangibile del soldato francese, coraggioso, disciplinato, contraddistinto in ogni situazione, anche le più estreme, da un attaccamento indefettibile alla divisa e ai valori che essa rappresenta. In questo senso è nel non detto (o nel detto tra le righe) della dannazione del "perfido ebreo" Alfred Dreyfus che può ravvisarsi l'annuncio della piena integrazione degli israeliti nel corpo nazionale successivamente propugnata da Barrès ne *Le diverses familles spirituelles de la France* (1917).

Barrès is famous for his association with a kind of anti-Dreyfusism that is most virulent, sectarian, and racist. After having specified the timeline, the method and, above all, the deep motivations of the Barrèsian engagement in the Dreyfus Affair, this paper proposes to carefully, and without any prejudice or revisionist logic, read his numerous speeches devoted to that issue, collected in *Scènes et Doctrines du Nationalisme* (1902). Through a meticulous analysis of these articles, which are undoubtedly sectarian, defamatory, and deeply entrenched in an anti-Semitic rhetoric, one notices a kind of secret, unconfessed admiration for the accused – for his extraordinary human stature and, above all, his imperturbable martial attitude. Paradoxically, after the fierce delusions of Boulangism, it is exactly this murky, persecuted Jewish captain to have, reluctantly, provided Barrès with a tangible model of the French soldier, who is brave, disciplined, characterised in every situation, even the most extreme ones, by an indefectible attachment to the uniform and the values that it represents. In this sense, it is in the untold about the punishment of the "perfidious Jew" Alfred

Dreyfus, or told between the lines, where it is possible to acknowledge the announcement of the full integration of the Israelites in the national corpus, later propagated by Barrès in *Le diverses familles spirituelles de la France* (1917).

Jacopo Parodi, *Come lavorava Sermonti. Lettura rapinosa di Inferno XXXIV e di un suo "abbozzo"*

Il presente contributo si propone di intrecciare il ritrovamento di un prezioso abbozzo di lavoro di Vittorio Sermonti sul canto XXXIV dell'*Inferno* con la visione che Sermonti ha della poesia di Dante. Sermonti è stato un commentatore dantesco atipico: un narratore di grande pregnanza che sa rendere chiari i nodi misteriosi della *Commedia*. Percorreremo il modo in cui Sermonti legge la figura di Lucifero, mostrando la diversità del demonio descritto da Dante rispetto agli autori precedenti. Ad emergere non è solo l'originalità del Sommo Poeta, ma anche quella di Sermonti che con sapienza costruisce una narrazione profondissima, che mette in luce la solitudine e il dolore di Lucifero.

This contribution aims to interweave the discovery of a valuable working draft by Vittorio Sermonti on Canto XXXIV of the *Inferno* with Sermonti's broader interpretation of Dante's poetry. Sermonti stands out as an unconventional commentator on Dante: a narrator of remarkable depth, capable of clarifying the enigmatic cruxes of the *Commedia*. The article examines Sermonti's reading of the figure of Lucifer, highlighting the distinctiveness of the demon as portrayed by Dante in comparison with earlier authors. What emerges is not only the originality of the *Sommo Poeta*, but also that of Sermonti himself, who, with narrative mastery, constructs an interpretation of profound intensity that brings to light Lucifer's solitude and suffering.

Roberta Borrelli, *Violenza e controllo in* Belmoro *di Corrado Alvaro, forme e degenerazioni del femminile*

Il romanzo incompiuto *Belmoro* (1957) di Corrado Alvaro delinea uno scenario distopico in cui la tecnoscienza, alleata del potere, mira a reificare l'umano, generare corpi postumani e mercificare il vivente, compromettendo le libertà fisiche e psichiche. Il presente articolo evidenzia come siano le figure femminili a mostrare con maggiore efficacia gli esiti tragici dell'uso e abuso delle tecnologie e, secondariamente, intende ricollocare Alvaro nel dibattito sulle tecnologie, soprattutto riproduttive, restituendogli uno spazio ancora non riconosciuto. L'analisi critica, inoltre, si avvale di una prospettiva postumana e transumana, volta a indagare il tema della maternità e del rapporto madre-figlio, dimostrando che il romanzo non solo rivela le derive della modernità ma conferma le intuizioni di Alvaro sull'impatto che la tecnologia ha sul corpo.

The unfinished novel *Belmoro* (1957) by Corrado Alvaro delineates a dystopian scenario in which technoscience, allied with power, seeks to reify the human, generate posthuman bodies, and commodify living beings, thereby undermining physical and psychological freedoms. This article highlights how it is the female figures who most effectively reveal the tragic outcomes of the use and abuse of technologies and, secondly, aims to reposition Alvaro within the debate on technologies – especially reproductive ones – restoring to him a place that has not yet been acknowledged. Moreover, the critical analysis adopts a posthuman and transhuman perspective to explore the theme of motherhood and the mother-child relationship, demonstrating that the novel not only exposes the excesses of modernity but also confirms Alvaro's insights into the impact of technology on the body.

Guido Scaravilli, *Un monologo anomalo ne* La folla *di Paolo Valera*

Il contributo si propone di studiare la configurazione di un monologo singolare ne *La folla* di Paolo Valera, scrittore poliedrico che si lanciò, alla fine del XIX secolo, nella composizione di un romanzo di chiara ispirazione naturalista. Per la sua forma e la sua tenuta strutturale, tale monologo sembra essere assimilabile alla fenomenologia di Dujardin di *Les lauriers sont coupés*, ma, ad un'attenta analisi, l'innovazione dell'autore viene inscritta, più generalmente, alla vena sperimentale diffusasi tra gli autori del clima di fine secolo, che con la loro acribìa, arrivarono a preannunciare esiti che *a posteriori* sarebbero stati definiti modernisti.

This article aims to study the configuration of a singular monologue in *La folla* by Paolo Valera, a multifaceted writer who, at the end of the 19th century, embarked on the composition of a novel clearly inspired by naturalism. Due to its form and structural integrity, this monologue seems to be comparable to Dujardin's phenomenology in *Les lauriers sont coupés*, but, upon careful analysis, the author's innovation is more generally inscribed in with the experimental vein that spread among the authors of the *fin de siècle* climate, who, with their meticulousness, came to herald outcomes that would later be defined as modernist.

IV. Jane Austen in Pakistan: Soniah Kamal's *Unmarriageable*

by *Elena Spandri*

> It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife[1].

> This is Pakistan. The Home of the marriage-industrial complex. Always a wedding taking place everywhere. Weddings are our nation's bread and butter and foundation and flags[2].

1. *A dream come true*

At the Gwinnett County Public Library launch of *Unmarriageable* on 17 May 2022, Pakistani author Soniah Kamal retraced the steps of her lifelong infatuation with Jane Austen's works, and with *Pride and Prejudice* in particular. She was fourteen years old when her aunt Helen gave her a gorgeously illustrated copy of the novel, which scared her on account of its size.

[1] J. Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, edited with an Introduction and Notes by V. Jones, Penguin, London 2014, p. 5.
[2] S. Kamal, *Unmarriageable*, Ballantine Books, New York 2019, p. 236.

She immediately «engaged» with the colourful pictures but was not until sixteen that she had the courage to open the first page and start reading it. The discovery was astonishing: without knowing, Jane Austen had written «the most quintessentially Pakistani novel that I had ever read in my life, about a mother who was desperate for her five unmarried daughters to marry»[3]. What impressed Kamal about *Pride and Prejudice* back then was the author's appearing more interested in social critique than in romance and her employing a romantic plot to humorously expose the deficiencies of the patriarchal system in Regency society and the paramount relevance of marriage in women's bounded destinies[4]:

> Mrs Bennett was like too many mothers I'd grown up around, those obsessed with getting their daughters married off because that was what "good mothers" did. As for "good girls," they obeyed their mothers, regardless of what they themselves wanted. […] In a country where marriages continue to be arranged on the basis of convenience, pedigrees, and bank balances, Elizabeth's spurning of the self-righteous Mr. Collins and the pompous Mr. Darcy were defiant acts we could look up to[5].

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[3] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GWB7idKRwcI. Last accessed 6 November 2025.

[4] Kamal's previous novel, *An Isolated Incident* (2014), is of a completely different tenor, as the plot engages with the tragic conflicts of Kashmir, from which her family originated. The novel was written to honour a promise the writer made to her grand-father and took ten years to write.

[5] S. Kamal, "*Pride and Prejudice* and Me", in "A Reader's Guide", *Unmarriageable*, cit., p. 350.

As Austen's plot powerfully resonated with the pressure on marriage persisting in modern-day Pakistan, despite Pakistani women's having reached professional emancipation, Kamal promised herself that one day she would set *Pride and Prejudice* in her home country. After four decades, a few relocations (from Karachi to Britain, Saudi Arabia, and the US), and a MA degree in Creative Writing at Georgetown University, Soniah Kamal's teenage dream of transporting Jane Austen in Pakistan was finally accomplished. The story she had written in two months, to be turned in as her academic dissertation, came out in 2019 and was an instant success[6].

Most certainly, *Unmarriageable* owes part of its popularity to the paratextual materials included in the book, which provide an excellent reader's guide. They comprise a section titled "Questions and Topics for discussion", which pinpoints the major themes of the novel and can be used as a teaching activity; a short autobiographical essay expanding on the similarities between Regency England and contemporary Pakistan ("*Pride and Prejudice* and me"); an erudite unit on the politics of names, followed by another witty short piece, where Kamal creates a shrewd postcolonial background for the invented town that supplies the novel setting, going through the 1857 Indian Rebellion, the 1947 Partition, and the post-independence change in nomenclature that renamed the ancient city of Gorana after a renowned Muslim Bollywood star ("How Dilipabad got its name").

[6] The reviews of *Unmarriageable* unanimously praise its irreverent and witty quality, as well as its imaginative combination of romance, entertainment, and social critique.

Drawing on the novel's paratextual materials, as well as on the recent transnational turn in Jane Austen's studies, the article reads Kamal's rewriting of *Pride and Prejudice* in *Unmarriageable* as an insightful exploration into the viability of the novel of manners in contemporary Pakistani literary scene, which pays tribute to Austen's sophisticated style and tackles issues of gender, class and money in a postcolonial patriarchal society undergoing processes of modernisation and globalisation[7]. Can Jane Austen's "universal" themes be translated into any cultural environment, as Sabina Akram argues in her reading of two contemporary adaptations of *Pride and Prejudice*, and as Kamal herself maintains in the autobiographical essay?[8]

[7] For a critical survey of Austen's postcolonial readings, see Y. Park and R. Sunder Rajan (edited by), *The Postcolonial Jane Austen*, Routledge, London and New York 2000 and K. Sinanan, A. Bautz, D. Cook (edited by), *Austen After 200. New Reading Spaces*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke and New York 2023. For Jane Austen's afterlife, see G. Dow and C. Hanson (edited by), *Uses of Austen. Jane Austen's Afterlives*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke and New York 2012, K. Sutherland, *Jane Austen's Textual Lives: From Aeschylus to Bollywood*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2007, and K. Halsey, *Jane Austen and Her Readers 1746-1945*, Anthem Press, London 2013.

[8] Austen's novels «focus on issues that continue to dominate many people's life today. Her universal themes, such as class, courtship and family, contain timeless insights about human nature and can be translated into any cultural environment, ranging from twenty-first century British culture to contemporary South Asian culture». S. Akram, *Austen, Adaptation and the Subcontinent: Postcolonial Cri-*

What cultural gestures are implicated in replotting a Regency story about women's status in the marriage market, and the fate of the nineteenth-century landed gentry, in modern-day Pakistan still coming to terms with its colonial legacy and the repercussions of Partition? What model of cultural mobility is involved in such a "close" re-reading of one of the most quintessentially British literary classics?

2. *From language confusion to literary fusion*

In order to illustrate the rationale of the novel, both in her public interventions and in the paratextual materials Kamal resorts to a straightforward postcolonial explanation. Despite its political independence, obtained at the price of an abiding collective trauma[9], Pakistan is a country where the legacy of the British empire is still palpable in the use of English, which is

tique in Bride and Prejudice and Austenistan, in *Journal of Comparative Literature and Aesthetics*, XLV, 22, 2022, pp. 93-102.

[9] See Y. Khan, *The Great Partition. The Making of India and Pakistan*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London 2007, p. 210: «Partition […] was one of the twentieth century darkest moments. […] The Partition of the 1947 is also a loud reminder, should we care to listen, of the dangers of colonial interventions and the profound difficulties that dog regime change. It stands testament to the follies of empire, which ruptures community evolution, distorts historical trajectories and forces violent state formation from societies that would otherwise have taken different – and unknowable – paths». See also S. Wolpert, *Shameful Flight. The Last Years of the British Empire in India*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2006.

not only one of the two official state languages out of seventy-four living languages (the other one being Urdu), but also and foremost «the *lingua franca* of privilege and opportunity»[10]. At the end of "*Pride and Prejudice* and Me", Kamal mentions the infamous "Minute on Indian Education", in which the historian and Whig politician Thomas Babington Macaulay set the Subcontinent's linguistic policy for creating «a person brown in colour but white in sensibilities» in 1835[11]. She then adds that while the language politics inherited from the British empire generated deep class divides and confused human beings, she turned to writing to counter "confusion" with "fusion":

> It was then that I realized what the origins were of the emphasis in the Pakistani educational system on learning English and English literature at the cost of exploring our indigenous languages and literatures. History has made it such that my mother tongue, for all its intents and purposes, is the English language. I wanted to write a novel that paid homage to Jane Austen and *Pride and Prejudice*, as well as combined my braided identification with English-language and Pakistani culture, so that the "literature of others" became the literature of everyone. Therefore *Unmarriageable*[12].

Along with other Pakistani writers of her generation, such as Kamila Shamsie and Moshin Hamid, Kamal develops the idea of an Anglophone global literature that bears the mark

[10] S. Kamal, "*Pride and Prejudice* and Me", cit. pp. 349-350.
[11] *Ibid*., p. 352. On the colonial policy of education in the Subcontinent see R. Allen and A. Trivedi, *Literature and Nation. Britain and India 1800-1990*, Routledge, New York 2000.
[12] *Ibidem*.

of postcoloniality, by writing what she terms a «parallel retelling» of *Pride and Prejudice*: a masterpiece in narrative style and psychological realism she grants not merely the standing of a national but that of a universal classic. Interestingly, the shift from Regency Britain to Pakistan at the turn of the twenty-first century is realised by deploying two apparently contradictory rhetorical strategies. On the one hand, in fact, *Unmarriageable* translates every single culture-specific element of *Pride and Prejudice* into a Pakistani context, so that all the scones become samosas and all the bonnets turn into dupattas. On the other hand, the accurate retelling of Elizabeth Bennett's story, which is not limited to customs and lifestyle but encompasses individual emotions and collective structures of feelings, seems to gesture towards eliminating the specificity of place and sidestepping what is generally conceived to be the quintessence of postcolonial agendas, that is the reclaiming of a symbiotic relationship between cultural identity and place.

As I read and reread *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth Bennett and every other character ceased to be English – to me, they were Pakistani. That I was imagining characters and scenarios in a Pakistani setting was nothing extraordinary. Ever since I could remember, I'd been engaging in literary transference/transplantation/translation from one culture to another. Growing up on English literature, I taught myself to see my daily reality reflected in my reading material, while plumbing its universal truths in search of particulars. […] In reading English literature through a Pakistani lens, it seemed to me that all cultures were concerned with

the same eternal questions and that people were more similar to one another than they were different[13].

Kamal's project targets universality and yet does not give up locality in a distinctly decolonial manner. Instead of identifying with the circumstances of Austen's characters, forcing an assimilation to the hegemonic culture bound to reproduce the colonial dynamics of power, her girlish imagination transforms the British characters into Pakistani characters capable of absorbing the literary value of the source text on equal terms, without succumbing to its cultural authority. Accordingly, if reading English literature with a Pakistani lens brings Kamal close to what appears as a Goethian notion of *Weltliteratur*, the historical context of the novel allows for interrogating the qualified universality she advocates through her project. Indeed, the profound similarity she claims between Austen's universe and contemporary Pakistani customs might well be regarded as a self-orientalising assertion about the backwardness of Asian societies. Conversely, it is my contention that it rather reads as an implicit acknowledgement that the emancipatory, progressive politics which characterized nationalist projects in the Subcontinent, after India and Pakistan gained independence from Britain and from each other, have been replaced by a new patrimonial wave that, similarly to early nineteenth-century Britain, has marginalised and oppressed women, limited their social mobility, and undermined their ef-

[13] *Ibid*., p. 351.

forts to contrast the patriarchal system[14]. In fact, only a lucid political agenda underlying the novel's sparkling atmosphere can account for Kamal's insistence on not reading *Unmarriageable* as a Pakistani sequel to *Pride and Prejudice* but as its Asian equivalent. An alter ego that, while paying tribute to a great Western classic, is also perfectly equipped to stand alone.

3. *A play of mirrors*

All this considered, one must admit that the paramount pleasure afforded by *Unmarriageable* is the play of mirrors it sustains throughout the narrative. The novel offers an experience in literary ventriloquism which feels at once deeply enjoyable and deeply bizarre. Despite the apparent blasphemy of the remark, in fact, there are points at which one must stop and call to mind whether she is reading Austen or Kamal. The most explicit mirror play relates to the politics of names, which is one of the ways whereby the novel pursues its decolonial agenda. Since Kamal wants to expose the linguistic legacy of colonialism, she chooses names that match those in the original and evoke the characters' role in the story. Accordingly, Jane becomes Jena, Bingley becomes Bungles, Darcy becomes Darsee, and Collins becomes Kaleen, which means "carpet", because the family once owned carpet factories. Charlotte Lucas becomes Sherry Looclus, which sounds like "low-class". «Bi-

[14] On contemporary global neo-patrimonialism see S.E. Hanson and J.F. Kopstein, *Understanding the New Patrimonial Wave*, in *Reflections*, XX, 1, March 2022, pp. 237-249.

nat is an echo of Bennett, but furthermore, if pronounced in a certain way – Binaat rather than Binut – it means "girls" in Arabic, and what else is this a tale of if not girls?»[15] Elizabeth is turned into Alysba/Alys, the British wife of Pakistani poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz who, through marriage, acquired the same hyphenated identity Kamal and her heroine reclaim for themselves. Furthermore, to mirror the habit of anglicising Asian names, the novel pairs "occidental" names with "oriental" suffixes: Jenkins becomes Jenkinudin and George Wickham become Jeorgeullah Wickaam.

> De Bagh means "of the garden", and the de Baghs hail from royal gardeners, or so they say. Darsee's names come from *darzee*, meaning "tailor", telling us that at some point there was an attempt to erase the family's menial roots. Every country has its Ellis Island-style name changes, and Pakistan's came largely from 1947 Partition[16].

The elusive relationship with history is another point where *Pride and Prejudice* and *Unmarriageable* beautifully tally. So, it is not surprising that the story in *Unmarriageable* takes place between December 2000 and August 2001, just in time to circumvent the dramatic events which symbolically put an end to the cosmopolitan illusions cherished by many people at the turn of second millennium and inaugurated, instead, a word order based on new, savage nationalist ideologies, whose consequences were deeply felt in the Indian Subcontinent and

[15] S. Kamal, "A Note on the Names in *Unmarriageable*", in "A Reader's Guide", cit., p. 353.
[16] *Ibid*., p. 355.

in its bordering countries[17]. However, although no mention of 9/11 is provided in *Unmarriageable* – whose happy ending features the newly-wed couple romantically reading together the first lines of the incipit of *Pride and Prejudice* at Chawton House –, a few quick references to the Partition offer glimpses of the troubled history of Pakistan, which surround the romance with an unequivocal political aura. Significantly, Aly's momentous realisation that her sister Lady's honour was saved by Darsee, and not by her uncle Nisar, is accompanied by a reflection on the interconnectedness of history and geography, embattled places and national identities, that somewhat invalidates the prospective couple's cherished fantasies of a modern, progressive cosmopolitanism[18]:

[17] Pakistani novelists Nadeem Aslam and Moshin Hamid tackled the aftermath of the New York terrorist attack and the bloody consequences of the US war on terror in their respective novels, *The Blind Man's Garden* (2013) and The *Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2013). On Pakistani literary response to the 2001 New York attack see U. Anyaria, *Global Pakistan in the wake of 9/11*, in *The Routledge Companion to Pakistani Anglophone Writing*, ed. by Aroosa Kanwal and Saima Aslam, Routledge, New York 2022.

[18] Darsee makes it clear that one of the things binding him to Alys is their common international experience: «'I believe people like her and me have an advantage having grown up for a time period without our any set roots, and so we are quite comfortable letting go of places. We're the sort of people who believe home is where you make it, and borders are ridiculous, and airports are the most harmonious places on earth'», S. Kamal, *Unmarriageable*, cit., p. 275.

Alys hung up the phone. She headed towards the graveyard for some privacy. She paced the lanes between the graves. She walked by the grave of a Pakistani soldier who at the time of his death in World War II had been an Indian soldier; geography had converted his citizenship from one country during life to another country after death. Darsee, with his romantic notion of being rootless, would have appreciated his observation.[19]

The peripheral position of the reference with respect to the main plot echoes the casual mention of Antigua plantation in *Mansfield Park* and mobilises a whole critical tradition which, from Edward Said onwards, has insisted on the power of the novel genre to embed – and hence simultaneously unveil – repressed histories[20]. As for present-day Pakistan, the novel catalogues the country's multiple problems only once, through Alys's disenchanted perspective – which is nonetheless more than what Austen makes with her own topicality:

She grabbed the newspaper no one had opened yet and flipped through the usual news of honor killings, dowry burnings, rapes, blasphemy accusations, sectarian violence, corruptions scandals, tax evasions, and the never-ending promises by vote-grabbing politicians to fix the country[21].

[19] *Ibid*., p. 304.
[20] Edward Said's reading of the role of Antigua in the economy of *Mansfield Park* is considered as one of the foundational texts of postcolonial critique. See *Culture and Imperialism*, Vintage, New York 1993.
[21] S. Kamal, *Unmarriageabl*e, cit., pp. 229-230.

The theme of social mobility, pivotal in *Pride and Prejudice*, is addressed in *Unmarriageable* by showing the Binat family's dysfunctionality as the result of two interrelated socio-economic circumstances: an overturn of fortune caused by Mr Binat's brother's fraud, which robbed him of a conspicuous portion of his property, and the consequent social ban forced on the family. Born in the city of Lahore and subsequently migrated to affluent and cosmopolitan Jedda in Saudi Arabia, after the economic collapse the Binats had to relocate to the small provincial town of Dililapad, where «there wasn't even a proper book or library» and «life seemed to revolve around marrying well and eating well»[22]. Accordingly, Jena and Alys, the eldest daughters, started to work as English teachers at the local British school, which provides the opening setting for the novel. The first paragraph appears dazzlingly Austenian in both content and form, as it offers the characters' social and economic determinations in an informative, poised, and lively prose:

> When Alysha Binat began working at age twenty as the English literature teacher at the British School of Dililapad, she had thought it would be a temporary solution to the sudden turn of fortune that had seen Mr. Barkat "bark" Binat and Mrs. Khushboo "Pinkie" Binat and their five daughters – Jenazba, Alysba, Marizba, Quittyara and Lady – move from big-city Lahore to backwater Dilipabad. But here she was, ten years later, thirty years old, and still in the job she's grown to love despite its challenges. Her new batch on ninth-graders was starting *Pride and Prejudice*, and their first homework had been to rewrite the opening sentence of Jane Aus-

[22] *Ibid*., p. 42.

ten's novel, always a fun activity and a good way for her to get to know her students better[23].

Along with the realist vein, a metanarrative level is introduced from the start, which unlocks a feminist discourse by means of ironical observations and situations, and creates systematic parallels between Austen's and Kamal's stories: «It is a truth universally acknowledged that a girl can go from pauper to princess in the mere seconds it takes to accept a proposal»[24]. Although the epithet in the title is referred to either protagonist throughout the story, it is primarily applied to Valentine Darsee:

> «That man is definitely interested in you», Sherry said.
> «Oh please». […]
> «If you play your cards right, and he marries you, that would be the greatest coup».
> «*I* wouldn't marry him. He's unmarriageable»[25].

Unmarriageable invests a lot in a close imitation of Austen's text, which approximates a chapter-by-chapter rewriting of the plot "transplanted" within an Asian context, which is offered as exotic in customs as much as amazingly familiar in spirit. Kamal's prose provides sparkling dialogues, long segments of free indirect thought, caustic satire, and, in keeping with the realist conventions of Austen's novels of manners, it foregrounds the colonial past of the Binat family, whose ances-

[23] *Ibid*., p. 3.
[24] *Ibidem*.
[25] *Ibid*., p. 150.

tors were turned into landed gentry by the British administration in the post-mutiny era, and thus given the economic and ethical responsibility of that quintessentially Western class[26]. Like in Austen, Kamal's social critique is levelled at the patriarchal system and at women's passive complacency with it, at hypocrisy, religious bigotry[27], and the materialism of contemporary Pakistani society. And it is mainly voiced by a rather obtrusive narrator who also plays the role of a cultural mediator between the novel's Western and its Eastern readerships. In the following comment on the wealthy couple who have just got married after having fallen in love in Amsterdam, outside family control, the narrator explains how important it is for the bride (Fiede) to exhibit that, while in Europe, she «missed her tribe terribly»:

> Though a love marriage, officially, the Feckers were telling everyone it was purely arranged marriage so that no one could accuse Fiede of being "loose" or "fast"[28].

[26] See C. Bayly, *Imperial Meridian. The British Empire and the World 1790-1830*, Longman, London 1989 and T.R. Metcalf, *Ideologies of the Raj*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1995.
[27] Religious bigotry is epitomised by the character of Mari, who turns to orthodox Islam to compensate for a failure in the medical career. Her moralism and affected piety are systematically satirised by her sisters: «"I swear Mari", Lady said, "no one is going to marry you except a gross mullah with a beard coming down to his toes, and once he finds out what a party pooper you are, you'll be the least favourite of his four wives"», S. Kamal, *Unmarriageable*, cit., p. 37.
[28] *Ibid*., p. 60.

The novel thrives in similar situations, which allow readers unfamiliar with Pakistani traditions the double pleasure of getting to know a new culture, without losing touch with the more familiar Austenland.

The most recurrent target of Kamal's witty resistance to patriarchal ideology is the ethics of marriage, criticised on pure Austenian terms and through transparent Austenian formal strategies. The Pakistani obsession with marriage satirised in the novel lies in its being the only respectable way for a woman to have sex, so that, at the age of thirty, Alys and Jena already appear as «certified Miss Havishams»[29]. As one would expect, the character on which the responsibility of voicing traditional views on marriage falls is Mrs. Binat, who never tires of advancing the cause of matrimony and never stops scheming to obtain a good proposal for her daughters. Her prescriptions for grabbing a husband by «keep[ing] your distance without keeping your distance», letting him «caress you without coming anywhere near you», and cooing «sweet somethings into his ears without opening your mouth»[30], make for one of the funniest pages in the novel. Nonetheless, unlike Mrs. Bennett, whose vanity is uncompromisingly indicted by Austen's narrator, Mrs. Binat is portrayed as a more nuanced personality and

[29] S. Kamal, *Unmarriageable*, cit., p. 7. The choice of a typically female profession for the Binat sisters is not accidental, as Kamal openly denounces the predicament of female schoolteachers who live miserable lives because they cannot afford help and are forced to overwork to perform a crucial educational role that is socially undervalued.

[30] *Ibid*., p. 40.

is often granted the honour of free indirect thought, which highlights the predictability of her conventional mind, while also suggesting a measure of sympathy with her "drama":

> Still, Mrs. Binat knew beauty had the potential to defeat the slurs of a jealous relative. Jena had only to sink her hooks into a prospective Rich Man, who would subsequently be so besotted by her look that he would ignore rumours about her family. Alas, Mrs. Binat thought as she smoothed a wrinkle from Jena's *pallu*, none of her daughters were proficient in the art of hook, reel, grab. In fact, except for Lady, her daughters were discomfited by the very notion of catching a husband, despite the number of times she'd told them that one had to seek out a good proposal as one would a promotion or a comfortable shoe[31].

What is most dreaded by the Binat women is downward mobility, an experience which only Jena and Alys have been able to come to terms with, thanks to their teaching profession, and which Mrs. Binat has self-piteously rephrased as «a tale of rags to riches, riches to rags»[32]. However, for all the discomfort associated with a downscaled lifestyle, neither Jena nor Alys is available for an arranged marriage, and both greatly admire Sherry Lacloos who stands what appears to be an irrevocable spinsterly destiny with great dignity. Soniah Kamal has often declared Charlotte Lucas to be her favourite character in *Pride and Prejudice*, and consequently her alter ego in *Unmarriageable* figures as a perceptive and self-ironical woman who significantly contributes to Alys's personal growth and

[31] *Ibid*., p. 54.
[32] *Ibid*., p. 38.

proves brilliant at negotiating her agency within a marriage of convenience. Wanting a proper dowry and unable to procreate, Sherry wisely chooses to make the best out of her limited social chances by marrying a man she does not love so as to enjoy a comfortable life, help her family, and achieve a measure of freedom. Her engagement to Farhat Kaleen (not a reverend but a physiatrist that everybody takes for a psychiatrist), on the very day Alys has refused his proposal, sounds as an intolerable insult to Mrs. Binat who tries in vain to end the two girls' friendship.

One discourse *Unmarriageable* insists on throughout the narrative revolves around the body, specifically the female body. Austen's interest in physical attitudes, facial expressions, and deportments is replaced by a focus on women's repressed sexual needs and the imperative to look fashionable, fit, and young in order to secure a good husband. Kamal offers hilarious dialogues on virginity, menstruation, female masturbation as a substitute for marital sex, the tastelessness of heavy make-up, and the "drama" of being overweight.

«It is a truth universally acknowledged that a good girl ought to keep her mouth shut about whether she's keeping her legs shut».

«I bet Friede's been humping and pumping night and day», Sherry said. «But at the wedding, like all good pigeons [virgins], she'll pretend her feathers have never fluttered»[33].

«Better to die a pigeon than copulate with a potbelly»[34].

[33] *Ibid*., p. 51.
[34] *Ibid*., p. 49.

«My womb has produced those rare creatures: girls who are dainty but also tough. And their wombs will produce just as well. Not to worry! Even Qitty's womb is in tip-top shape; all she needs is a bit of dieting»[35].

«And these pigeon problems», Jena said in despair, «are only meant to preoccupy us while the men are free to focus their energies on the important things in life»[36].

«I pray your dreams come true», Jena said to Lady, «but that doesn't mean you can be mean to Qitty or to anyone. We are all God's creatures and we are beautiful».

«Those who can afford plastic surgery are more beautiful», Lady said. «Qitty, you fatso, stop sniveling. You know I call you fat for your own good»[37].

Like its English counterpart, *Unmarriageable* exploits all the tropes of the marriage novel: chastity, eroticism, family honour, purity of lineage, and shame. Kamal showcases the tradition of romance which flourished in the Zia era (1978-1988), when the resurgence of nationalist ideology and a muscular affirmation of Islamic identity were expressed not by putting a ban on the allegedly corrupt West but by enforcing "purity" on Pakistani women, whose body was turned into the index of the nation's integrity[38]. This seems to be the first point

[35] *Ibid*., p. 110.
[36] *Ibid*., p. 253.
[37] *Ibid*., p. 18.
[38] «General Zia had engaged familiar ideological tropes in a politics that associated all that was pure, and also by association impure in

of contact with the Regency era, when middle-class women were required to take part in the nation-formation process through proper sexual behaviour[39]. The second point of contact is a patent connection between realism and patrimonialism (or neo-patrimonialism), which operates in both Austen's and Kamal's works[40] and sustains their respective pictures of women's education and expectations. As perceptively argued by John Plotz, in fact, the resurgence of realist modes in contemporary novels relates to the emergence of new patrimonial societies resulting from the collapse of modernity conceived as a dynamic system of egalitarian values advocated on a global

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the parlous Pakistani state, with the symbolic and real female body», Abu-Bakar Ali, *Agency, Gender, Nationalism, and the Romantic Imaginary in Pakistan*, in *The Routledge Companion to Pakistani Anglophone Literature*, cit., p. 227. For a diasporic perspective on marriage culture, see in the same volume R. K. Gairola and E. Fatma, *Conjugal Homes: marriage culture in contemporary novels of the Pakistani diaspora*.

[39] See L. Collins, *Britons. Forging the Nation 1707-1837*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London 1992.

[40] On the structural connection of Austen's novels and patrimonialism see Thomas Picketty's *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA) 2014. Expanding from Jane Austen's social realism, John Plotz argues that the rise of speculative fiction in contemporary literature has turned to anti-realistic modes because the neo-patrimonial wave that has invested societies in the last decades has prompted audiences to «take comfort in elves and aliens so eagerly because a shared human world has come to seem increasingly unlikely, even fantastical», *Is Realism Failing? The Rise of Secondary Worlds*, in *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, L, 30, 2017, pp. 426-435, 426.

scale, and its replacement with an idea of stability warranted by property assets and by the well-known association of patrimony and matrimony[41]. This is why Elizabeth Bennett's hard-earned combination of real love and real estate resonates so much with Soniah Kamal's literary universe. Embracing Plotz's sound argument, it is possible to conjecture that Kamal's use of Austen involves a relevant intellectual and political reinvestment in the progressive and egalitarian potential embedded in social realism.

4. *"Thick" mimesis and cultural mobility: from Elizabeth to Alysba*

The historical similarities exhibited through the amusing play of mirrors provided by *Unmarriageable* do not so much advance an argument in favour of a revisionary postcolonial aesthetics, as point to a different and farther-reaching artistic gesture[42]. To be true, in *Unmarriageable* cultural mimesis might even appear reversed, in that Jane Austen gets inscribed within a Pakistani chronology where the moral and ideological posi-

[41] For a political reading of Austen's novels, see C. L. Johnson's classic study, *Jane Austen: Women, Politics, and the Novel*, The University of Chicago Press, London and Chicago 1988.

[42] For a critical survey of the different connections between postcolonial literature and the Western canon see John Marx, *Postcolonial Literature and the Western literary canon*, in Neil Lazarus (edited by), *The Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Literary Studies*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2004, pp. 83-96.

tioning of women determines the viability of a nationalist project which shows weird similarities with the Regency era:

> This is Pakistan. The Home of the marriage-industrial complex. Always a wedding taking place everywhere. Weddings are our nation's bread and butter and foundation and flags[43].

Given this premise, a question arises as to whether Kamal's experiment with an Austenian comedy of manners set in modern-day Pakistan suggests that the postcolonial novel has come full circle. And this being the case, what alternative model of cultural mobility would *Unmarriageable* advocate?[44] "*Pride and Prejudice* and me", the short autobiographical essay included in the «Reader's Guide», implicitly discusses the type of cultural mimesis at work in the novel, which matches neither a subaltern reproduction of cultural authority epitomized by V.S. Naipaul's notion of mimicry, nor the disruptive imitation of colonial authority that turns it against itself, articulated by Homi Bhabha. In fact, both notions of mimicry are central to postcolonial agendas, but whereas the former highlights the inferiority complex underlying the reproduction of Western authority in a postcolonial context, the second threatens the binary coloniser/colonised and aims to dislocate colonial au-

[43] S. Kamal, *Unmarriageable*, cit., p. 236. The quotation appears as one of the two essay's epigraphs.

[44] For a sweeping reflection on the forms and implications of cultural mobility see S. Greenblatt, I. Županov, R. Meyer-Kalkus, H. Paul, P. Nyíri, F. Panewick, *Cultural Mobility. A Manifesto*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge and New York 2010.

thority from its dominant position[45]. Both notions of mimicry imply extensive imitation, but while the structure of feelings attendant to one is associated with mourning and melancholia, the psychic attitude attached to the other has rather to do with resistance and subversive passive aggressiveness.

Although it is undeniable that *Unmarriageable* makes a pervasive use of cultural mimesis, its extreme mimetic drive does not turn into any of the two traditional modes of post-colonial mimicry just mentioned. The novel reads neither as a subaltern imitation of *Pride and Prejudice* confirming the latter's cultural authority as a universal classic, nor, conversely, as a threatening double which appropriates the models' authority in order to dislocate it from its stable position within established literary hierarchies. What *Unmarriageable* offers, instead, is a form of "thick" mimesis which is bent on replacing epistemological binaries with more relational postures between the two texts. The adjective is drawn on Clifford Geertz's anthropological method of "thick description", which aims at providing a deeply contextualised and nuanced understanding of cultures, including their self-interpretive forms[46]. On the one hand, in fact, thick mimesis celebrates the relevance of *Pride and Prejudice* within a shared cultural genealogy outside

[45] For the first type of mimicry see V.S. Naipaul's seminal novel *The Mimic Men* (1967) and *Reading and Writing. A Personal Account* (1982). For the second type of mimicry see H. K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, Routledge, London and New York 1994.

[46] See *Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture*, in Id., *The Interpretation of Cultures. Selected Essays*, Basic Books, New York 1973.

any inferiority complex. On the other hand, it "provincializes" that self-same authority by reclaiming the right to an autonomous space with respect to it[47]. Perhaps, the theoretical paradigm which best applies to Kamal's novel is once again offered by Edward Said, when, writing about the opposition between a «monolithic» and «homogeneous» idea of cultural identity and a heterogenous and «nomadic» one, he employs the musical metaphor of "contrapuntality", which implies two independent melodic lines played at the same time, where no single part dominates[48]. Observed from Said's perspective, *Unmarriageable* becomes a «contrapuntal» retelling of *Pride and Prejudice* that exposes the latter's ideological contradictions and repressed issues, while acknowledging a shared cultural genealogy with it.

A few stylistic choices showcase the shift from "opposition" to "contrapuntality" that brings *Unmarriageable* from reactive postcolonial aesthetics to a rooted literary cosmopolitanism indifferent to questions of primacy, purity, and originality[49]. The first choice regards an extensive use of Urdu, which reproduces Pakistani linguistic hierarchies and fixes characters within them. While Jena and Alys tend to use standard English, their less cultivated mother realistically resorts to native

[47] See D. Chakrabarty's classic study of postcolonial historiography, *Provincializing Europe. Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2000.
[48] E. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, cit., p. XXV.
[49] For the notion of «rooted cosmopolitanism» see K.A. Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism. Ethics in a World of Stranges*, W.W. Norton & Company, New York and London 2006.

Urdu any time she wishes to convey strong emotions and dissent. The second stylistic choice concerns a systematic engagement with the free indirect thought, which unproblematically mirrors Austen's major stylistic invention. Kamal adopts it chiefly on two occasions: when she wants to delve into the character's foibles and unspeakable sentiments, like when, reflecting upon the opportunity of marrying Alys, Farhat Kaleen gives vent to the sexist, classist, and racist prejudices which make up his mediocre personality:

> Kaleen was admiring the fortune the Shehs must have spent to create this plucked paradise. That the Binats were invited to this VIP to-do had duly raised Barkat "Bark" Binat in his esteem. This was proof that Pinkie's family were not absolute nobodies, and Kaleen shed any doubts over his upcoming nuptials with Alysba Binat. He glanced at Alys. His bride-to-be looked like a rosebud tonight, one he could not wait to have and to hold. She was the little on the dusky side, but no matter; secretly he thought wheatish women equally as attractive as whitish ones. He wished he hadn't promised Pinkie Binat to keep his bethrotal to Alys a secret, for he wanted this illustrious gathering to know that she belonged to him[50].

Then, when she wants to disclose her character's epiphanies, for example the moment Alys realises the extent to which her alliance with her father has seriously damaged the structure of family relationships:

> Her father winked at her and, for the first time, Alys recognised her own complicity in her family dynamics. She was her fa-

[50] S. Kamal, *Unmarriageable*, cit. 148.

ther's favourite daughter. His princess Alysba. And because she enjoyed her status as first daughter, Alys had chosen to overlook her father's ridiculing her mother. It was not that her father was wrong, but he should not have turned Pinkie Binat into a joke between them. Should not the husband-and-wife bond be more sacrosanct than that between a parent and child?[51]

The third choice responding to a decolonial logic of mutuality is the pervasive use of discourses and dialogues on literary themes advancing the cause of a global culture which has overwhelmed distinctions between East and West, avantgarde and pop art. In most of these textual occurrences, literature and art allow for a spiritual equality which is forbidden in actual life, thus retrieving another privileged trope of nineteenth-century women's novel (suffice to think of Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*). A passion for literature is what Alys and Darsee share from the beginning of the story and what provides bridges between characters belonging to asymmetrical social *milieus*, like Alys and Beena dey Bagh's daughter, Annie. Unhappy with the silence to which Lady Catherine de Bourgh's ill daughter is relegated in *Pride and Prejudice*, Kamal updates the character by endowing the girl with a distinctive self-ironical voice, which brings the theme of women's disabilities into the novel. Thanks to Alys's reading recommendation, in fact, Anne manages to identify with the disabled daughter described in one of Flannery O'Connor's short stories and to use literature to improve her self-knowledge:

[51] *Ibid*., p. 263.

«I loved Flannery O' Connor short story "Good Country People"», Annie was saying. «Alys, the one you recommended».

The wretched mother, the gossiping neighbor, the angry daughter, the dreadful Bible salesman, the wooden leg. Annie could easily see the story set in Pakistan, and that made Flannery O' Connor an honorary Pakistani.

Alys laughed. «O'Connor, Austen, Alcott, Wharton. Characters' emotions and situations are universally applicable across culture, whether you're wearing an empire dress, *shalwar kurta*, or kimono»[52].

These forms of appropriation prove that what *Unmarriageable* celebrates is *Pride and Prejudice*'s power to provide a literary protocol for portraying the ethos of an anglophone country which has overwhelmed imperial binaries and can afford a sympathetic, creative, and not complicit, perspective on its colonial inheritance. Indeed, while the novel appears to universalise the Western canon through Alys' unconditional devotion to Jane Austen, the mirroring effect resulting from a faithful reproduction of the plotline and the characterisation of *Pride and Prejudice* in a Pakistani context activates the sense of parallel histories in which patrimonial, conservative ideologies once played and evidently still play a relevant role. These historical parallels originate from the two countries' mutual exchange and, in either case, entail a struggle for women's agency that reflects the different and conflicting values respectively attached to solid and mobile wealth. Accordingly, if the first objective of *Unmarriageable* has to do with proving the viability of a quintessentially nineteenth-century English genre, like the

[52] *Ibid*., p. 233.

novel of manners, in an Asian context, its broader scope reaches well beyond the revision of the Western literary canon, typifying postcolonial literatures, and invites an understanding of literary relationships in terms of a network of cultural exchange informed by a *longue durée* epistemology. The two novels resonate with one another not because they expose improbable universals concerning sex, gender, and marriage, as Sabrina Akram maintains[53], but because they are rooted in social contexts generated by the same deep-seated cultural matrix. A matrix which defies trans-epochal and transoceanic distance and reproduces itself through what Raymond Williams understood to be abiding dialectics between "the country" and "the city" with all their attendant values, first and foremost women's ability to simultaneously act as free agents and as custodians of property, propriety, and tradition[54], as it is the case with Elizabeth Bennett and Alysba Binat.

Predictably, the super-happy «Epilogue» updates the «fairy-tale-like quality»[55] of *Pride and Prejudice* by magically

[53] See note n. 7.

[54] R. Williams, *The Country and The City*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1973.

[55] «To some, *Pride and Prejudice* has a markedly fairy-tale-like quality which, while accounting for much of the novel's enduring popular success, is politically suspect», B. Johnson, *Jane Austen. Women, Politics, and the Novel*, cit., p. 74. Johnson concedes that the happy ending of *Price and Prejudice* somewhat dismisses the social realism with which the novel begins, but argues that overall the novel does not neutralise social criticism and that its alleged conservatism «is an experiment with conservative myths, and not a statement of faith in them», p. 75.

endowing all the Binat women with well-established plans and previously unsuspected agency – except for Lady, whose breach in morality and decorum is punished with an unhappy marriage and constant financial crises. Mari's opinionated religious zeal, which had replaced a failure in a medical career, turns into serious interest in Harvard programmes in Comparative Religion and advanced Quran courses taken at Islamabad Red Mosque. Mrs. Binat's obsession with marriage is sublimated into an entrepreneurial project called «Pinkie Heirloom», which manufactures a popular bridal line with great expansive potential. Finally, and most significantly, Qitty's dismissed lifelong preoccupation with overweight brings her to manage a weekly column on self-acceptance that transforms her into a famous fashion blogger, enabling the realisation of her teenage dream «to pen a graphic novel about a fat sister and how the fat sister surrounded by four not-fat sisters was the one who triumphed»[56].

Does this eulogising retelling of a British classic seemingly oblivious of imperial history point to the dismissal of all decolonial consciousness? Certainly not, since Soniah Kamal's "thick" rewriting of *Pride and Prejudice* still reads as a literary form allegorizing an unsettled national project through realism and satire[57]. However, the intensity of the mimetic drive exhib-

[56] S. Kamal, *Unmarriageable*, cit., p. 331.

[57] The reference is to Fredric Jameson's controversial but still unchallenged assertion that, in its initial phase, postcolonial literatures amounted to an allegory of the decolonising nations. See, *Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism*, in *Social Text*, XV, Autumn 1986, pp. 65-88.

ited by *Unmarriageable* marks a deep conversion in the politics of the contemporary anglophone novel, which unapologetically dislocates what is "original" and what is "derivative", what is "highbrow" and what is "lowbrow", from their fixed positions within the global literary system and utopianly projects their respective authors towards fresh and undeferential conversations.

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