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Class and Social Mobility in Pamela: A Critique of 18th-Century British Class Structures

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Abstract
Indeed, Samuel Richardson's Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded (1740) is a text that can help understand the phenomenon of class relations and social climbing in the context of British 18th-century society. This paper seeks to discuss Richardson's portrayal of the society especially in the manner in which he portrays the growth of the protagonist, Pamela from a maidservant to a gentlewoman in the society of the time as a critique of the still emerging and entrenched class system. Through understanding the conflict between Pamela's low birth and her high status the study reveals the relationship between virtue, education and conformity as the factors that define one's status in society. In its turn, the research explores how the character of Pamela embodies both the possibility of social climb and the impossibility of the latter. The role of power in the novel is one of the main aspects focused on the novel and especially on the relationship between Pamela and her employer Mr. B. This paper thus seeks to unravel how Richardson's works both conforms and subverts the cultural expectations of the middle-class Englishwomen and the fluidity of the class-status. Moreover, the paper analyses the responses of the society to the new position of Pamela, as the characters' attitude to her new position is described. These interactions represent a form of a much larger cultural uncertainty of social mobility in Britain during 18th century. Thus, this paper contends that if Pamela is read as a novel produced and set in its historical and cultural context, then this means that the novel is not only a piece of fiction, but also a social commentary on the opportunities of social mobility in a rigidly tiered society. Therefore, this research seeks to establish the manner in which Richardson's Pamela depicts and deconstructs the class systems in Britain in the eighteenth century and the changing relationship between merit, virtue, and status as the determinants of social position.

Keywords: Social mobility, class structure, virtue, education, gentility, marriage.

Introduction

Social class has been an important aspect of human societies for centuries and has an influence on people's existence, chances and relations. The social class system in the 18th century Britain where the events of Samuel Richardson's novel Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded are set was well defined and dominant to a level that is almost unimaginable in today's society. The social structure was well defined, the noble classes and the upper classes were on high rank, the middle classes were second, and the labour classes and the lower classes were on the lowest rank. This division was not simply based on class, or job, but on all aspects of life and included social morality, behaviour, and traditions.

Promotion was also difficult during this period hence the idea of social mobility, or the ability to climb up the social scale. Although not completely improbable, social mobility, especially upward mobility was a difficult process which was not frequently observed. This was true because the society was deeply rooted in the idea that status was hereditary and that social classes could not be changed as per an individual's effort or performance. This rigid class structure was supported by several factors such as social, economic and legal factors and beliefs towards the culture which stated that it was natural to have such structure of the society.

Against this background, it is possible to view Samuel Richardson's Pamela more as a sensationalist novel that touches upon the question of class relations and social climbing. This novel was published in 1740 and it is a story of Pamela Andrews, a 15 years old maidservant who rejects the sexual harassment from her master, Mr. B and in the end

marries him and becomes a gentlewoman. Thus, having studied the plot of Pamela, it is possible to note that in addition to telling a rather interesting and engaging story, Richardson offers a rather multifaceted analysis of the class relationships of his period.

Pamela starts the novel in a situation that was not uncommon for many young women of the middle and upper classes in eighteenth-century Britain. She is a maidservant in a rich family and having worked there from her tender age after her mother secured her a job through a friend who is the mistress of the house. Thus, Richardson is eager to stress Pamela's vulnerability in the class hierarchy from the very beginning of the novel. She is learned far beyond a servant's lot in life due to the benevolence of her deceased mistress but her learning increases the conflict between her potential and her station in life. For instance, as Pamela puts it in one of the letters she writes, the servants on coming to the house congratulated her and hoped that now that the master's wife was dead, she would take her place (p. 12). This quote gives an example of how narrow the social mobility was for a woman like Pamela- her dream is to become a housekeeper, which, as far as the servant toting the rank of the upper servant, is still beneath her but among the lower ranks.

It is actually class struggle that forms the central theme of the novel which sees Mr. B pursuing Pamela. Mr. B, as a gentleman of the class, at first, does not see Pamela as a woman with whom he might marry, but as a piece of flesh he can do as he pleases. Such an attitude was the norm of the time indicating that servants were owned by their masters and could be used to provide labour including sexual. Pamela's rejection of Mr. B's actions is therefore not only a question of virtue but also of the opposition to the socio-structural relations of power based on class of the time.

The practice of class-based assumptions about women like Pamela's is therefore challenged by the articulate defence of virtue through the letters and journal entries. In one dramatic scene she tells Mr. B "My soul is as good as the soul of a princess; tho' my condition is below the meanest slave" (p. 78). In this statement, there is a suggestion of a revolutionary thought during the period that is that one's moral standing is not determined by their class. By insisting on her spiritual identity with her social 'betters', Pamela calls into question some of the central tenets of the class system: that a man's worth, his moral worth, depends on his place in society.

Gradually, thanks to the unyielding moral principles of the heroine, the protagonist of the novel, Pamela, Mr. B experiences a change in the attitude towards her person which makes him to face the reality of the falseness of the aristocracy. This transformation is well illustrated when he notes, "I cannot but say, that the mind of this excellent creature has been a thousand times more valuable to me than her person!" (p. 203). This realization changes the elementary class-based approach that he adopted, which initially defined his actions.

The final union of Pamela and Mr. B is a clear example of the sexual ascent which in the eighteenth-century Britain was considered to be rather improper. Richardson employs this plot development to analyse the problems and issues of social class barriers. It is not a clear and easy transformation of Pamela to become the status of the gentlewoman. She receives cold shoulder from all members in Mr. B's social network, which regards her as an intruder.

In connection with the class and social class, the most profound features of the novel are Pamela's extramural literacy and education. Being able to read and write as well as being eloquent also makes her stand out from the other servants and also helps her to turn down Mr B's advances as well as be socially promoted. It is well illustrated in one of her first letters to her parents where she says, "I hope I shall always have a grateful heart, for the good education I have received, by Lady B's bounty; and the good examples she set me" (p. 7). This quote also marks the gratitude of Pamela and also reminds us of the strange nature of her education that makes her stand somewhere in between a servant and a lady with gentry background.

Therefore, the main conflict of the novel that is Mr. B chasing Pamela can be viewed as a conflict of class at its core. At the beginning of the novel, Mr. B is a gentleman, but he does not want to marry Pamela, but he thinks that she is his possession, and he has the right to have sex with her. Such attitude was typical for the perception of the servants as property that not only worked for the owner but could also be used sexually. It is therefore not a matter of the individual woman's honour, but a challenge to the class system of the society in the age of the action.

Thus, Pamela, the object of the novel's investigation of the class-based assumptions, is equally capable of presenting a coherent defence of her virtue through her letters and journal. In one particular scene, she tells Mr. B as follows: "I have as good a soul as a princess; though I am of a far lower rank than the meanest slave" (p. 78). This statement captures a paradigm shift of thought in the course of the period that despite the segregation of people into classes, they are equally valuable beings. Pamela rises against the upper class, and even though she does not state it, she claims that she is spiritual equal of the upper class people.

This is why it is particularly relevant that the novel defines virtue as one of the techniques to better one's position. Pamela's virtue of not succumbing to the sexual advances of Mr. B and even when he tries to force himself on her, she resists him, is portrayed as a kind of class that belongs to a higher social stratum. This is well illustrated in her statement "I am poor and lowly, and am not intitled to call you husband; but may I not say father, when I am your servant and a servant to your servant? (p. 132) Here, Pamela defends herself asserting that she is Mr. B's equal in the moral realm while at the same time reminding the reader of her social inferiority to him; this shows the main conflict of the novel: worth versus status.

Pamela's morality takes her to the change in Mr. B. Mr. B has to change his behaviour and start respecting the character of Pamela and thus he has to undergo the reality of the false social status. This change is seen where he states, "I cannot but say, that the mind of this excellent creature has been a thousand times more valuable to me than her person!" (p. 203). This realization is a shift from the class-based thinking that guides his actions at the start of the novel and shows that the idea of recognizing talent beyond one's class is possible.

When Pamela marries Mr. B it is not hard to notice that she is trying to improve her social status and this is depicted as a rather dramatic, or even sensational given the context of the 18th-century Britain. Richardson uses this plot development to illustrate how challenging it is to move from one class to another. Thus, it is not an easy and, certainly, an unambiguous process whereby Pamela becomes a gentlewoman. She gets rejection and hatred from the people in Mr. B's friends who consider her as an intruder.

The novel also deals with social class mobility with emphasis on the efforts of Pamela to fit into the new class. She feels uncomfortable with her new status of wealth and nobility as

can be seen from the following quotations: “It is impossible for me to bear such favours as these; I am so ill-deserving of them, and have more to do in making amends for my past ill-spent time than in providing myself with new ornaments” (p. 357). This internal conflict is evidence of the fact that one’s class identity is something that is inherited which is not compatible with the psychological aspects of climbing the social ladder.

Richardson also uses the behaviours of the other characters towards Pamela to refer to the ridiculousness of the class division. Mrs. B, Lady Davers is the sister of Mr. B., who initially does not wish to accept Pamela as a sister-in-law and does not refer to her as Mrs. B but Mrs. Pamela (p. 412). In one of the scenes, Lady Davers says to Mr. Tomlinson the following words: “O the little strumpet!-She is but the more worthy of the name for her advances to you” (p. 415). This rejection portrays the kind of attitude that the upper classes had towards the lower classes while at the same time denying the fact that the later could be promoted based on merit.

However, the fact that Pamela is accepted by most of the members of the Mr. B’s social status at the end of the novel proves that there is some recognition of the social climb based on the merit of the character. This acceptance is however not unconditional but they pose a great threat to the fixed class systems which were in existence at the time. Thus, the novel paints a rather positive picture of the society’s future as a more tolerant, meritocracy based and less rigid as portrayed by the triumph of Pamela.

This focus on education as a means of social mobility was liberal for the time because it went against the flow that one’s class was decided for them. The importance of education is also felt by Pamela herself: “I have learnt to read and write, to a level which is beyond my standard” (p. 22). This acknowledgement of her better education emphasises the role that education played in her being elevated in the social ladder.

Richardson also employs the novel to discuss the idea of gentility and the true meaning of the words: ‘gentleman,’ or ‘gentlewoman’; He employs the actions and morality of the character Pamela, to illustrate that gentility is not a result of a bloodline or wealth but virtue. This is well brought out in the following lines from Pamela, “For what makes one man more valuable than another, but the use he has made of his privileges and the greatness of his soul?” Vol. 3, p. 489. This concept is rather radical in comparison with the tradition that determined gentility by the blood in one’s vein.

The novel also does not avoid the social aspects and it also adds a class struggle as one of the themes of the story of Pamela. Richardson uses the character of Mr. B’s estate to analyse the aristocracy and its place in society especially as it concerns the lower classes. On this aspect, Pamela’s behaviour as the new mistress of the estate and her friendly treatment of servants as well as her charitable work in the community represents a rather positive aspect of the noblesse oblige contrary to what the novel portrays the upper class to be like. For example, Pamela expresses herself in the following words: “I shall know these good ladies to be humble and to use my fortune with temperance and to endeavour to do all the good I can to my fellow-creatures” (p. 502). This statement is a representation of Richardson’s dream of a better upper class, a class that knows that they have a responsibility of catering for the lower class.

But it is however worthy to note that even though Pamela offers a critique of some of the features of 18 century class system, the book does not advocate for the scrapping of this system. Therefore, the happy end of the novel and the victory of the main character who becomes a member of the gentry, on the one hand, reinforces the status quo, on the other hand, it also provides the reader with the opportunity of changing one’s status, however limited it may be. The idea of promoting black women like Pam, is presented not as something that can be done by other people but as an exception. This is well illustrated in the statement made by Mr. B to Harriet where he says to her that, “My dear girl, I have often told you, you are a very extraordinary person…that you have a genius and a native dignity which little expected in your station that transcend all your sex” (p. 423). Hence, while this statement is employed to praise the fate of Pamela, it also indicates that this is not the case with most people.

This ambivalence is characteristic of the attitude to the class and social climbing in the 18th-century Britain. There was a beginning of the belief that it was possible for an individual to climb the ladder in society through education, integrity, and diligence or in the enlightenment and industrial age as we shall see later on, there was a strong conservative or preservative force of the society to maintain the status quo.

Richardson’s novel mediates these two options and tells a story which is both subversive of and complicit in the construction of the class divide. On the one hand, remembering the story of Pamela, it is possible to mention that virtue and merit can and should be rewarded even if the person belongs to a low class. But the final of the narrative and the turning of Pamela into the wife of the gentry can be considered more conservative as it offers the reader a chance to change the status only on the individual level and does not challenge the class system.

Language and communication are another facet of the novel that is related to the study of class. Pamela’s literacy empowers her to write well and that is why she can defend herself, proclaim her moral freedom and get Mr. B’s respect. But it also reveals how her letters are employed by Mr. B to control and subjugate her, which is indicative of the problematics of power in the given cross-class scenario. This is well illustrated when Mr. B intercepts the letters that Pamela writes and says, “I must see to what other intended provocations I am to be exposed” (p. 87). This invasion of the right to privacy in her letters also illustrates the extent to which power relations of the superior class over the inferior class in the lower class and power to exercise it.

It is also necessary to pay attention to the fact that Richardson uses epistolary form as a commentary on class and literacy. In this way, focusing on the heroine’s letters and a diary, he gives a voice to one of the female classes which were voiceless or represented by others’ descriptions in literature of the period. This is a narrative technique which allows telling about a low-ranking character more humanely and more kindly than it has been done in novels of the 18th century. The speeches given by Pamela, and her power of thinking reflects upon the lower class and their capacity of thinking and their emotions as in the following words, “I have been thinking, may not the grand test of virtue and honour be more properly proposed to young gentlemen, than to us poor maidens?” (p. 185). The kind of philosophical thoughts that such a character, a servant girl, would have would have been quite revolutionary and shocking to Richardson’s readers of the time.

It also has an insight into the aspect of performance concerning the class status. In the process of changing the status, the girl has to become a gentlewoman, and the author shows how she does it. This process, however, is not void of

some difficulties as she states, “I am very deficient in many things, and have much to learn, and am willing to learn, to make myself more worthy of the honour I have received” (p. 478). Such recognition of her necessity to change her social status shows that the class identity is not natural but a construction which presupposes some skills to switch between the upper and the lower class.

The economic factor of class division and mobility is also highlighted in the novel to some extent. Even in her rejection of Mr. B’s advances in the beginning of the novel, Pamela is aware of the status of women in the position she occupies economically. Thus, she thinks, “What can I do? Whither can I fly? My virtue is in danger, and all my poor worldly hopes are in ruins!” (p. 94). This awareness of the economic conditions that a young woman of her status in the society has to deal with brings a level of realism to her struggle as well as underlines the impossibility of social mobility in 18th century Britain.

It is also possible to learn about the perception of class and social mobility from the popularity of the novel and the discussions it provoked. It also shows the social concern and desire of people of 18th century over social mobility as the post- publication of ‘Pamela’ saw readers arguing over the possibility and decency of a country girl rising to the rank of a lady. That is why the story of Pamela could be interpreted as both positive and provocative, as the views on social climbing were rather ambiguous at the time.

Thus, it is possible to conclude that the novel Pamela by Samuel Richardson provides a rather ambiguous but in fact quite critical view of the British class system in the 18th century. Thus, the subject of merit and birth, virtue and decorum, and self-advancement and social status, which underlines the story of Pamela’s transformation from a servant into a gentlewoman, is central to Richardson’s novel. They are the interactions of the characters which reveal that although the novel questions some aspects of class-based thought especially the idea that character is inherited from the parent’s status, it also reaffirms some aspects of the existing order.

Richardson counters this stereotype by depicting the story of a lower-class protagonist who overcomes the odds of cross-class relationships and social mobility and thus, through her novel, invites a broad discussion on the potential and the impossibility of class mobility in 18th-century Britain. However, given the extraordinary nature of Pamela’s story and the rather conservative message of her social mobility achieved through marriage, one can deduce that while Richardson was ready to point at some flaws in the class system, he was not ready to abolish it.

Lastly, Pamela is one of the most important social novels that describes the issues of class and social climbing in Britain of the 18th century. The reason why it remains relevant to this day is because of the clear depiction of the interconnection between hard work, social status, and class as a system that has not been eradicated even to this generation. Although the details of the conflict of classes may be different nowadays, and although Richardson himself may not have considered some of those issues as very important, many of the questions which are posed before the reader are still actual in the discussions on the class and social mobility.

For example, near the end of the novel, when Pamela is thinking about the story of her own life, she says, “Who can tell what turn Providence may make of, to use even the most harassing troubles for our benefit?” (p. 512). This sentiment encapsulates the novel’s diffuse approach to the concept of social mobility-as a possibility and a problem, a hope and a source of anxiety, an opportunity for the self-making project and a threat to the social order. In meditating these contradictions, Richardson’s Pamela offers a complex and sustained study of class relations in eighteenth-century British culture.

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