



JANE AUSTEN'S TREATMENT OF LOVE AND MARRIAGE IN HER FICTIONAL WORLD: AN APPRAISAL

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Abstract

*This paper attempts to bring home the point that Jane Austen as the Chief exponent of the “daily island of life” proved herself to be the supreme practioner of the novel of manners by expressing the gentler virtues of a civilized social order, revealing with inimitable lightness of touch the comic foibles and amiable weakness of the people with a special focus on love and marriage as the theme of importance in her novels for which the novels *Pride and Prejudice* sense and sensibility and persuasion have been chosen for this brief analysis.*

Jane Austen may be regarded as the chief exponent of “the daily island of life” of the English at the turn of the nineteenth century. It is not the daily life of the peasant of the Commoner, nor the life of factory or counting-house, of the London slums or the labour unions. Nor is it the fashion of high fashion and dissipation. It is the daily life of quiet country gentry, secure in their landed property and church-livings, honest and self-respecting, well-bred, provincial and firmly snobbish. She proved herself to be the supreme practioner of the novel of manners. Her literary reputation established itself unobtrusively but steadily. As F.R.Leavis put it, “The great English novelists are Jane Austen, George Eliot, Henry James and Joseph Conrad. Jane Austen is one of the truly great writers. She not only makes tradition for those coming after, she creates the tradition we see leading down to her.” (P.11) All lovers of novels cannot but agree with F.R.Leavis.

Jane Austen was a born story-teller and revealed in it from early years. She wrote from sheer love of writing, was not sensitive to criticism, her stories being published rather anonymously during her life time. Faithful observation, personal detachment and a fine sense of ironic comedy are among Jane Austen's chief characteristics as a writer. The secret of her power lies in the complete mastery she has as an artist over her material. She was “finely alive to her limitations, never touched a character or scene she did not thoroughly know and never invented a story or personage which she did not subject to such minutely intimate treatment that the reader feels as if it was all a fragment of autobiography” says one modern critic. The art of observation is one which every great novelist must possess. In this art, Jane Austen surely excels and this constitutes the secret of her power as a novelist. Even though Jane Austen has referred to her novels as ‘two inches of ivory’, in her novels, one has a perfect picture of provincial life in the late eighteenth century. In her intense concentration on the thoughts and feelings of a limited number of characters, she creates as profound an understanding and as precise a vision of the potentialities of the human spirit as the art of fiction has ever achieved.

Jane Austen was born on December 16, 1775 as the younger daughter of a Hampshire clergyman, rector of Stevenson. Her father, George Austen, was scholarly type of man; and her mother, Cassandra Austen, was a keen gardener. Her father's house at steventon remained Jane Austen's abode for a quarter of a century. For their education, Jane and Cassandra depended largely on their father and brothers, the cultured atmosphere of their home and their contacts with relatives. Reading occupied much of Jane's time and she began to write stories early. Some of her early works survive in three note-books entitled volume the First, volume the Second and volume the third, containing short novels, plays etc., all written before she was sixteen. By 1796, she wrote a novel called **Elinor and Marianne** in the form of a series of letters moddled on Richardson. Though she had written something more, five novels alone stand to her credit 1. **Pride and Prejudice** (1797), 2. **Northanger Abbey** (1798), 3. **Sense and sensibility** (1797), 4. **Mansfield Park** (1814) 5. **Emma** (1816). The special charm of her writings lies in the fine impartiality with which she individualizes and differentiates her characters. “Her compass is not great, but within it, she never fails” she found the people around her crowding at tea parties, at church gatherings, at balls and she reproduced them with an unemotional fidelity. Her power of self-detachment enabled her to keep out of her stories those strong prejudices and preferences that often sway an author's creations and made her pure and simple. “There is no didacticism, no philosophy, no propaganda in her fictions. We have a perfect picture of provincial life in the early eighteenth century” says one critic. As a novelist, Jane Austen worked within strict limitations. This was often put forward as a criticism of her work. She was conscious of her limitations, worked strictly within them and turned them to her advantage. The area of experience with which she could deal was naturally determined by her own life.

The society in which Jane Austen lived had perhaps the greatest influence on her. Her life, lived as it was amid English country society of neither the lowest nor the highest stratum provided her with the opportunity of learning by heart the social pretensions and ambitions, of balls and visits and the hopes and fears of genteel people of moderate means. Though her delicate and highly finished art, she turned this world into a microcosm of life in its social aspect. She described he last



generation of Englishmen and women who called face life with cheerfulness, decorum, determination, grace, elegance and enjoyment. In the words of David Daiches, “this is neither romanticism nor sentimentality but shows a remarkable individual temperament” (744). Jane Austen considered herself to be “the most unlearned and uninformed female who ever dared to be an authoress”. It is this recognition of her limits which makes her an artist of the highest rank. Walter Allen makes an important observation in the context. To quote him:

“Perfection, however, which is what the pure novelist is after, demands the recognition of severe limits. The art of Jane Austen is made possible precisely by the recognition of limits. Miss Austen was a highly sophisticated artist. The scope of her art is not in fact lessened by her ignoring of the major events in the history of her time. The reality of her world would not have been in any way intensified had she dragged in references way intensified had she dragged in references to the Napoleonic wars or to the Industrial Revolution” (104).

In her novels, all social groups stand apart, there is no free mingling of the diverse groups. W.A. Craik observes in this connection:

“Some admirers regard Jane Austen as a writer who depicts the domestic life of the Regency period with photographic realism..... Jane Austen uses only a small section of the rural society and the country is the background of all her work..... The settings are all country houses or the town houses owned or rented for the season by people with country estates” (P49).

“Three or four families in a country village is the very little thing to work on” – wrote Jane Austen to her niece Anna. It very well reveals her idea of a novel and it is this idea that she has put into practice in all her six novels. **Sense and sensibility** has the village of Devonshire as its background; the unfortunate love affairs of the twin heroines – Elinor and Marianne form the basis of the story. For a slight pace, the action moves to London and Cleveland. The Dashwoods, the Ferrars, the Middletons, the Palmers and the Steeles are the families who get involved in the story. *Pride and Prejudice* is a major work of art in its own right. It “represents Jane Austen’s first complete success along a certain line of experiment, the tracing of a young woman’s progress from immaturity and inexperience to a better understanding of herself and her world” (Gooneratne 103). In the words of Frank N. Magill, “Jane Austen’s delicate but telling satire of the English country gentlefolk of her day and indeed of her neighbourhood – remains a delightful commentary upon the little foibles of human nature” (P781). Jane’s *Mansfield Park* is considered “a deeply analytical novel by Douglas Bush who writes:

“Its theme, carried in a positive way by the heroine and the more vulnerable hero, and in a negative way by many other characters, is the problem of maintaining the moral values, individual and social, which traditional wisdom and the enlightened individual conscience validate, against the pressure of the looser values of the world at large. In recent years, **Mansfield Park** has been increasingly considered Jane Austen’s most profound work. It has also been called, for example by Mrs. Leavis, the first modern novel, an anticipation of George Eliot and Henry James” (P109).

Emma is in large part the story of the heroine’s continual efforts of judgment, errors which prove to be harmful to other people. Mansell Darrel considers it ‘the profoundest novel’ of Jane Austen and it is “real life that is the subject of *Emma*, emerging in the heroine’s gradually achieved ability to see society in true perspective and to do justice to its positive virtues” (P153). What gives **Emma** its power to move is the realism and depth of feeling behind the attitudes of Jane Austen who “examines with a scrupulous, yet passionate and critical precision, the actual problems of the world” (Kettle 93). **Persuasion** is nothing but Jane Austen’s exploration of the human situation, the dilemma of a young woman, Anna Elliot whose prudence has been mistaken for moral weakness by the person upon whom her happiness depends. **Persuasion** is considered the most beautiful novel of Jane Austen by Mansell Darrel who writes:

“It is serene, dreamlike..... *Persuasion* has always been the darling of the Janites. It has an earned beauty and is nature, confident and autumnal. It alone is mellow and ripe” (P186).



Jane Austen's satirical treatment of social pretensions and worldly motives is perhaps at its keenest in this novel, especially in her presentation of Anne's family. However, the predominant tone of the novel is romantic. The influence of her parents, brothers, sisters and of their family life in general on Jane Austen was tremendous. The family had a strong sense of principle and was cultured and religious. The influence exerted by her family members is clearly visible in the selection of themes like love, marriage, married life, ordination, adoption, evil effects of bad education, fraternal love etc., and also in the art of characterization. When compared with the Victorian women novelists like George Elliot, Charlotte Bronte and Elizabeth Gaskell, one could see the limitations of Jane's experience. She had never gone outside the south of England. There is no evidence that she met any of the leading intellectuals or literary men of her day. She was isolated from the contemporary writers like Wordsworth, Coleridge, Southey, Byron, Lamb, Hazlitt, De Quincey, Shelley or Godwin. Gillie has observed that the circumstances of her being a life-long spinster might have made it difficult for her to move outside the range of her family circle. However she was broadly content with the conservative circle on whom the great changes of the age scarcely impinged. Jane Austen herself was fully conscious of her limitations. When Rev. James Stationer Clarke—the domestic chaplain of the Prince suggested "a historical romance, illustrative of the history of the august House of Coburg," Jane Austen is said to have replied as;

"I am fully sensible that such a romance might be much more to the purpose of profit or popularity than such pictures of domestic life in country villages as I deal in. But I could no more write a romance than an epic poem. No, I must keep to my own style and go" (Laski 104).

But it is beyond doubt that within her limits, Jane Austen has succeeded admirably in expressing the gentler virtues of a civilized social order, revealing with inimitable lightness of touch the comic foibles and amiable weakness of the people who she lived amongst and liked. Even a casual reader of Jane Austen's novels can never forget the Thorpe's, the Dashwood girls, the Bennet family, the Betrams, Emma Woodhouse, the Elliots of the cheerful naval man of Persuasion. Arthur Compton Rickett has rightly pointed out that even though her compass is not great, she never fails within it. In her novels, we get a perfect picture of provincial life in the late eighteenth century; it is a delicate water colour that can be put beside the more vigorous oil painting of Fielding. Her great admirer Walter Scott has observed:

"That young lady had a talent for describing the involvement and feelings and characters of ordinary life which is to me the most wonderful I ever met with. What a pity such a gifted creature died so young" (Judith 2).

No doubt, Jane Austen remained unsurpassed in her artistic mastery of limited materials. Critics like Lord David Cecil, Mary Lascelles and W.A. Craik considered her as a truly great artist. According to them, Jane Austen limited her range to the world of comedy and of the English country gentry of the Regency period and avoided all contemporary events only because of her strong aesthetic sense. As Beatrice Keen Seymour says;

"It is true that Jane Austen's novels are empty of all echoes of momentous events because artist's choice of subject is a thing to which he is entitled... Jane Austen had a sense of proportion that was as amazing as anything about her, so that she got the emphasis in the right place" (P11).

If the rural England or early eighteenth century is the background of Jane Austen's novels, the general background of Jane Austen's novels, the general theme of almost all the novels is connected with love, marriage and married life. **Sense and sensibility** presents the parallel and contrasted love stories of the two pairs of lovers, Elinor- Edward and Marianne Willoughby and Colonel Brandon. Nineteen year old Elinor has both personal and traditional reason and rectitude. She has no romantic illusions. Edwards's entanglement with Lucy Steele and Mrs. Ferrar's financial ambitions stand as obstacles in the way of her fulfillment. Throughout the novel, she is found to be under heavy emotional strain and she succeeds in maintaining a right balance between feeling and reason. Marianne, through her romantic love affair with John Willoughby shows herself to be an impetuous embodiment of romantic sensibility. Her marriage with the middle-aged Colonel Brandon is a proof of her attainment of 'sense'; she becomes devoted to her husband as once she had been to Willoughby. **Pride and Prejudice** has marriage as its focal point. The plot concerns itself with a series of marriages. When the story opens, couples like the Bennets, the Philipses, the Gardiners, the Lucases – are all already married. The development in the relationship between Jane-Bingley and Elizabeth – Darcy gets neatly portrayed. In Mansfield Park, the love-affairs of Edmund-Mary-Fanny, Maria Rushworth-Henry Crawford, Henry Crawford-Fanny and Julia and Mr. Yates are dealt with at length. The very



subject of the novel Emma is marriage. It begins with one marriage, that of Miss. Taylor, ends with three more and considers two others by the way. Arnold Kettle observes:

“Jane Austen, like Henry James, is fascinated by the complexities of personal relationships. Emma is as convincing as our own lives and has the same kind of concreteness. Marriage in Emma is thought of entirely in terms of actual and particular personal relationships. We do, in fact, in reading Emma thus enrich our experience” (P88).

The theme of love and marriage is presented in the best way possible in Persuasion. Anne Elliot and Captain Wentworth fall in love eight years before the action of the novel begins. The love affairs of Captain Benwick and Louisa, Charles Hayter and Henrietta are neatly portrayed.

Jane Austen considered mutual love and respect to be the most important aspects of marriage and married life. In an age of romanticism, with her anti-romantic sober love controlled by reason was essential for a happy marriage. As Gilbert Phelps points out, in all her novels, Jane Austen insists that “true love is the only possible basis for marriage”. (P167). However, romantic love based on passion, emotions and sentiments is not in the least acceptable to Jane Austen. She admires restraint, commonsense, unselfishness, responsibility, sound principles, self-knowledge and discrimination in addition to warm-heartedness and good nature. The novels of Jane Austen also abound in loving brothers and sisters. It is nothing but the depiction of fraternal love of the Austen household.

To conclude, it may be said that the general theme of almost all her novels is love, marriage and married life. Even though Jane Austen could very well choose a theme of current importance, she chose love and marriage as the theme of her novels because she had a clearly defined view of the stability of society and she considered love and marriage to be the fundamental problems of all human beings in the society. Her attitude to spinsterhood, the great importance she gives to mutual love, respect and understanding in married life, futility of romantic love and foolishness of mercenary marriages.

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