



FEMININE WORLD – JANE AUSTEN’S GRANDEUR

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ABSTRACT

Feminism and feminist perceptions are not the topics to be lectured, views to be expressed, opinions to be exposed or matter to be argued or rights to be earned but it is a feeling to be realized and recognized then and there required. Every woman is a gift of God to the universe either she is beautiful or ugly, educated or illiterate, clever or mad, intelligent or innocent. She is a human being who renders love and service not only to her kith and kin but also to the society. She plays a vital part in everyone’s life as a good companion to her brother, better wife to her spouse, best mother to her children and overall extraordinary creation fulfilling all the needs of people around her. Such a lovable wonder of God sometimes becomes a writer exhibiting the voice of her fraternity in society at all ages. In the end of eighteenth century England there arose a thornless rose which blossomed majestic in appearance, soft in nature and grand in speech – a speaking peacock, Jane Austen entered the world of novel. She is the representative of her age reflecting the stage of women in late eighteenth and earlier nineteenth century England through her novels. When we go through her novels we cannot but admire the range and variety of her portraits of women characters. Though the society in which she moved, was restricted to the upper middle class all the variations of ordinary feminine characters which have appealed to the readers through the ages because of this essential humanity. Among the fools, flirts and worldlings of Jane Austen’s novels, are the different categories of women such as we meet in our daily life, all the daughters of Eve under their different costumes and in their different attitudes. Thus her world is a feminine world with the achievement of a perfectly harmonious relationship as its motive.

Lord David Cecil understands Jane Austen’s idea in writing about marriage in her works and rightly says:

“It was wrong to marry merely for money, but it is silly to marry without it”



The most important business of their lives is that of getting married and towards that end all their efforts are directed. Most young women of Jane Austen's time had powerful inducements to marry. If they did not marry in time they would end up as pitiable old maids, with no one to provide them the security and happiness of a home and the joy of having children of one's own to look after. Hence Jane's centre of attraction is always a young maiden before her marriage. As Leonie Villard remarks,

'Smiling and very much alive, sometimes half-concealing her grace beneath a veil of shyness, or cloud of melancholy, a young girl is invariably the heroine of a novel by Jane Austen.'(1)

Writing with a clear purpose and design, she depicted the world with which she was most familiar. She had restricted herself for specific reasons to the English country gentry. This English country gentry was portrayed and judged from a woman's point of view. Therefore Jane Austen's novels are circled with heroines. Around each of them there is a small collection of persons, friends or relations, suitors who are to be taken seriously, and others who can be laughed at. Across the background we have figures, dashed off with a single stroke, but always interesting and sometimes deliciously comic. All her characters come alive of their gestures, attitudes and conversations realistic in nature, only the heroines reveal their full personality to the reader. She is the conscience of the authoress in all novels. Every problem is viewed and unfolded through that character.

Northanger Abbey is the story of Catherine Morland who is taught sense by a series of misadventures and disillusionment. Jane Austen speaks about her in the following manner:

"Her heart was affectionate, her disposition cheerful and open, without conceit or affection of any kind, her manners just removed from the awkwardness and shyness of a girl; her person pleasing, and, when in good looks pretty, and her mind about as ignorant and uninformed as the female mind at seventeen usually is."

Youth, beauty and natural credulousness make her a lovable heroine. As the story proceeds we find the heroine just seventeen years old who is one among ten children of a country clergyman. She is like a tomboy in her childhood, and in the age of 17 she is "in training for a heroine." As portrayed by Jane Austen she is an excessive lover of reading Gothic novels, among which Anne Radcliffe's *Mysteries of Udolpho* is a favourite. Catherine lacks experience and sees her life as if she were a heroine in a Gothic novel. She sees the best in people, and to begin with always seems ignorant of other people's malign intentions. She is the devoted sister of James Morland. She is good-natured and frank and often makes insightful comments on the inconsistencies and insincerities of people around her, usually to Henry Tilney, and thus is unintentionally sarcastic and funny.



*He is delighted when she says, "I cannot speak well enough to be unintelligible."
(Austen, Jane. "Northanger Abbey". Austen.com. Retrieved 4 August 2012.)*

She is also seen as a humble and modest character, becoming exceedingly happy when she receives the smallest compliment. Catherine's character grows throughout the novel, as she gradually becomes a real heroine, learning from her mistakes when she is exposed to the outside world in Bath. She sometimes makes the mistake of applying Gothic novels to real life situations; for example, later in the novel she begins to suspect General Tilney of having murdered his deceased wife. Catherine soon learns that Gothic novels are really just fiction and do not always correspond with reality.

Sense and Sensibility is exclusively concerned with Elinor and Marianne. Elinor shares Jane's good sense and clear insight while Marianne grows wiser through suffering. The two sisters present a sharp contrast to each other so far as their temperaments and natures are concerned; and there is much common between them. Each of the sisters develops a love affair with a young man who attracts her and who is attracted by her. These two love affairs develop in a more or less parallel manner, though the final outcome of each case is different. The contrast between the sisters is further emphasized by the author when Elinor reacts to her disappointment in love differently from Marianne's reaction to hers. When Elinor learns that Edward is engaged to marry Lucy, and that he is persisting in his sense of loyalty to that girl, Elinor has every reason to shed tears of distress and to make herself miserable. But far from doing so, she actually tries to give comfort to Marianne who is feeling more upset by Edward's resolve than even Elinor. Marianne then understands that Elinor can console herself for her loss by means of her self resolution and self-command. She also apologizes to Elinor by saying:

"How barbarous have I been to you! Is this my gratitude?"

Thus the two sisters share mutual affection to each other when they are sailing in the same boat. The handling of problem shows the mental capability and strength of their character. Thus Marianne learns from her sister to acquire will power to endure her frustration in love with that calmness with which Elinor has endured hers.

Pride and Prejudice deals with the story of Elizabeth Bennet who is indulged in the clutches of intellectual complexity resulting often in serious misunderstandings. She is an attractive, intelligent, high-spirited and self-respecting girl whose prejudice against the proud hero Darcy, and the supplanting of that prejudice by a deep and sincere love is the theme. She is one like the author. More than one generation of readers felt as Jane herself had felt towards Elizabeth. Prof. Dobson rightly says,



“It is not alone that she personally attractive or rather that she has exceptional charm but she is intellectually engaging as well.”

Anne Eliot is the pivot whom the story of Persuasion revolves. At the age of nineteen, she allows herself to be persuaded by a well meaning but ill-judging friend to give up the man, she loves with all her heart. She is under the illusion that she would find happiness by doing her duty and repressed the claims of ardent youthful love. But fate seems to favour the lovers and after she was almost lost him, Anne is united with her lover whom she loved long. Thus her wounded love at the age of naive nineteen finds fulfillment after eight years.

Emma, named after the heroine is a tale of self-deception of Emma Woodhouse who imagines herself a genius in match-making among her friends is schooled by an arduous course of blunders and humiliations. In portraying her character, Jane Austen gives us plenty of psychological interests. From the beginning we find her snobbish, self-important and presuming. She adopts a know-all attitude, though she is alarmed by Mr. Knightley in the matter of match-making to Harriet Smith initially with Mr. Elton and later with Frank Churchill. She thinks that she can successfully handle the affairs of others and manage the lives of others. Mr. Knightley rightly points out that Emma allows her reason to be subordinated by her fancy or whim. She is vain enough in thinking that she can give a direction to events in accordance with her own notions. Because of this presumptuousness she makes a mess in the life of Harriet Smith. She couldn't guess that she is duped by Frank Churchill due to her ignorance. Her snobbery makes it impossible to judge people like Robert Martin by their real worth. She is also seen as heartless and rude to poor Miss Bates at Box Hill. As her calculations goes wrong, she gradually realizes her follies and its impact on the life of Harriet, Mr. Knightley and herself. She finally sympathy for the poor and the needy. understands that appearances are deceptive. Despite all these faults, she possess redeeming qualities such as genuine devotion to her father, a deep affection for her sister and sister's family and an active sympathy for the poor and the needy.

Fanny Price, a young simple girl watching intently and learning to fit herself into a society entirely new and strange, is the centre of Mansfield Park. She is adopted by the Bertram family when she is nine years old. She is completely misunderstood in her new home. The members of Bertram family do not understand the predicament of the new arrival. She is treated simply as a curiosity because of her silence or her ignorance. She is a means for the young Bertram girls to show off their superior attainments and an object for Mrs. Norris' scolding on her need to be grateful. Only her cousin Edmund perceives and understands her unhappiness, and helps her to get over it. Fanny is retiring by nature but she is also naturally good. She learns much from Edmund who forms her taste; but she learns from her position the Christian virtues of humility and self-denial. She has been portrayed as a timid, powerless and witless heroine by Jane Austen. She resembles Elinor in patience but lacks her



sympathy for others and timely irony. Though she lacks essential qualities of an attractive heroine she is always right in actions and judgement.

It is the heroines obviously dominate the novels of Jane Austen. Emma, Elizabeth and Fanny think aloud before us and thus we receive voluntary confidences about things which no one suspects-not even the heroine's best friend who is to become later the companion of her life. It is the life of the heroine in the midst of all social pretensions, ambitions, balls, visits, shopping, sewing, gossip and other trivial matters that is depicted in the novels. Lord Brabourne says about her heroes that they are all 'decidedly inferior to the heroines.'⁽²⁾ Men are seen only through women's eyes in her novels. Moreover men are not shown at work. Wentworth is a sailor who has been made commander 'in consequence of the action off St. Domingo.' He was, however, 'immediately unemployed,' when he came to Monkford and met Anne Elliot. We come to know of him as having been the captain of the frigate Laconia. Later, he is referred to as 'just returned to England, or paid off, or something' as Louisa Musgrove puts it. He is again 'unemployed' when he meet Anne Elliot eight years later, at Kellynch. He occupies himself mainly with finding a wife and in flirting with the two sisters, Louisa and Henrietta Musgrove. Jane Austen tells us:

'There was a very general ignorance of all naval matters throughout the party; and he was very much questioned...as to the manner of living on board, daily regulations, food, hours, etc.'⁽³⁾

Wentworth tells them of unseaworthy vessels, and of some of the ships in which she has sailed; and he also refers modestly to his own exploits in the taking of privateers. We know of course, thus that he was a sailor and that he liked his job, but Jane Austen is concerned not with Wentworth the sailor but with Wentworth the man, the admirer of Louisa and Henrietta, the beloved of Anne. Bingley was the tenant of Netherfield Hall and the possessor of income of nearly a hundred thousand pounds inherited from his father. But he is important in the novel as the prospective husband for Jane Bennet. Darcy owned Pemberley, a property in Derbyshire, and we are told that the estate was worth 'a clear ten thousand pounds per annum.' When Elizabeth first saw it, she was impressed. But if Mr Darcy ever attended to his estates or had trouble over them, we do not hear about it because Jane Austen is not concerned with these matters at all. Darcy is there to fall in love with Elizabeth, to be misunderstood and spurned by her, and finally to marry her. Henry Tilney is a clergyman though we should hardly be aware of it if Jane Austen did not tell us so. He takes his duty lightly- so lightly that we never hear of them. He is there to serve Jane Austen's purpose, which is the correction of Catherine Morland's romantic follies. He is also there to be loved by her and eventually to bestow upon her his heart and hand. Edward Ferrars had wanted early to be a clergyman but had found his desires thwarted by his family, who thought the church not 'smart' enough for them and recommended the army which poor Edward regarded



as too 'smart' for him. But it is not the profession of Edward that interests us. He catches our attention because Elinor takes interest in him. His destined role is to be Elinor's lover and ultimately her husband. George Knightley has a significant place in Emma as a means of correction of Emma's follies. His brother John is a lawyer—one of the few men in the Austen world with a definite profession other than church—but we hear of him not as a lawyer but as Isabella's husband. Mr Weston comes before us as one who had married 'poor Miss Taylor.' Edmund Bertram is destined for Holy orders from the first and took his calling with a seriousness foreign to Jane Austen's clergymen. But for the greater part of the book he is not a clergymen. He spends his youth acting as a brother and mentor to Fanny Price, whom he finally marries. Henry Crawford was the owner of Everingham and four thousand a year, but nowhere does it appear that the inheritance imposed the least responsibility upon him. He is there to flirt with the Bertram sisters. But, then, simply because Jane Austen studied her heroes from a single point of view, they cannot be called 'puppets'.

There are excellent human touches in all of them. Darcy, George Knightley and Edward Bertram are drawn in greater detail. Darcy is a very sound study of personality. He is a combination of the likeable and the intolerable, of selfish pride and disarming generosity. He has faults enough, but not those of understanding. In his cure, the novelist is very near to psychological approach. Mr Knightley and Edward Bertram are not entirely their ladies' men, though other aspects of their personality are not emphasized. It is not correct therefore, to say that Jane Austen could not draw men only because she does not stress the job of men and their affairs outside home. The truth is that hers is a feminine world, and in that world men are drawn from the feminine point of view.

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