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Intellect: An Antithesis to Realism in Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*

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Abstract

The works of Jane Austen perfectly deal with the social norms and issues prevailing within the society in which she lived. In her works, the social as well as economic conditions of women, the expectations that are forced upon them by their families and societies are both reflected upon and questioned. Her novel *Pride and Prejudice* focuses on her use of counter-cultural heroines to question society's standards and by doing so, she provides examples of women whom her readers could relate to and learn from them as well. Finally, considering the ways, which Austen uses to challenge the practical and social norms prevailing in her society by the use of wit, intelligence, and satire, this article attempts to draw the readers' focus on how Austen attempted to emphasize the importance of novels in her society and at the same time outlining the importance and impact that novel reading has cast on her society and in 21st century as well.

Keywords: Wit, intelligence, reality, social issues, satire, *Pride and Prejudice*

Introduction

Jane Austen (1775 - 1817) has a marvellous narrative technique and distinctive literary style. Her works were written in the latter decades of the 18th century; flourished through the early part of the 19th century and are widely read, interpreted, and re-read till the present day. She is the most prominent of the women novelists of the late 18th and early 19th centuries. She stands as a remarkable and unique figure in the history of the English novel, for, no other novelist before or after her up to Dickens and Thackeray, makes the novel so perfect artistically as she does. By

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treating ordinary people in her novels, Austen provides a distinctly modern character to them. She perfectly portrays the English middle-class life in the early part of the 19th century in her novels. She was the last of the seven children of Rev George Austen and Cassandra Leigh Austen. Despite being the youngest child of a family of simple means, she was always motivated by her father to explore novels in their family. Her father bought paper and ink to motivate her to start writing at an early age.

Austen's great quality and high intellectual skill makes her characters reveal themselves through their speeches and actions rather than describing them with artistic perfection as other writers do. She chooses a limited background for her novels, and her background consists of the four or five families in a county, just like the atmosphere of her society where she resided. Therefore, her novels could be termed "Domestic" or "The Tea Table" novels. She draws all her stories from the life and setting that she knew very well. She portrayed real-life characters in their ordinary form. Poet and novelist, Sir Walter Scott opines in his diary on March 14, 1826:

That young lady had a talent for describing the involvements, feelings, and characters of ordinary life which is to me the most wonderful I have ever met with. The Big Bow-wow strain I can do myself but the exquisite touch which renders commonplace things and characters interesting from the truth of the description and the sentiment is denied to me. (222)

Set in the background of rural England, in the early years of the 19th century, *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) is a romantic novel and classical satire written with an incisive wit and superb delineation of characters. The budding relationship between Elizabeth Bennet, the second of the five daughters of a country gentleman Mr. Bennet, and Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy who is a rich aristocratic landowner, is the central plot or point of the novel. Depicting vivid pictures and themes of society, Austen's writings cannot be placed under a particular genre. Although, many literary historians and critics have categorized her writings as "Romance" in correlation with "Comedy of Manners" (Southam, Web.).

In each of the books, Austen deals with the themes comprising the major elements of love and marriage, based on the courtship between her primary protagonists. *Pride and Prejudice* also deals with love and marriage as one of the major themes along with other social issues of female education, economic condition, etc. prevailing in the contemporary English society. The reflections of the contemporary English society in which Austen lived can be seen clearly in her works along with her use of satire to challenge it. The thing that makes Jane Austen a source of perennial interest is the everlasting and unresisting presence of humour and irony in her novels.

Wit and Intelligence: Prime qualities of Elizabeth Bennet

Among all the novels of Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* has occupied an everlasting charm as the most popular novel. There are approximately 77 different versions and adaptations of the novel in the commercial industry in different languages across the globe. The primary protagonist of the novel, Elizabeth Bennet, is portrayed as a witty, intelligent, self-confident, outspoken, and strong-headed character. She shares the wit and humor of her father along with the distaste for social norms regarding the views of marriage for financial stability as stressed by the then society. Though Mr. Bennet loves all his daughters, his favourite, indeed, is Elizabeth, possessing qualities such as quickness of mind, loyalty, vivacious, spirited, and sensible. Austen herself dedicates to Elizabeth, in a letter to her sister Cassandra, dated Jan 29, 1813, her ultimate words of praise: "I must confess that I think her as delightful a character as ever appeared in print, and how I shall be able to tolerate those who do not like her at least, I do not know". (Web.)

Someone being in love is one of the favourite themes of Jane Austen. The practical significance of this theme, as dealt with in *Pride and Prejudice*, is that Elizabeth's gratitude, courtesy, and her growing affection for Mr. Darcy are quite inseparable from her intellectual growth. In an observation made by Lionel Trilling, about Emma, we see that we like Mr. Knightly "because we perceive that he cherishes Emma not merely in spite of her subversive self-assertion but because of it" (7). The same idea applies to Mr. Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice*. Elizabeth, being perfectly aware of it, cannot stop herself from inquiring Darcy when she demands answers for his having fallen in love with her: "Did you admire me for my impertinence!" (368)

It is on account of her wit and impertinence that till today, generations of readers have admired her and this is the reason why, we recognize that the possibility and responsibility of free, witty, and lively thought is the major concern of this novel. Elizabeth Bennet is intelligent and lively. Her quickness and readiness of mind are evident in her desire for witty and teasy conversation, where she likes to adopt striking and independent views. An example of Elizabeth Bennet's witty nature can be cited in her witty remark towards Lady Catherine. As Lady Catherine is understandably upset with her nephew Mr. Darcy's decision to marry Elizabeth, a girl of a status "beneath him", she protests his decision. Then, to her protest, Elizabeth comes up with a witty remark in order to prove her suitability for Mr. Darcy: "He is a gentleman; I am a gentleman's daughter; so far we are equal" (344).

Social Norms: A Practical Narrow-mindedness of Society in *Pride and Prejudice*

Pride and Prejudice is well noted as well as highly quoted for its ability to question social norms. Austen has fully acknowledged, included, and reflected the social

issues and conventions of her period in this novel. We find many characters believing in and adhering to the principles and ideals of different social norms. Amidst all the social issues, most importantly, Austen explores the institution of marriage, when and where marriages were performed for social and financial security rather than love.

In the Regency era, social hierarchy was underlined to the core of everything. Being a Satirical novel, *Pride and Prejudice* is filled with scenes that depict the social norms and standards of the Regency era. Austen's writings do not conform to the social conventions of the era but instead poke fun at them. One of the social norms of the era was in the form of social expectations from women to get married to wealthy persons. The satire can be seen just in the first line of the opening paragraph: "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife." (1)

The social elements and norms reflected in Austen's works probably are believed to be her blind spots or the spheres of society considered normal for her time but when we see them with the spectacle of today's modernity, they can be termed as 'darker elements'[1]. The novelist portrays the practical aspects of life and prevailing norms of society through the portrayal of her characters such as Mrs. Bennet and Miss Charlotte Lucas. Mrs. Bennet, whose nerves were less developed, is a woman of little understanding, little informed, and having an uncertain amount of temper. Whenever she feels discontented due to certain reasons, she would fancy herself to be nervous. The only and most important business of her life is to see her daughters getting married to a well-off family. As Mary Evans, a scholar of Jane Austen observes: "If Mrs. Bennet is slightly crazy, then perhaps she is so because she perceives more clearly than her husband the possible fate of her five daughters if they don't marry." (7)

In the novel, Austen depicts Mrs. Bennet as the outcome of English Society where she is shaped and manufactured as a product by social expectations and is currently trapped in an unfavorable and unstable marriage because of them. The other social issues found and addressed in the novel are the position of women in English society, racism, class distinctions, etc. Here, Austen shows that people having more money or a high social status need not be better ones. Oftentimes, those people have less integrity, less intelligence, less ability and so they cannot help make the world a better place. In the Regency era, daughters were considered as a strain or financial burden in the family. The same case was with Miss Charlotte Lucas, a fast friend of Elizabeth Bennet. And so, in an attempt to reduce the so-called financial burden of her family, Miss Lucas instantly agrees to the proposal of Mr. Collins about their marriage. In a conversation with Elizabeth about Collins' marriage proposal, she points out:

When you have had time to think it over, I hope you will be satisfied with what I have done. I am not romantic, you know; I never was. I ask only a comfortable home; and considering Mr. Collins character, connection, and the situation in life, I am convinced that my chance of happiness with him is as fair as most people can boast on entering the marriage state (123).

To our utter surprise, it seems to be true as she sets up things in her new house in such a manner so that she sees her husband only when she wishes to.

Reality: What if it goes wrong?

All of Austen's characters live in the little realities that they have constructed, just like really, we all do. We all live in our reality shaped by our worldview, our observations, our experiences in life, the information we understand or trust, etc. A lot of Austen's stories are specifically based on this question of what if reality goes wrong. What if the way we understand reality is so different from what reality is? Austen draws that difference there between reality and appearances of reality. In *Pride and Prejudice*, reality appears that Mr. Wickham is great when he is a scoundrel as he intends to marry Mr. Darcy's 15-year-old sister only for the sake of claiming her part of fortune. Dealing with the issues of appearances versus reality is another of the main themes that run through all of Austen's works.

When Elizabeth goes to visit the newlyweds Mr. Collins and Charlotte, Mr. Collins tells her that he and Charlotte seem to be made for each other. Charlotte secretly tries to avoid Collins at all costs but to Collins, it seems that they are made for each other. Probably, it may be due to two factors; the first one is because Charlotte is doing a great job at deceiving him of her true feelings and is trying to create false appearances or false impressions. And, the second factor, as earlier Elizabeth has rejected his marriage proposal, so Mr. Collins is trying to make her jealous by appearing to be very happy with Charlotte; or he wants Elizabeth to realize the fact that, of course, according to him, Elizabeth has made a mistake by rejecting his marriage proposal. In the novel, each of the characters either good or bad is trying to create false appearances on others. For example, when Elizabeth gets a letter from Darcy that clears all her misunderstandings, she is like "wow! My whole life is a lie", and she has an emotional kind of breakdown and she has to go back to the Collins' house. Well, she does not want them to know that she has an emotional moment. And, it says: "She entered the house with the wish of appearing as cheerful as usual" (202). Here, the usage of the word 'appear' can be deciphered as Elizabeth consciously decides to appear cheerful. She tries to give the false reality to Collins that she is fine. Of course, Elizabeth does not want anyone to know that she is undergoing trauma, but not all characters' motives are as seemingly innocent as that when they are creating false appearances. The issues involving understanding Mr. Darcy and Mr. Wickham have to do heavily a lot with this

appearance vs. reality. Jane Bennet puts it: "one has got all the goodness, and the other all the appearance of it" (217). So, Mr. Wickham has all the appearance of goodness while Mr. Darcy actually has goodness; but he is not just very good at appearing so.

Conclusion

Pride and Prejudice, although, being one of the famous pieces of classic literature and a romantic novel, has been criticized after its publication, for it lacks the historical context in which it is likely to set; either during the French Revolution (1787-99) or the Napoleonic wars (1799-1815). In this novel, Austen accurately portrays the entire social world in which she dwelt, by depicting the existence of her characters in such a bubble formed by society that is impenetrable by the events outside it. She depicts her society in all its narrow and shady pride and prejudice, with unswerving accuracy and unending satire. It is, therefore, not surprising that though almost unknown in her own times, Austen's reputation has risen very high in modern times.

Austen's novel gained popularity and remained popular firstly and largely because of its central character, Elizabeth Bennet who was reportedly Austen's favourite and her mouthpiece, among all her heroines; secondly, due to its unswerving appeal to be a well-told and potentially happy ending love story in all respects with men and women alike. Alistair Duckworth observes that it is generally agreed that *Pride and Prejudice* "achieves an ideal relation between individual and society" (118). Thus, the novel is not only a brilliant product of Austen's art as a great novelist, but also it is one of the most popular novels in English as it contains an interesting story, compact dramatic plot, lively and witty dialogues, along with delightful humour and revealing irony.

Endnote

1. 'Darker Elements' refer to an online article by Kristen Bird that appeared on 9th Feb. 2022 in his article entitled "The Darker Side of Jane Austen". https://crimereads.com/article/darker-side-jane-austen/.

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