JANE AUSTEN AND FEMINISM: A CLOSE READING OF HER NOVELS

Zubair Ahmad Bhat

Dept of Comparative Languages & Culture, Barkatullah University

Abstract

Today Jane Austen is universally admitted to be an English classic, though she has to her credit only half a dozen novels namely, ***Sense and Sensibility, Pride and Prejudice, Emma, Mansfield Park, Northanger Abbey,*** *and* ***Persuasion****. Although her field was a very limited and narrow one, she cultivated it with such perfect artistry so as to win an immediate passport to an eternity of literary fame. Her novels have a permanent and universal appeal and she is recognized as one of the greatest writers in English literature. In her fiction, traditional, personal and social mores are the organizing and continuing principles of her characters' 19th -century world. However, while her characters must live in a society of often-intricate social rules, customs and seemingly deep-rooted social hierarchies, their humanity is not dictated by social class, money or education. Individual qualities and personal sentiments undergo beyond and outside of these artificial structures or any "social construct." Her characters have minds and hearts of their own and are their own moral agents. The characters in her novels are not idealized. Individuals of all social classes might go away from the standards of decency, humility, courtesy, and kindness, which she undoubtedly upholds, but they suffer consequences. This paper analyses on the broader way the feminine aspects in the novels of Jane Austen and it also shows the status and position of women characters in her novels according to their place and act or role.*

Keywords:
Fiction
Society
Feminism
Status and Position of Women Characters

Introduction

Although the novel has won so many triumphs and unfolded so many rare experiences and mighty passions since Jane Austen's time, readers still find pleasure in the familiar little world of her novels because of the abiding charm of her characterization, particularly in regard to her women. It is almost universally accepted that she does not succeed so well in the delineation of her men as in the portrayal of her women. According to Bernard Groom, the only man who is wholly a home in her world is Mr. Woodhouse, the valetudinarian of weak nerves,

who would not recommend an egg boiled by anybody other than his own cook.

Upper-middle Class Women

For most women of the upper-middle-class, the little world of social relationships was, a century ago, that in which they, "found their happiness or not at all". Jane Austen, who belonged to this class and found the delight of her life in these social relationships, has succeeded in giving us a very exact and realistic portrayal of the women to whom dancing, visiting and attending balls and parties were the most important things in their social life. Into the portraits of her heroine, Jane Austen has put her best art, subtly differentiating one from another. The minor figures grouped around them the fools, flirts and wildlings, are equally distinct and individualized. Mrs. Bennet, Miss Bates, Mrs. Norris and Lady Bertram live in our memory as much as Elizabeth Bennet, Fanny Price, Emma, Woodhouse or Anne Elliot. The portraits of all these women are exact and minute and each of them is characterized by her own vocabulary, mode of thought and turn of phrase. In her delightful transcripts of real life, as it was lived by the gentry in rural England, we come across a whole gallery of women characters in the round, who can be looked at and studied from all angles. In addition to those who form the majority, there are a few flat characters that represent certain humor in the old sense of the word. But even these flat characters in Jane Austen are extremely entertaining because they are mainly comic. We are as much interested in a beloved bore like Miss Bates as we are interested in any well-rounded characters in the novels.

Austen's Personal Involvement with her Characters

Jane Austen's own affections centered on her young people, and especially of course, in her heroines and that is the reason why they are always at the center of the novels. About Elizabeth Bennet, she wrote, "I must confess that I think her (Elizabeth) as delightful a creature as ever appeared in print". This is true also of the heroines of the other novels who are not in any way unusual or remarkable characters, except that we like them enough to make their names household words. Though they were born in George the Third's reign, we seem to know them so well, since their simple virtues, the charm of their youth and good looks, and happy natures, are matters of everyday experience. The power which makes them live is Jane Austen's rare talent for describing the involvements and feelings of ordinary life. Only imaginative sympathy with the characters she created could enable Jane Austen to make ordinary commonplace things, interesting from the truth of the description and the sentiment. Being a woman of great vitality, generous impulses, and large-hearted charity, gifted with a power of intuitive sympathy, Jane Austen prized the frank, the open-hearted, and the eager character beyond all others. Warmth and enthusiasm captivated Jane Austen and she felt, she could depend more on the sincerity of those who said or looked a rash or hasty thing than those of whose presence of mind never left them.

Her heroine Emma exclaims, "There is no charm equal to tenderness of heart". This is a quality commonly shared by all her heroines.

Lovable Heroines

Marianne Dashwood and Elinor Dashwood in *Sense and Sensibility* may be considered as twin heroines, each embodying a mode of existence, which is desirable, but each of which contradicts the other. We are shown how in the course of the story, Marianne gradually acquires more sense and Elinor more sensibility. In Catherine Morland, the heroine of *Northanger Abbey*, we have another very delightful creature. Jane Austen speaks about her in the following manner, "Her heart was affectionate, her dispositions 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 very lovable heroine. Far more lovable and attractive is the heroine of Pride and Prejudice i.e. Elizabeth. 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 of this novel. Elizabeth's blind prejudice against Darcy is gradually removed and in the process, her self-revelation is gradually brought out.

Of all the children of Jane Austen's imagination, Elizabeth is the cleverest, wittiest, and liveliest and is one of the most of likable to the author. More than one generation of readers have felt just as Jane herself had felt towards Elizabeth. They have found no one so delightful and are not inclined to tolerate those who do not like her. Coming to *Mansfield Park*, we find ourselves presented with a heroine, Fanny Price, who appears exasperatingly meek and modest by modern standards. The modesty of Fanny is the key to the book and it is a fine and true stroke to make her think that Crawford's proposal is nothing but a joke. We see more of Fanny's heart that we do of any other of Jane Austen's characters, except Anne Elliot. Anne completes and improves upon the characters we have in Fanny Price just as Elizabeth completes and improves upon Elinor. We get the impression that Elizabeth Bennet and Emma Woodhouse is the sort of young women who can take care of themselves, but Fanny Price and Anne Elliot is the sort of girls who become the victims of men and fortune. Hence, Fanny Price and Anne Elliot appeal less to our heads, but more to our hearts. Emma Woodhouse is unique among Jane Austen's heroine in one respect. She learns and changes and grows in the course of the story. At the beginning of the novel, she is vain and self-conceited and proud of her ability to see into the heart of other people and delights in ordering their lives. But bitter experience opens her eyes to her own limitations and she becomes humbled and chastened at the end. Emma is more complete, the center of interest in the novel than Elinor or Elizabeth, though not more than Fanny or Anne. All that is best in the book depends on the character of Emma, who is alive and convincing from the first to the

last. She is true to life in her selfishness and goodness, in her commonsense and in her folly, in the social and personal vanity which is always leading her into disasters, and in the soundness both of heart and mind which is always there to get her ultimately out of them. She is a delightful creation and the all -important pivot on which a delightful book turns. But she does not captivate one's heart as Anne Elliot does or run away with one's heart and head as Elizabeth does. According to Bailey, "There are few heroines in fiction whom we love so much, feel for so much, as we love and feel for Anne Elliot. Though we are interested in the love-affairs of Elizabeth and Emma, our hearts are not stirred for them as they are for Anne. It seems that Jane Austen had a great tenderness of feeling for this lovely and latest born of her heroines and has communicated some of it to her readers.

Their Individual Traits

Speaking about these heroines of Jane Austen, in general, the first thing that we have to admit is that they are very well distinguished from one another. Certain qualities like a keen intelligence, liveliness of disposition or brilliance and it may be repeated in one or two of them. But we cannot on any account, accuse Jane Austen of giving us the same character in different costumes or conditions of life. Elinor Dashwood, Elizabeth Bennet, and Emma Woodhouse share the intelligence, liveliness, and wit which have been the characteristics of their creator. But apart from these qualities, they have nothing in common. Each of her heroines is attractive and lovable in her own individual way and can be immediately distinguished from her sisters of the other novels. All the novels depend primarily on their heroines because it is in their fortunes that Jane Austen is most interested.

Minor Women Characters

Jane Austen's portrait of the minor women characters is equally memorable and true to the life as those of her heroines. They include such silly women as Mrs. Bennet, such beloved bores as Miss Bates, and such vulgarians as Mrs. Elton and such odious characters as Mrs. Norris. One of the most memorable characters belonging to this class is Mrs. Bennet, the unbelievably silly mother of the brilliant and witty Elizabeth. It is interesting to note what Bailey has to say about the attractiveness of Jane Austen's portrayal of this character and its truth of life. Bailey says, "When we read *Pride and Prejudice*, we do not ask ourselves, whether any wife and mother were ever so entirely absorbed in being ridiculous as Mrs. Bennet. She never once speaks but to expose her own folly. But though it would be hard to discover in life a woman who never says a sensible thing, yet the magic of art knows how to make Mrs. Bennet alive and convincing from her first word to her last. That is the secret. Art is not art if it is not surprising; it is not great art if it is not true. We are surprised at the silliness of Mrs. Bennet at the wit and sense of Elizabeth. And they, of course, lack a concentration and intensification, transcending any individual whom we have ever known.

But as we read the book for the second, or fifth or fiftieth time, our surprise is more and more absorbed, as it was in the case of *Hamlet*, in recognition that, as Hamlet's heights and depths turns strangely out to be our own, so too, Mrs. Bennett's silliness, and Elizabeth's sense our sense. The surprise never ceases altogether; if it did, too much of the delight would go with it; but at each reading the surprise, which began by asking whether such things could be true, comes more and more to ask only how so much of truth can be known and uttered with such certainty and force. And if we have laughed at Mrs. Bennet with some aloofness and superiority all through the book, do not we at the end recognize that the last and silliest of all her outbursts is the one in which, if we will but confess it, we must see ourselves.

Miss Bates in *Emma* is a character whom R.W. Chapman calls truly Shakespearean. She is a character one cannot help laughing at and on her own plane; she is comparable with Sir John Falstaff himself. Though she is not witty, she can easily be the cause of wit in others. Bailey says about her, "Miss Bates is incomparable! Among all attempts to put incessant and inconsequent garrulity upon the stage of the novel, this one of Jane Austen stands out alone in the solitary certainty of success. Miss Bates's character is so lifelike that those who know nothing about the art of creation might suppose it to have been taken down by a shorthand writer. But those who have ever made any humblest attempt at art or letters know what an immeasurable gulf lies between the results of shorthand or photography and such a miracle of creation as this. In Mrs. Elton who resembles Lady Catherine in insolence and snobbery, we have a character that we hate and despise and also laugh at when she begins boasting about her brother-in-law's barouche-landau and of people who have extensive grounds. In spite of all her insolence and snobbery, she is more despicable and comic than odious. In Mrs. Norris, we have a character that is truly odious. Speaking about her we have to admit that Jane Austen had searched her conscience and had dealt even-handed justice to the worst of her characters. After showing us all the odious traits in Mrs. Norris's character, the novelist is careful to point out in the last quarter of the novel the only good thing that could be said about her. It is that with such a nature as hers, she would have been better able to cope with the unfortunate situation in which fate had placed her sister Mrs. Price. By this remark, Jane Austen saves the character of Miss Norris from total inhumanity.

Variety of Women Characters

Reading through Jane Austen's 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 in rural England, she was able to observe among the members of her own social 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, and flirts of Jane Austen's novels, are the different categories of women such as we meet within our daily life, all the daughters of Eve under their different costumes and in their different attitudes. 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. All Jane Austen's young women seem to realize the necessity of marrying young and marrying well, as far as possible.

Their Graphic Realism

Jane Austen's women, particularly her heroines, were so dear to her that it is said she used to look or their portraits whenever she went to Art Exhibitions or picture-galleries. How real they were to her contemporaries is evident from the fact that many of them saw in their friends and acquaintances the prototypes of these characters. A Miss Dusantoy had a great idea of being Fanny Price while Miss Merries was convinced that the novelist had meant Mrs. And Miss Bates for some acquaintance of hers. But Jane declared though she thought it quite fair to note peculiarities and weaknesses, it was her desire to create, not to reproduce character placed at the center of Jane Austen's novels and made to function as an anxious spectator and judge of all that is going on around her. About these women at the centre of her novels, Baker has made the following observation, "In every novel there is a family, like or unlike the Austen; and in every novel, one female character in whom it is not too fanciful to recognize an impersonation of the demure observer, in the corner of the room, ticking of instances and oddities and forming judgments and conjectures. Being players themselves, with a great deal at stake these anxious spectators do not see the whole of the game; but they see more than the other players; they read, mark, learn for their own benefit; sometimes they also teach.

In *Sense and Sensibility*, this is Elinor's part. She is not a sprightly and humorous creature, and not much like Jane Austen, except in her good sense and clear insight. She is much more like the sensible but reserved Cassandra. This sedate lady has finished her education and looks at the weaknesses and errors of her fellow-beings with regretful forbearance, and with a tender solicitude for those who are her nearest. Elizabeth Bennet, in the next novel and Anne Elliot, in the last, who are the closest likenesses in character to Jane Austen herself, seems to have least of this particular duty assigned to them. They are in such ticklish situations themselves that their part as critical observers is not so much to the fore. But none is a better mouthpiece of Jane Austen's caustic reflections than Elizabeth; and in Anne, she lays bare more of her heart and lets out more of her inmost thoughts than she permitted herself elsewhere, even in the characters she loved best. Fanny Price, in *Mansfield Park,* is a different type, but as a simple young thing watching intently and learning to fit herself into a society, entirely new and strange, she has a similar function. Catherine Morland in *Northanger Abbey* is another neo-type, bewildered by her first experiences, who is taught sense by series of misadventures and disillusionment. As a girl making her debut she is obviously like Fanny Burney's *Evelina*, the

ingenuous diarist. Emma Woodhouse, in the novel called by her first name, with intellectual powers not inferior to Elizabeth Bennet's has to be schooled through an arduous course of blunders and humiliations, due to misconceptions of what is going on under her eyes. Only after many reverses and some bitter pangs do these characters attain to anything like the novelist's omniscience. The reader sees far more than they can and is invited to smile at their aberrations. But they are placed at the center; they are obliged by their situations to be watchful and critical. The story in each case shows them assimilating experience, acquiring tact and judgment, and adjusting themselves with more or less pain and difficulty to their circumstances and obligations, and it is largely through their eyes that the story in all its bearings grows clear to the reader. Being placed at the center of the novel in each case, these characters have to be watchful and critical of the others. But this is by no means easy when instead of being impartial spectators; they are also actors in the drama. But though they are not able to see the whole of the game, they see much more than the other players and they read, mark and learn for their own benefit and sometimes they also teach. Therein lays their great power. Their dilemma consists in their having to play the part of a spectator of the game as well as that of an active participant at the same time. Elizabeth Bennet and Anne Elliot are in such ticklish situations themselves that they cannot always assume the role of impartial observers. But Elizabeth is often made to express Jane Austen's own satiric reflections on characters and situations and while through Anne Elliot she lets us see most into her heart and inmost thoughts. These central characters are made to serve as critical commentators, not only on the other characters but also on the theme of the novels concerned.

Conclusion

The self-contained and narrow world which Jane Austen has created for us is quite true to the one in which her own eventful life was passed. Even within her restricted world, she excludes all that falls outside the boundaries of a woman's experience. She never attempted to crowd her novels with the kind of characters that Fielding and Smollett and Scott created with their wider knowledge of male society. In Jane Austen, we hardly ever have a conversation entirely among men, without any female audience. The reason for this is that the novelist could not trust herself to write truthfully and convincingly of the talk and behavior of men in an exclusively male society which was unknown to her.

References

1. Austen, Jane. (1994), *Pride and Prejudice*. London: Penguin.
2. Baker, William. (2008), *Critical Companion to Jane Austen: A Literary Reference to Her Life and Work.* New York: Info Base Publishing.
3. Litz, Walton A. (1967), *Jane Austen: A Study of Her Artistic Development.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Contributor details :

Zubair Ahmad Bhat

Research Scholar Department of Comparative Languages and Culture

Barkatullah University Bhopal M.P. India.

Email Id: Zubairscholar@gmail.com