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## JANE AUSTEN: A RADICAL INNOVATOR

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Give a girl an education and  
Introduce her properly into the world and  
Ten into one but she has the means of settling well,  
Without expense to anybody . . .

(Miss Norris on bringing Fanny to Mansfield Park, *Mansfield Park*)

Jane Austen's authenticity is what makes her one of the most prominent women writers of England as well as worldwide. Although her works achieved the deserved appreciation posthumously, yet her works stand tall as prodigious models in the modern times. Her style is a proof of her skepticism of the conventional form of fiction prevalent during her times. She challenged the accepted norms and completely transformed fiction. It is evident not only from her letters to and discussions with her sister, Cassandra, but also from her novels.

Austen wrote several private theatricals, including a satire named *History of England* when she was fifteen. It was a burlesque which made fun of the history books being taught in England during her time and bore the seed of the kind of works she would go on to write. Her literary career can be divided into two periods: in the first, she has a total of six novels to her credit and certain unfinished works which are present in the form of letters. She came into the limelight with her novel, *Pride and Prejudice*. It was given varied reviews by several writers and critics. Charlotte Bronte remarked that *Pride and Prejudice* was a disappointment, "a clearly fenced highly cultivated garden and neat garden with neat borders and delicate

flowers; but no open country, no fresh air, no blue hill, no bonny beck" (Letter to G. H. Lewes).

Austen started reading extensively at an early age, mostly relying on her family library, where she found great interest in Mills and Boons, Harlequin novels, epistolary novels, and 'Conduct literature for women', which instructed aspiring ladies on the correct standards of behavior and even warned against the danger of contemporary novels on impressionable female minds ("What Books Were On Her Reading List?"). The theme of these novels was based on the search of a suitable husband. Fiction of her times generally consisted of gothic and sentimental novels with melodramas. Ann Radcliffe was the pioneer of the gothic novel, and was quite famous for her vivid descriptions of the supernatural with a touch of romance, travel etc. Even in Austen's novel, *Northanger Abbey*, Catherine Morland is obsessed with *Mysteries of Udolpho*. Her novel *Pride and Prejudice* was inspired by Frances Burney, a famous novelist of her time known for his knowledge of society with all its virtues and vices indicating satire and wit. In his novel, *Cecilia*, he uses the words pride and prejudice three times in capital letters. Dr. Leyster says, "the whole unfortunate business", "has been the result of PRIDE AND PREJUDICE...yet this however, remember: if to PRIDE AND PREJUDICE you owe your miseries, so wonderfully is good and evil balanced, that to PRIDE AND PREJUDICE you will also owe their termination . . ." (Burney 451). Her ability to be inspired by the works she read and admired and yet give them a new direction is what makes her a lateral writer. Austen holds that small actions or gestures reveal adequately the nature of a person. For her big gestures are similar among all but it is the small gestures of a person which differentiate one's character from the other.

Austen was an ambitious moralist, a keen observer of society and human follies and virtues. In many of her novels, she shows the protagonist in discord and her gradual improvement, for instance, realization of snobbery and impropriety in *Pride and Prejudice*. Elizabeth Bennet goes through a phase of realizing her prejudice and Mr. Darcy lets go of his pride. In *Mansfield Park*, Fanny goes through an evolution from being a frail and passive girl to a girl with moral depth and right judgment as exhibited in certain situations, for example when she firmly refuses to marry Henry Crawford. In *Sense and Sensibility*, she shows the young,

emotional, and romantic Marianne going through a similar transformation and coming out as a woman with plausible views and actions. Austen as we know belonged to the age of reason. This is what which makes her a staunch advocate of prudence and propriety. All her novels are presented from a woman's point of view, but this really does not make her a feminist. She lays more emphasis on sisterhood rather than talking about women's plight, but she does guide her characters and her readers with the kind of prudence a woman should follow. She also teaches with example how to be a wiseacre in the art of choosing a right husband. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Lady Sarah Pennington advises her daughters to choose a husband on the account of what his servants and dependents have to say about him, "What praise is more valuable than the praise of an intelligent servant?" (250). Mary Waldron comments on this unique feature of Austen's in her book *Jane Austen and the Fiction of her Time*,

She [Jane Austen] appears to have judged that the writers of fiction had a duty to keep faith with readers - invention must tie in with what she thought they would recognize and to some extent share . . . a work of fiction ought to combine a moral tendency with a credible scenario. Without the moral the credibility might be dangerous, especially to young readers. They might want to imitate the 'bad' characters if they were not given clear guidance. (2)

On the other hand, W.H Auden holds a positive review on her social commentary. In the second period of her career, Austen's novel *Emma* became the talk of the day because of Emma's snobbish character. Austen deliberately created a fault in the protagonist's character which was later resolved with realization resulting with a changed behavior. According to Austen, snobbery has to be pitied by the readers. Her oeuvre as a writer had key themes of love, marriage, and wealth. Her style as a writer was quite witty in the sense she brought several issues in the beginning with a touch of romance, irony, satire, and humor. Her works would conclude with a solution indicating to all the society's problems, which was to make people less selfish and more sensitive towards the needs of others. Her aim as a writer was to change accepted behavior of women with all sighs, smiles, and adoration, incapable of more than infatuation. She was against all the exaggerations including the portrayal of women as fickle as that would mislead the readers. Her idea was to present the reality

through fiction without any fake embellishment but with a direction towards idealism, as in her novel *Emma*. Mr. Knightly is surprised at Miss Harriet's refusal, to which Emma gives a rebellious reply, ". . . a man always imagines a woman to be ready for anybody who asks her" (Austen, *Emma* 61).

Claudia L. Johnson believed that "Austen's view of power structure was not to escape from the conflict". In almost all her novels like *Mansfield Park*, *Northanger Abbey*, *Persuasion*, and *Sanditon*, she talks about the British gentry particularly about the dependence of women on marriage in the pursuit of social standing and economic security. More importantly, she portrays the hollowness of shallow obligations imposed on women.

Jane Austen weaves her content in a way in which she gives a reflection of her own limited life and acquaintances. Moreover, her obsession with her own brother's careers, the friendship of women, and the value of sisterhood is evident in her works. Each of her novels has a pair of female friends and sister who have different characters but are never in conflict. This provides a way to compare the protagonist's character giving a more vivid picture. Her strong portrayal of camaraderie shared by women of her novels gives a glimpse of her strong bond with her sister, Cassandra.

Austen was quite unaffected by the huge events of her times like the French revolution and the Napoleonic wars. In other words, she was not into any political issue, imagination, melodrama which was quite prominent among her contemporaries. She was more concerned about the crisis of values, and tried to bring reality to the fore, by highlighting the frustration and limitations in which young women lived their life with barbed fences. She focused more on 'solutions' than talking about social conundrum.

Her works mirror the depth of moral values which actually according to her were very essential for people of not only her time but for generations to come. Her work is appreciated by the modern readers as they believe that hers is a definitive prose on society's woes and her potent flows are echoing even in the present with all her mischievous inclinations and romance.

Austen also held a firm view on the structure of her novel which was to combine a moral tendency with a credible scenario. Mary Poovey wrote, "The romantic conclusion is an

attempt to hedge the conflict between the individualistic perspective inherent in the bourgeois value system and authoritarian hierarchy retained from traditional paternalistic society”.

Austen’s disagreement with all the conventional ways of fiction is clear from her remark, “I do not write for such dull elves, as not great deal of ingenuity themselves” (Austen, Letter). She set about a challenge to contemporary assumptions attempting to free fiction from elements which hampered the relationship with its readers. In all her novels she shows how the aristocracy or the gentry were obsessed with manners, looks, and gentility. In *Emma*, Mr. Knightly and Emma are always engaged in discussing people. This shows the folly of human nature. Jane Austen studies these follies throughout her novels and, in a way, ridicules them. Emma and Harriet meet Mr. Martin, Emma gives a whole review of his looks and gentility through his manners and actions. She says, “He is very plain, undoubtedly; remarkably plain; but that is nothing compared with his entire want of gentility” (Austen, *Emma* 39). Through the resolved endings of her work, she follows a realistic and honorable value as she makes the siblings and parents see desirability of the union and reconciled to it. With her unique style she paved a way for a “new fiction” which is a fiction with “facts”.

Jane Austen was quite similar to her contemporaries namely Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley etc., in talking about the complexities of female desires and the restraints of propriety. Furthermore, the latter was determined to challenge the traditional values, which Austen took forward in her own distinct style which showcased the same challenge from an inner domain and also built a defense system against traditional value through her aesthetic choices, her style, and subject matter. It would not be wrong to say that she searched for solutions for the inherent complexities of female desires and propriety which were earlier simply posed as problems which had no logical solution. Ann Radcliffe’s popularity was based on the well appreciated genre of the age she wrote in. Gothic novels were meant for mere entertainment. They were not directed towards an issue, had no moral depth, and were literally shallow. Considering the popularity, Ann Radcliffe was indeed a consummate writer but unlike Austen, she lacked the curiosity and the desire of opening the boundaries which were created for woman on the social front as well as the professional front. Her

succeeding writers, like the Bronte sisters in particular, wrote about the process of female maturation in this restricted world but their representation is quite dull and somber. Their works reflect bereavement, elements of horror, with a touch of egotism. They too resolve into a semi happy ending without providing a real defense mechanism for the challenges of women.

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