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Jane Austen's Novels: A Study from Feminist Perspective

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Abstract

To bring changes in the society, the role of courageous women and their sacrifices are always to be recognised though many a times, it is seen that they are deprived of it and are rather exploited. Jane Austen is alleged to be such a woman. Six of her novels, concerned basically with the themes of love, marriage and wealth show many progressive notes here and there in the respective texts. They vividly depict the life led by and psychology revealed by women in that age. Apart from that, these texts also reveal the author's feminine realization and thoughtful propositions. Feminist policy of the Victorian Era is shown in novels like *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma*. In first half of the nineteenth century, also known as the Romantic Age, Jane Austen is acclaimed as one of the most reasonable and artistically perfect writers of narratives as her novels are acknowledged by readers world-wide. She has produced diverse woman characters with unlike individualities and knowledge in her work. Her stories show that women protagonists start to follow their true love despite various challenges from society,

public stigma and differences in class, strata, social and monetary status which symbolize female self-awareness and sense of self-dignity. The present paper puts forth a critical analysis of Austen's work in the context of feminist ideology.

Keywords: Feminism, Inequality, Prejudice, Pride, Social Status, Race, Community, Province, Marriage, Property, Stereotype, Novel of manners, Ivory tower

Feminism is one of the emerging and widely discussed theoretical perspectives and when Austen's novels are discussed from feminist point of view, its dimension and significance is further strengthened. Feminism deals with women's rights and many other gender related things bothering the female folk in particular and the entire humanity in general. Feminism makes an effort to ensure rights, power, justice and dignity to women on logical basis to attain an impartial and balanced status in socio-economic and political life along with men. However, the main problem is with feelings and practices that sustain such prejudiced exercises. Identifying that women are placed at the lowest level and treated as inferior to men in every respect, this discrimination on the ground of gender provides a wonderful platform for the feminists to work upon. At one point of time, the subjugated absorb the ideologies and principles popularised by the dominant group. Domination of so called weaker female folk by so called stronger male force continues forever though ironically women are bound to follow and accompany them. This system can be called patriarchy. This patriarchal system shows that men are there to rule over women in every phase of their life, a thought-provoking issue indeed giving rise to various waves of feminism in England, America, France and Indian Sub-continent as well since late twentieth century till date. The most discouraging thing is that this patriarchy encompasses within it the female folk as well which results in perpetuation of subjugation and exploitation of women in the society since time immemorial.

Long-suffering ages of discrimination on ground of gender has not been resolved till now. Females are still not yet at par with males in almost every sector because there is only a stereotypical assignment of roles and duties to the female folk despite the incessant struggle of many brave and bold women for attaining their dues, getting back their lost power, space, time and privileges. The condition, however, varies from country to country. For example, Western world shows freedom and equality for women but still plenty of indications are present to establish that they are not equal with their male counterparts. In working sector, women are still paid less than males, they are sexually and morally harassed and are hardly promoted to higher posts. Because of prejudice, many professionals cannot accept a female leader. It is perceptible almost everywhere. In many cases professional achievements of women are hardly recognized and for married women with children, these become almost a far cry. Feminist drive gets a negative implication in the modern life for which if any issue is raised, the followers are advised not to make an argument and be thankful for their present position.

The positions achieved by women and social status of equality whatever little bit - earned by them are the results of hard work of the scientists, philanthropists, and feminist workers. Peter Barry's renowned book *Beginning Theory* (2009) analyzes the problems of

ensuring equality, liberty and social dignity to women in the society. He significantly supervises the feminist literary criticism and considers the women's movement of 1960s as a kind of renewal of old tradition of thought and action. References have been made to the epoch-breaking books like *A Vindication of Rights of Women*, *A Room of One's Own*, *Subjection of Women*, *The Second Sex* and *The Origin of the Family* etc. Representation of women is one of the forms of socialisation assigning role models to both the sexes so that femininity and feminine goals and aspirations can be set. Feminists opine that women in the nineteenth century hardly worked for a living and thus marriage is supposed to take a big part in ensuring social position, happiness and fulfilment in women's life either positively or negatively. He shows the significance of the portraits of ladies scattered in pages of literature. Jane Austen is one such great canonical author who has been able to carve a niche in the literary field particularly in raising issues of women and portraying such strong and influential women characters like Mrs Bennet, Elizabeth and Emma etc. in an age when women were not given minimum of the rights and privileges deserved by them as human beings and ample examples are there in the texts to show how love, romance and marriage are influenced by economic security, social status etc. The marriage of Mr. Collins and Charlotte is a perfect example of this. Apart from that just the opening ironical line constitutes the crux of the entire novelistic masterpiece *Pride and Prejudice* and gives a glimpse of patriarchal mindset.

Jane Austen intelligently shows cheerful wedding which is a woman's cherished desire, a social duty of womanhood beyond professional and public life. Gracefulness in handling delicate relationships born out of love and marriage is vigorously shown in the novels of Jane Austen. The match-making is the prime pre-occupation of most of the mothers of Austen having marriageable daughters and there cannot be better example than that of Mrs Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice*. The big matchmaker in *Sense and Sensibility*, Mrs. Jennings, also an aggregable and lovable widow of the novel, a well-intentioned mother has an eagle eye on the romances of young people, shows interest in settling the life of Dashwood sisters as well by finding suitable life partners for them as early as possible. Similarly in *Mansfield Park*, Mrs. Norris, aunt of Fanny becomes a terror and epitome of cruelty for the latter and ends terribly. Charlotte Lucas, the bosom friend of Elizabeth in *Pride and Prejudice* marries Mr. Collins only because of his handsome income which meant a lot in match-making during those days, a realistic interpretation indeed. That financial security is important for women is reiterated by the far-sighted author, Austen. There has been the reference to right to property of women too as for not having a male heir, Mr Bennet decides to hand over the paternal property to a distant cousin called Mr. Collins. *Pride and Prejudice* gives clear picture of power relations of upper-class society of Austen's times. Women's self-enhancement is determined much by compatible marriages which give material comfort also at the same time. Elizabeth Bennet, the protagonist is defined as a handsome lady, her father's favourite, proud, having strong personality, a unique creation on the part of the author. The head of the Bennet family Mr. Bennet is just a titular one, the entire family is in control of Mrs. Bennet, the mother figure whose prime concern in life is managing husbands for five of her marriageable daughters. From the point of view of social status, marriage is the only option for women shown in *Pride and Prejudice*, as Mrs.

Bennet is seen so concerned about her daughters and wants husbands like Mr. Bingley and Mr. Darcy for her daughters only because of their wealth and power.

Central characters like Elizabeth Bennet and Emma Woodhouse in *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma* respectively are portrayed as witty, selfish, self-governing, vigorously clever girls who ultimately come out with mature judgment and sentimental prospects.

“Novel of manners” is the term used by history of English literature for Jane Austen’s novels, rich in delineation of customs, values, etiquette, traditions and mosaic of traditional culture. Such kind of novels of manners have realistic and ironical situations which depict the manners and outlook of the primary characters having supreme self-confidence, individuality, power of decent ways of life.

Her novels are different from mere love stories as they reflect realistic approaches and style which are somehow related to her own life. Again, the age and family environment of the author must also be taken into consideration in order to realise female identity and their natural demands. But though the author belonged to a conservative society, the female characters are found to move much ahead of their times who do not hesitate to voice forth their feelings, emotions and thoughts. Elizabeth and her male counterpart Darcy are placed side by side just as Jane and Bingley and none of them is ready to be vanquished. Both Elizabeth and Jane exhibit their strength of character providing an extra-ordinary level to the plot design of the novel. Thus, the creation of such bold and unique women characters is in itself a great achievement in our perception. It may be mentioned here that the condition of England had not been encouraging at all till the end of the Victorian Age with respect to the rights and privileges granted to women. Thanks to John Stuart Mill, Charles Darwin, Herbert Spencer, Mary Wollstonecraft that the condition of women in England improved gradually towards the end of Victorian Age when again imperialism and colonial enterprises were at their peak around the world.

In 1811 Jane Austen’s first novel *Sense and Sensibility* was published. This novel revolves around two sisters, Elinor Dashwood and Marianne Dashwood and their love stories. The story is of a British squire family named Dashwood Family. Jane’s view on love and marriage can easily be seen when the love life of both the sisters is compared. It also recovers and reiterates women’s emerging issues from time to time. Social status of an individual depends upon the property attained by him as at that time people valued the patriarchal system the most. Similarly, women after their marriage as usually become subordinate to their respective husbands and go under the direct control of the male guardians in the family. Both Elinor and Marianne attain happiness at the end of the novel but by sharing learning experiences from each other. Ultimately, they discover how to express and feel their sentiments and happiness without sacrificing their dignity and self-control.

Sense and sensibility are the dominating themes in the novel which convey the view point of Jane to act in love and marriage. As according to Jane’s view, sensibility should always be there with feelings as extremely emotional women can bring great pain to themselves. Elinor tries her best to find the most suitable husband for her as the best source of

gathering livelihood for women was to go for marriage. This novel sets the tone for her upcoming novels.

Jane Austen's masterpiece *First Impressions* as original title is drafted in 1796. Later in 1813, it was revised and published as *Pride and Prejudice*. Continuing the theme as in the previous novel, *Pride and Prejudice* is also having similar themes of love and marriage. Story of the novel is all about central character, Elizabeth Bennet and her expressive maturity with romantic interventions here and there. She eliminates misunderstanding and finds her true love in the man against whom she was highly prejudiced at the very first encounter. The first impression of both Elizabeth and Darcy for each other was not at all positive but irony lies in the fact that both of them are united with ringing of marriage bells. In this novel importance of love in marriage is expressed but reluctance to marriage just for money and status is also shown among Bennet daughters. The episodes of love and marriage are given much importance as during that period, these issues reigned supreme in social life and the best delineation of character, particularly of female identity comes out of the negotiations among various participating characters. However, the main line of the story revolves around love incidents of the second daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Bennet, Miss Elizabeth Bennet. Elizabeth gives strong opposition to Darcy's egotism which shows women's love and crave for equality in every respect. She totally denies the marriage for money and status but ultimately goes for it because of love. Jane Austen has created self-governing women in the novel. She resists patriarchal society, its discriminating attitude and conveys her self-governing thoughts and ideas. This novel has been attracting millions of readers since decades and shows urge for self-awareness and love for self-identity under all circumstances.

The novel, *Emma* is a story of landlady named Emma, beautiful, wealthy and smart indeed, the best choice of the author herself. She helps women by finding suitable husbands belonging to upper social status so that women can improve their own position and change their destiny whatsoever. She does so as a curious matchmaker. Jane finds in Emma's character the germs of much potentiality. She also depicts the desire of women for inner happiness and self-esteem. It is not complicated to understand Jane Austen's appropriation of the theory of love and marriage in this novel. A unique love relationship between Emma and her life-long friend George Knightley, much senior to her in age exhibits the most matured love affair detected at the last moment of the novel, a common feature of most of Jane Austen's novels. The so-called romantic love is missing in her. It is something sensible and logical relationship no-doubt. The author also describes two female characters Isabella and Lucy who are in low social status with insufficient wealth in the novel called *Northanger Abbey*. Both are trying to marry in upper class to change their social status. Anne in *Persuasion* and Fanny in *Mansfield Park* both portray beautiful pictures of love, which is also a demonstration of their stepping towards self-governing female awareness.

The central characters in the novels discussed above have their individual points of view which lay bare the clear picture of the then upper-class society and the status and position of women as such. Women characters are found concerned about their future and identify

defects in the communal approach to women and marriage. They feel the presence of a biased attitude towards ladies and thus attempt to redefine life at their own will.

The present work is based on a thorough analysis of some of novelistic masterpieces of Jane Austen focusing on the portrayal of female characters, their major issues of life, determining factors for their self-enhancement and self-uplift in various phases of life. Women, being the symbol of love, beauty, compassion, kindness, softness, service-mindedness and endurance irrespective of class, race, community, language, religion and clime, deserve at least something in return. Thus, self-expression and self-determination are always the coveted prizes for all, specially, women because they are mostly deprived of these by most of the societies around the world. For Jane Austen's heroines, matured and restrained love with sensibility and reasonable outlook mean a lot which impresses the readers a lot and lifts the psychology of the author to a great height. Thus, in man-centric social set-up the assurance of a loving, dignified and secured conjugal life can act as a great moral boost-up for women and the author has done justice to her female characters. In decision making as well, women are assigned honorable roles though the society was not that much progressive at that time. Austen was much ahead of her time and all her works are great artistic successes indeed.

Jane Austen's presence and the significance of her works cannot ever be decimated from the entire arena of English writing. She is indispensable as long as English literature is being studied and taught in some corner of the world. Her fictional works can be viewed as works of a woman activist that challenge the man-centric society. The connection between opposite sexes in Austen's books is investigated as defined in the texts, examining Austen's attitude to marriage, particularly women's right to choose their life partners, accentuating the dimension of their life. During the most common way of perusing her novels, it is difficult to see any direct resistance to the patriarchal thoughts or advocacy of feminist principles whatsoever; it is more interesting to find out the real story, as Austen figured out as to how to typify her vision in incongruity and laughter, humor and irony being the main literary weapons in her hands. Austen lends genuine support to felicity and autonomy, and defies the man-controlled dictatorial society. In this regard, Austen can be viewed as a votary of causes and interests of women and a progressive author. In a word, Jane Austen is a champion who appeals to any age. There is no denying the fact that a more intensive scrutiny of her novels is required to do justice to Jane Austen as an individual, as an author and also as a sincere advocate of women's rights and freedom, hopes and aspirations, present and future, morality and ethics etc. as demonstrated in her extraordinary books. More research on this aspect of her novels would definitely bring out many more latent facts, which have so far remained unexplored.

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