

Jane Austen's Novels as a Social Comedy

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Abstract: - Austen's novels were written and published by her when the Romantic movement in literature had begun to emerge. Though Austen and Wordsworth were contemporaries, Austen is called an 'Augustan novelist' and Wordsworth is called a 'Romantic poet'. Austen's novels are usually treated as the part of the 18th century tradition of reason and good sense, which the Romantic movement reacted against. She often ridicules the lack of realism, falsities of sentiment and absence of psychological veracity in the treatment of character in the novels of sensibility and particularly in the Gothic novels, very popular in her time. She consciously and deliberately identified herself with the 18th century tradition of realism initiated by Richardson and Fielding, who dealt with the problematic nature of the relation between the individual and society, and tried to resolve the problem through a plot where the rights of the individual are somehow balanced by his or her obligations to society. However, there are critics, who regard Austen as a transitional novelist. M. Mukherjee finds her instrumental in the extension of the self to include woman in novels, which has been uptill now all male-dominated. R. Vanita, too sees Austen as a Romantic novelist because of her interest in the juxtaposition of inner and outer worlds, the movement of the individual consciousness between these worlds and the insistence in the novels on love and friendship as the best basis for human community.

To my mind, Austen's merit lies in making creative use of the realistic tradition of Fielding and Richardson for dealing with the issues and problems of contemporary social developments and in trying and finding a proper comic resolution to conflicts, while continuing to show an awareness of their acuteness. She is also among the first writers to use 'free indirect speech' reporting the thoughts of a character in language that approximates to their 'idiolect'. Her novels are mainly and largely the part of social and domestic comedy. However, she is not a novelist to be read 'the mouth open and the mind closed' as E.M. Forster thinks. Her use of irony incorporates a strong dislike and contempt not just for the abstraction called 'society' but also for individual foibles. It is a fact that she is evasive or deliberately microscopic in choosing to ignore the large political developments of her day and the sexuality associated with the female body but she does so to keep her comic art pure and focused on what she has decided to accomplish as a novelist. She also provides a model of realistic technique for dealing with the themes of marriage and money. Despite a tentative connection between material means or possessions and gentility in the sense of superior behaviour of character visible in her novels, she does not hesitate in mocking social pretensions and hypocrisy. As a matter of fact, Austen presents 'a criticism of life in terms of comedy.'

There are a few critics, who are of the view that Austen's novels have a strong orientation towards the lives, characters and interests of women and try to explore her connection with 'feminine sensibility' in novels. The analysis of her women characters and their motives, however,

diminishes this chance because they unequivocally subscribe to the view that marriage is the only and essential fulfilment of their own selves. Each of her novels ends with the happy marriage of the heroine. It is another matter that Austen speaks of the say of women in choice of their life-partners. Elizabeth in 'Pride and Prejudice' shows this assertiveness when she rejects the marriage-proposal of Mr. Collins. Yet Elizabeth has enough materials for comedy in her character. Thus, Austen provides her readers with both entertainment and instruction that she accomplishes with her comic art effectively and artistically.

To the mind of F.R. Leavis, Jane Austen is one of the truly great writers and herself a major fact or in the background of other great writers. Leavis gives her a sort of five star rating by including her in the 'The Great Tradition'. He observes—

"Jane Austen, in fact, is the inaugurator of the great tradition of English novel and by 'great tradition.' I mean the tradition to which what is great in English fiction belongs."¹

Making a comparison between George Eliot and Jane Austen even Lord David Cecil has also observed—

"Life is chaotic, art is orderly. The novelist's profession is to work an orderly composition which is also a convincing picture of life. It is Jane Austen's triumph that she solves this problem perfectly, fully satisfies the rival's claims of life and art."²

The stories of the most of novels written before Jane Austen consist of a large variety of characters and incidents clustering round the figure of a hero bound together loosely or less loosely by an intrigue and ending with wedding bells.

It is Jane Austen, who evolved an orderly comparison which is also a convincing picture of life. F.R. Leavis again observes—

“Jane Austen’s plots and her novels in general were put together very deliberately and calculatedly (if not like a building), But her interest in ‘composition’ is not something to be put over against her interest in life : nor does she offer an ‘aesthetic’ value that is separable from moral significance.”³

Leavis also quotes the observation made by D.W. Harding in the essay ‘Lady Susan into Mansfield Park’ published in ‘Scrutiny’ vol-X, No. 2 in this regard—

“The principle of organisation and the principle of development in her (Austen’s) work in an intense moral interest of her own in life that is in the first place a pre-occupation with certain problems that life compels on her as personal ones.”⁴

A number of responses and problems arise in reading Austen’s novels. On the first reading, it appears as if her novels have no obvious relevance to a modern reader. However, one is always struck by her subtle comic art that is not as boisterous as that of Fielding or Dickens. Her comic art is really soaked in humour and irony. There is always a tug of war between real and ideal. An opposition is established from the beginning between money and love in ‘Pride and Prejudice’. In spite of her powerful criticism of many aspects of her society, she is not a liberal novelist.

Even her humour expresses strong criticism of society. She wonders with amusement why human beings should be such fools though she has no apparent contempt for these fools. She shows the knack of Shakespeare in delineating her fools. Her method of positively representing a mere negative is really ingenious and wonderful. She neither betters her fools nor abuses them; she simply derives pleasure from their folly. Emma is presented as a figure of fun. She stands along with the great figures of English high comedy. Praising Austen’s comic art, L. D. Cecil observes—

“Like all great comedians, she (Austen) satirizes in relation to a universal standard of values.”⁵

Austen has none of the underlying didactic intention ordinarily attributed to the satirist. She has no missionary mission. She is an artist and remains honest to her art. The line between the serious and the comic is so thin in her novels that it becomes very difficult to pinpoint where the one begins and the other ends and vice-versa. Even her satire is flavoured with comedy. She reveals with inimitable lightness of touch the comic foibles and amiable weaknesses of the people, whom she lives amongst and liked. If on the one hand, she is intensely critical of people, on the other

hand, she feels emotionally attached with them. This is one of the dilemmas of her comic art that she seems to be reconciling all the time in her novels. Her ‘comedies of manners’ appear to be ‘the comedies of morals’.

Austen deliberately keeps herself confined to the subjects, which she can treat comically. It does not mean that she is not a serious writer. She really presents ‘a criticism of life’ in terms of comedy. A. H. Wright in this respect remarks—

“Jane Austen not only limits herself to the sphere, which she understands; she even picks and chooses amongst the raw materials of experience available to her, eschewing what her genius cannot control.”⁶

As a matter of fact, Austen deliberately leaves out her works whatever she cannot personally know and emphasizes what is most valuable to her talent. However, within her limits, she is marvellous. Her novels are an admirable copy of life, in spite of being comic. She may be without ‘sentiment’, without ‘poetry’ but in her comic domain, she is superb. It is her dissatisfaction with the daily life that she witnesses around her, that provides raw materials for comic treatment by her. David Daiches believes that Austen exposes the economic basis of social behaviour with an ironic smile. In this respect, L. Villard observes—

“Merely an amused and attentive spectator, Jane Austen does not seek to interpret life, she is content to observe it, but her mind and her sentiments are always in unison with the objects of her observation.”⁷

Austen always observes and defines the incongruities between the large idea and the inadequate ego. Here, it is right to quote the observation of David Cecil, who says—

“Like all great comedians, she (Austen) satirizes in relation to a universal standard of values; her books express a general view of life. It is the view of that eighteenth century civilization of which she was the last exquisite blossom. One might call it the moral-realistic view.”⁸

It should be noted here that Austen is no narrow expositor of an outworn morality, no mere angry satirist. In ‘Sense and Sensibility’, it is sensibility that is given a comic treatment whereas ‘Northanger Abbey’ is, for the most part, a burlesque of the Gothic novel of terror, with special reference to Ann Radcliffe’s ‘Mysteries of Udolpho’. ‘Mansfield Park’ is a treatise on education. ‘Emma’ is a drawing-room comedy of self-deception in which the heroine’s misapprehension is gradually disclosed in very amusing and interesting way. Overpersuasion is the theme of ‘Persuasion’ and it is packed with wit and comedy. It is an all-accepted fact that ‘Pride and

Prejudice' is a delightful comedy despite the fact that the novel displays and illustrates the dangers of excessive pride and prejudice. However, Austen's novels cannot be dismissed as simply light-hearted.

Generally, it is thought that Austen's 'serious criticism of life' and 'comedy' existing side by side in her novels are baffling but it is her skill as a novelist, that brings the two together. She has used her comedy in several ways to express strong criticism of her society and to promote after native values. In 'Pride and Prejudice' Mrs. Bennet's obsession of her idea of marrying off her daughters is ridiculed while in 'Sense and Sensibility' the self-indulgence of Marianne is ridiculed.

Shakespearean comedies end with marriages of heroes and heroines, which represent reconciliation and harmony and so do Austen's novels. This is the reason why Austen's novels are often compared with Shakespearean comedies. Comedy in Austen's novels has been not so much to suggest something, which make us laugh, though at several places her novels often do as well, but as the opposite of 'tragedy'.

Austen's comic art is superb in many ways. Her ironic treatment of folly, silliness and affectation is a moral comment. For example, she rings down the curtain of 'Emma' with a delightful ironic touch. To quote—

“The wedding was very much like other weddings, where the parties have no taste for finery or parade; and Mrs. Elton, from the particulars detailed by her husband, thought it all extremely shabby and very inferior to her own.—“Very little white satin, very few lace veils; a most pitiful business!— Selina would stare when she heard of it”.—But in spite of these deficiencies, the wishes, the hopes, the confidence, the predictions of the small band of true friends who witnessed the ceremony were fully answered in the perfect happiness of the union.”⁹

Austen achieves perfection in her narrow world by recognizing her own limits. It is her comic art, that makes her novels highly readable. She deals with the ordinary daily life of middle class people and in general she looks at it from the comic and satiric point of view. Only such events and characters are selected, which can be comically treated. Her characters have certain weaknesses and follies, which she exposes and ridicules. She studies man in relation with each other. She confines herself to the manners and writes actually the comedy of manners. This enables her to use her comic art.

Austen does not believe in wounding; she believes in amusing. She does not exhibit the bitterness of Swift. She is dispassionate observer of the human scene. She finds it full

of inconsistencies, which she brings out in her novels but with a smile on her lips. She never laughs at those who are wise, consistent and sensible. The interpretation of life is ironical and humane at the same time. She uses her comic art in her fight against shams, illusions, affectations, silliness, pride, snobbery, prejudices, etc. It is said that human nature in essence is the same everywhere in every age and it is this 'essence', which she reveals in the portrayal of her characters though her vision of life is essentially comic and ironic. To quote David Cecil—

“Jane Austen's realistic English drawing-rooms are theatres in which elemental human folly and inconsistency play out their eternal comedy.”¹⁰

Thus, Jane Austen is a social comedian. She deals with domestic affair in a very lovely comical way. Almost all her novels are its fine examples.

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