



## Jane Austen was not a Romantic

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**Dr. Shruti Singh**

Assistant Professor English

Government College for Girls Mandkola (Palwal)

(Ph – 8901183600 Email: singhshruti78@gmail.com)

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### Abstract:

Was Jane Austen a romantic? The question seems absurd. After all who would call world's greatest writer of romances a non romantic. The answer lies within the narratives. For when one reads them, one finds a very strong materialistic voice dwelling more on social status and physical beauty. The actual expression and language of love is quite missing. One is left to imagine what Elizabeth Bennett must have said to Darcy or how Colonel Brandon must have made love to Eleanor. On the contrary there's a lot of stress on the monetary aspect of life in the narrative be it Darcy's estate or the lowly connections of Elizabeth's family or even Lady Catherine De Burg's worth. So what could it mean? In this paper one tries to analyze how Jane Austen's personal life and circumstances influenced and conditioned her novel's outlook on love and life and how it reflected in her work.

January 12, 1848:

“Why do you like Miss Austen so very much? I am puzzled on that point.

What induced you to say that you would rather have written *Pride & Prejudice* or *Tom Jones* than any of the *Waverly Novels*? I had not seen *Pride & Prejudice* till I read that sentence of yours, and then I got the book and studied it. And what did I find? An accurate daguerreotyped portrait of a common-place face; a carefully-fenced, highly cultivated garden with neat borders and delicate flowers-but no glance of a bright vivid physiognomy-no open country-no fresh air-no blue hill-no bonny beck. I should hardly like to live with her ladies and gentlemen in their elegant but confined houses. These observations will probably irritate you, but I shall run the risk... Miss Austen is only shrewd and observant.”

Hard to conclude from this, but for the past two hundred years Jane Austen is considered the most sought after source of the female voice in Edwardian and Victorian England. A sought after source for the female voice and for somewhat prude romances. Jane Austen may easily be one of the most successful authors recreated through the medium of cinema. In all her six celebrated novels namely *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) *Mansfield Park* (1814) *Emma* (1816) and two novels published posthumously *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion* in (1817) were written with immortal inks which were to last lifetimes.

Growing up, Jane faced hardships which were made worse by her being a woman. Living in the later years of the eighteenth century, living a poor and obscure life trying to appear upper class was an essential struggle in Jane's life. When we read about her life as portrayed by her nephew in 1869, *A memoir of Jane Austen*, she comes across as a woman who struggles with society for a place of her own but upon reading her novels, if one reads through the fine print, one comes across a woman defiant and revolutionary. She was such an avid observer and so forthright in her expression that her sister Cassandra Austen had to burn almost three thousand letters written by Jane because they were too flamboyant and curt in their comments on the family and society. Jane grew up in a household dependent on relatives. The family was almost destitute. The norms of male relatives inheriting all the family wealth and resources were a wounding gap in Jane's development as a balanced personality, something she showed strongly in her very first novel *Sense and Sensibility* (1811). Jane felt the pain of desperation from an early life as she along with her sister, were called back from school at Oxford due to lack of funds for their education.

Jane grew up writing parodies of famous books in her time and life. She wrote a parody of the popular novel 'Novels of Sensibility' and called it 'Love and Friendship'. Another book she wrote was called *The History of England* written as a mockery of one with the similar name by Oliver Goldsmith.

Jane dipped her pen in the ink of her own personal life be it her almost dying from typhus in 1783 as Eleanor does in *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), or the constant dependence on relative for an existence. Austen herself once received a proposal—her only proposal, in fact—from a Collins-like man. His name was Harris Bigg-Wither, and she had known him since childhood. He wasn't a catch. (Caroline Austen, another of Jane's nieces, recalled him this way: "Very plain in person—awkward, and even uncouth in manner—nothing but his size to recommend him—he was a fine big man—but one need not look about for secret reasons to account for a young lady's not loving him.") All this happened in early December, 1802, a few weeks before Jane turned twenty-seven; Charlotte's age.

Upon giving this way of writing a deep a thought, one cannot help but ask, could it be that her most popular novel like *Pride and Prejudice* was written as a mocking commentary on the society of the times. Is it the voice of Jane filling up the gap in narratives that gives us a peak into the mind of the writer? The detail with which the inferiority of Elizabeth relatives is described, the gap in social standing between Elisabeth and Darcy emphasized so strongly by Lady Catherine De Burgh and the eventual help provided by Elizabeth's uncle in London in case of Lydia are clearly commentaries on the social norms and gaps between the rich and the trading class. One can easily find the hate of Caroline Bingley or Lady Catherine De Burgh based on the inferiority of Elizabeth relations, whose greatest sin off course, is to belong to the trading class. Karen Newman, a Jane Austen scholar, argues that Austen balanced economic importance with love to give us her concept of the ideal marriage situation:

“Austen exposes the fundamental discrepancy in her society between its avowed ideology of love and its implicit economic motivation. . . Her consistent use of economic language to talk about human relations and the many portraits of unsatisfactory marriages prevent us from dismissing her novels as romantic love stories in which Austen succumbs uncritically to the "rewards" her culture allotted women. “(695)

All through her Narratives, her minor female characters like Lucy Steel or Charlotte Lucas expose the plight of women who settle for transactional marriages, become speculators and predators, or become superfluous women who have left the marriage market and battle for personal significance and existence. These characters illustrate the ambiguity of value within the marriage market economy, exposing women's limited choices.

Without economic backing, affection turns to either apathy or dislike .Lydia and Wickham's manner of living, even when the restoration of peace dismissed them to a home, was unsettled in the extreme. “They were always moving from place to place in quest of a cheap situation, and always spending more than they ought. His affection for her soon sunk into indifference; hers lasted a little longer; and in spite of her youth and manners, she retained all the claims to reputation which her marriage had given her.” (395)

Affection alone, particularly blind affection, cannot lead to happiness. Austen shows us that it is only part of the formula, that other considerations such as money and respect are also needed. So ,could it be that it is Jane herself guised in the a character of Charlotte Lucas , an aging girl devoid of looks and of money who seems lost in a society obsessed with pedigree . Charlotte seemingly compromises on love by marrying Mr. Collins. Could it be a Jane Austen now a spinster at the time of writing *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) speaking though charlotte Lucas when she says,

"I am not romantic, you know; I never was. I ask only a comfortable home; and considering Mr. Collins' character, connection, and 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." (22.17)

It seems impossible that Elizabeth's friendship with Charlotte should be able to survive Mr. Collins, and yet they remain friends. Charlotte is still Charlotte. This lends Elizabeth a certain confidence. The core of a person doesn't change easily; and, conversely, a person can change a great deal, can navigate her way through extreme circumstances, and still remain herself. That is one of the most noteworthy aspects of Elizabeth's relationship with Darcy. It is a Dynamic relationship and the churning starts from when Elizabeth sees Pemberly.

We can see Elizabeth, before Charlotte's choice, was a bit of a fantasist; after it, she grows more realistic. Charlotte's marriage doesn't just sit there, inert; it plays a role in the plot. The critic Stuart Tave, in a classic essay on Austen called "Limitations and Definitions," describes the way it affects Elizabeth. Charlotte's marriage, he writes, pushes Elizabeth "to rethink what she has been doing, to understand better those people who have not acted as she expected they would."

Her own openness to Darcy derives, to a large degree, from her openness to Charlotte. It's because of Charlotte that Elizabeth permits herself that famous thought, when she looks across the valley at Darcy's estate: "To be mistress of Pemberley might be something!" And Charlotte's choice teaches Elizabeth other, more abstract lessons. One lesson is that there are many kinds of happiness. From Charlotte, who will always live an imperfect life, Elizabeth learns that imperfect things matter just as much as perfect ones. She learns a lesson through Charlotte that a woman needs to commit to her happiness and social status first and love may eventually follow if she makes the right choice. Based on this realization she slowly learns to love Darcy.

One could even say that Jane Austen's narratives are more inclined towards social classes and money matters than personal romances. Had Jane Austen been a romantic one could find at least one evidence of a romantic conversation. Why is it that in all of Jane Austen's works, there is no Love at first sight? Eleanor doesn't like Colonel Brandon (*Sense and Sensibility* 1811), Elizabeth hates Darcy (*Pride and Prejudice* 1813), Fanny Price goes through a crowd of lovers and suitors to ultimately settle for Edmund (*Mansfield Park* 1814), Emma doesn't fall for Mr. Knightly until everyone else has (*Emma* 1815), and Henry Tilney and Catherine find each other as a bland couple in the end (*Northanger Abbey* 1817). Had Jane been a romantic would it be too much

for lovers to fall madly in love at the very first sight in at least one of her novels? Actually in all of Jane's works the protagonist female is looking for a comfortable social and economic status, a place on the society, a voice. This voice had to be earned through matrimony. Jane speaks through Jane Bennett when she tells Elizabeth who cannot accept the idea of her friend marrying a man like Mr. Collins "When she is secure of him, there will be more leisure for falling in love as much as she chooses." (6.5-6)"

Jane writes not as a passionate writer but as a realist making compromises. More than a romantic it would not be wrong to call Jane Austen a feminist, way ahead of her times who was moving through a world meant for men. One can sense restlessness in her female characters like Elizabeth or Eleanor to reach their true place in society; something that could only be classified as passion in her own times.

To conclude Jane Austen's approach to romances can be termed practical and grounded. For nowhere do we see a Rochester shouting his passion or a Gabriel Oak fighting fires for his love. And yet no female Edwardian writer could achieve what Jane Austen achieved. For only she could pack tightly all these wonderful narratives in her world and present it to generations to come as a picture postcard from the past.

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