

Pride and Prejudice: Jane Austen's Moral Vision.

(B.A.Eng.Hons.Part-2, Paper-4)

Jane Austen is not a proclaimed moralist. Unlike Fielding, her aim is not to propagate the morality. She believes in art for the sake of art. She is the pioneer of the novels. Therefore, her plots are well-knit. Her main interest lies in irony and there is a hidden significance of morality as we come across her moral vision in her novels through irony.

Jane Austen is in a favour of social prosperity than individual. She upholds the

organic unity of society. She stresses that the duty of human beings owe to others, to society and maintains that individual desires have to be sub-ordinate to the large scale . Lydia Wickham elopement is passionate and irresponsible. It shows that how society's harmony is disrupted and how others' lives are ruined by the selfish act of the individual. On the other hand the marriage of Elizabeth and Darcy, Jane and Bingley bring happiness and stability to everyone, not simply to themselves.

She discusses individuals 'short comings'. Even the hero and heroine have no exception. Elizabeth blinds herself absurdly because of prejudice whereas Darcy is full of pride. "... tolerable but not handsome enough to tempt me."

But we can see that both learn and understand each other. Their pride and prejudice are vanished. But the shortcomings of the other characters are not changed. Mr. Bennet is careless and irresponsible man. Mrs. Bennet is vulgar and stupid. Charlotte is very much economic. Lydia is lusty and Wickham is a deceiver.

Society is divided into classes. “Pride and Prejudice” is an attempt to harmonize the two extremes of middle class – lower end and the top end – into one. Bingley’s marriage with Jane and Darcy’s with Elizabeth. It is her moral approach to rub the class distinction-line of society.

She also discusses the institution of family which is disturbed. The heads of Bennet

family are not mentally bound. This is a matchless couple. Their role as a parent is not active. The disadvantages of such an unsuitable marriage attend the daughters also. On the other hand Bingley family is betraying because there is no head for them but only guided by Darcy.

Jane Austen is concerned with the growth of an individual's moral personality measured by the most exacting standards of 18th century values. Popes dictum "know thyself" underlines the theme of her novel. The conclusion of her novel is always the achievement of self-respect and principal mean of such an achievement is a league of perfect sympathy with another, who is one's spiritual counterpart. Jane Austen traces Elizabeth's prejudice and her

anguished recognition of her own blind prejudice before she is united with Darcy in a marriage based on mutual respect, love and understanding. As she says, "How despicable have I acted! I, who have pride myself on my discernment! – I who have valued myself on my abilities."

In the end she says, "There can be no doubt of that. It is settled between us already that we are to be the happiest couple in the world."

Main theme of her novel is marriage. She tries to define good reasons for marriage and bad reasons for marriage. Her moral concern though unobtrusive, is ever-present. The marriage of Lydia-Wickham, Charlotte-Collins and of the Bennets serves

the show by their failure the prosperity of the Elizabeth-Darcy marriage.

There is corruption in landed class. Jane Austen reflects this problem in her novel also. The Bingley sisters hate the Bennet for their vulgarity but are themselves vulgar in their behaviour. Lady Catharine is equally vulgar and ill-bred.

Army men in her novel are only for flirtation. They come only for enjoyment. They have no love in them. Some of them are deceiver like Wickham who elopes with Lydia not for love but for money.

Then she discusses the degeneracy of clergy. Mr. Collins is a clergyman. He comes at Netherfield in search of life partner. But he is rejected by Bennet's daughters. Then he turns towards Charlotte. He has some

reason for marriage. "My reasons for marriage are, I think it right thing for every clergy (like me) in easy circumstances to set the example of matrimony in parish ..."

Jane Austen throws light on the materialism and economic concern of society. Charlotte is more concern with money than man. She is lusty. Her materialistic approach is judged by her remarks. "I am not romantic, you know, I never was. I ask only for a comfortable home." Collins also has materialistic mind. Mr. Wickham is always thinking about money. He elopes with Lydia only for money.

Pride and prejudice, is in fact, corresponding virtue. Pride leads to prejudice and prejudice invites pride. Darcy

is proud, at the beginning. As he says: "... my good opinion once lost is lost forever. "His first appearance is appallingly insolent and we tend to agree with Mrs. Bennet's complaint: "He walked her and he walked there, fancying so very great". Darcy's remarks prejudiced Elizabeth. At ball-party, when he firstly sees her, he says: "... tolerable but not handsome enough to tempt me." Wickham's biased account about Darcy increased the hatred of Elizabeth. But we can observe that both earn when they go through the process of self-realization. Then Elizabeth thinks that: "... Darcy was exactly the man, who in disposition and talents; would suit for her." We may say that Jane Austen's main concern was irony. She uses irony to shake

the major figures of their self-deception and expose the hypocrisy and pretentiousness, absurdity and insanity of some of her minor figures. It is definitely possible to deduce from her work a scheme of moral value. Andrew H. Wright rightly points out that irony in her hand is the instrument of a moral vision. Walter Allen rightly comments: "She is the most forthright moralist in English."

It was in hers, perhaps more – for in her hands irony is an extremely effective device for moral evaluation that exposes those defects in her society which still prevail in ours today.

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