

JANE AUSTEN'S ENGLISH SOCIETY

Dr. K. SANTHANA LAKSHMI, M.A.,M.Phil.,Ph.D.
ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF ENGLISH,
BHARATHIDASAN UNIVERSITY CONSTITUENT COLLEGE OF ARTS & SCIENCE,
NAGAPATTINAM – 611 1001.

ABSTRACT

Jane Austen (1775–1817) a renowned English novelist was born in the period preceded and followed by prolific literary productivity. True to the notion that literature mirrors life, Jane Austen's novels realistically portray middle class life in England in the eighteenth and the early nineteenth century.

Jane Austen presents the English society of her period in all its essence. She deals with all the familial and social concerns of both men and women of her days. She brings out all the aspects of her society which begins at home and stretches out to cover society, politics, education, gender, marriage, religion, profession and economy in her works. With a minute and penetrating social observation, she paints a realistic picture of the English society of which she was an integral part her entire life.

This paper tries to bring out the life of nineteenth century society mainly focussing on the life of a particular section of people who is popularly known as 'gentry'. The research also concentrates on the following aspects - their profession, class distinction and consciousness of social status.

KEYWORDS : SOCIETY, CLASS, MEN'S PROFESSION, STATUS, MONEY

Jane Austen (1775–1817) a renowned English novelist was born in the period preceded and followed by prolific literary productivity. The personality of the novelist might be shaped by both Augustan as well as the Romantic periods. The Romantic period which covers the later eighteenth and the earlier nineteenth centuries is noted for incessant wars and socio-political changes that chiefly influenced the lives of the people. The widespread social unrest swayed the physical, intellectual, economic and social spheres of life. True to the notion that literature mirrors life, Jane Austen's novels realistically portray middle class life in England in the eighteenth and the early nineteenth century.

Jane Austen presents the English society of her period in all its essence. She deals with all the familial and social concerns of women of her days. She brings out all the aspects of her society which begins at home and stretches out to cover society, politics, education, gender, marriage, religion, profession and economy. With a minute and penetrating social observation, she paints a realistic picture of the English society of which she was an integral part her entire life. David Daiches aptly says:

"The world which her (Jane Austen's) books present to us is essentially an eighteenth-century world in its habits, tastes and appearance She was describing, though she did not know it, the last generation of Englishmen and Englishwomen who could face life as they faced a minute, with cheerfulness, decorum and determination to go through the appropriate motions with grace, elegance – and enjoyment." (Daiches: 11)

A limited number of characters and a selected social segment served her purpose well. She felt more comfortable with such a simple design. The gentry take up a vital role in the social scale of her novels.

In spite of great social transformations like Industrial Revolution, the loss of American colonies, Napoleonic wars and the French Revolution, the everyday life of the bourgeoisie goes on unaffected. The advancement of technology does not disrupt the stately eighteenth century patterns of rural life. The effects of Industrial Revolution, with its economic and social repercussions, were sharply felt by the underprivileged labouring classes. Unrest was widespread; however, the great reforms that launched a new era of English political life did not come until later.

In England, during the age of revolution, the English middle and the upper classes or the "landed gentry" felt very secure in their righteousness. Their lives and experiences are presented in the novels of Jane Austen. The landed gentry, who earned their property, not through inheritance from their aristocratic

ancestors, but by purchasing it with their new wealth, had an essential role to play in the society of England. They bridged the aristocracy and the English middle class. A distinction is often made between the landed gentry, or the titled land owners who are the possessors of the same property for generations and many others who advance their claim to be considered as gentry by virtue of the fortune they had come to acquire as a result of trade and business. The emergence of this new class on the social scene is seen as a natural result of the industrial development of England during the last years of the Eighteenth century. However, this new gentry could not win full acceptance of its claims to equality of status with the older gentry. It took atleast two generations for them to mix up with the men of ancient descent.

Jane Austen concerned herself in portraying the landed gentry because she was born at Steventon, a country village in the heart of the rural England, in northern Hampshire. She lived her life in a world populated by country-gentry. Her role in the world is that of a good-looking and highly sociable young woman and much-loved maiden aunt very much liked by everyone. Her world is very small yet interesting. It comprises of rectory, country mansion, the small town, the professional circle, with rare sallies to Bath or Portsmouth or Lyme. These spots define her life and art. She needs just three or four families in a country-village to work with her plot.

The Austen family has a notable place in the gentry, the social class system in England. The gentry are the growing middle class who included the lower nobility and the bourgeoisie or the land owning middle class. The gentry are a wide class consisting of people with different fortunes. There were some with a vast wealth and others who existed at the lower end of the class. Following the word 'gentry', the men belonging to this class came to be called 'gentlemen'. A man who owns at least three hundred acres of property and lives off the money, he has earned from his land is allowed to call himself a gentleman. Nevertheless, businessmen, Anglican clergymen and officers of army and navy who did not own lands are also included in this the highly respectable social class.

"Mr. Martin may be the richest of the two, but he is undoubtedly her inferior as to rank in society. The sphere in which he moves is much above his. It would be degradation." (EM, p. 53)

Jane Austen brings out the vision of the social life of the landed gentry who are the in-betweens. The landed gentry generally do not have any high ambitions in their life. They spend lot of time in sporting, attending wedding balls, going picnic with relatives and friends. They enjoy a leisurely life within social class and among the different ranks of people in England. They hold a primary significance in English society and formed the centre Jane Austen's fictional world.

Jane Austen does not explore the aristocratic people who are above the landed gentry and the common folk who are below the gentry. She has no intention to go beyond the limit of gentry sphere. She differs from Fielding chiefly in focusing and visualizing the contemporary social life of the eighteenth century English middle class. There is a difference between the landed class gentry and new land owners. The landed gentry are the owners of estates for many generations. The new land owners hail the honour by their recent fortune made through trade and business in towns like Bristol and London. Though they have wealth they did not win the social recognition which is equivalent with the permanent landed gentry. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Bingley and Darcy have same education and tastes, but Bingley is considered inferior to Darcy as he belongs to the landed gentry while Bingley has no link with the ancestral gentry. Men generally wish to be recognized as gentleman. Lady Catherine de Bourgh tries to eliminate Elizabeth from Darcy's path saying,

"If you were sensible of your own good you would not wish to quit the sphere in which you have been brought up." (PP, p. 282)

Elizabeth answers proudly,

"In marrying your nephew I should not consider myself as quitting that sphere. He is gentlemen; I am a gentlemen's daughter: so far we are equal." (PP, p. 282)

Soldiers and naval officers arrived at these estates and shared their perilous adventures, heroism, courage and intelligence. One can compare a few journeys of a country gentleman to London in a year with a young

naval officer like Ulysses who has extensive experience of various people and places. Fanny Price's brother, an eighteen year old boy travels in the Mediterranean and the West Indian Seas. On hearing the description of William Price's adventures, Henry Crawford wishes to live like the young valet:

"His heart was warm, his fancy fired, and he felt the highest respect for a lad who, before he was twenty, had gone through such bodily hardships, and given such proofs of mind. The glory of heroism, of usefulness, of exertion, of endurance, made his own habits of selfish indulgence appear in shameful contrast; and he wished he had been a William Price, distinguishing himself and working his way to fortune and consequence with so much self-respect and happy ardour, instead of what he was." (MP, pp. 241-242)

Sir Walter Elliot says that in Navy "persons of obscure birth are brought unto undue distinction, raising men to honours which their fathers and grandfathers never dreamt of." (PE, p.24) Anne Elliot, protests, "the navy I think, who have done much for us, have at least an equal claim with any other set of men for all the comforts and all the privileges which any home can give." (PE, p.24) English nation seemed to owe great admiration and debt to its Navy.

Many critics believe that Jane Austen had a high regard for naval officers. Her admiration could have also arisen due to her brothers, Francis and Charles Austen who served in the Navy. Leonie Villard believes that Jane Austen's admiration for navy personnel and the patriotism was because of her fraternal affection. When compared to Captain Wentworth, Captain Harville has some unpleasant nature in him. He is an exception in Jane's Austen's creation of naval men in her works. She always moulds them as respectable and cultured people possessing good qualities and social manners.

"...he was more negligent of his family, his habits were worse, and his manners coarser, than she (Fanny) had been prepared for. He did not want abilities; but he had no curiosity, and no information beyond his profession. He read only the newspaper and the navy-list; he talked only of the dockyard, the harbor, spithead, and the Motherbank; he swore and he drank, he was dirty and gross. She had never been able to recall anything approaching to tenderness in his former treatment of herself. There had remained only a general impression of roughness and loudness; and now he scarcely ever noticed her, but to make her the object of a coarse joke." (MP, p. 318)

Jane Austen often deals with naval men with distinguished manners and abilities from good family background. She presents them when they are off duty or on leave. In the social hierarchy, the next character that Austen takes up is the clergy. The clergy men play a crucial part in Jane Austen's works more than the men from the Royal Navy. It is worth noting the fact that Jane Austen's father, her brother James and Henry were all clergymen. The Clergymen enjoyed a dignified social status and they had quality education and a noble birth. Although they are not rich, they lived in comfort. Clergymen were treated as equals in high classes. This social status made younger sons from good families opt for a religious life in the churches.

The moral precepts that we find scattered sporadically across the novels of Jane Austen have their source in the teachings of the novelist's father. In eighteenth century, the religious duty of clergyman was considered special due to various reasons. Initially, clergymen's post is thought to be a regular career or a profession. A man with good education possessing sound morals qualifies for it. Mary Crawford of *Mansfield Park* is a good instance of a clergyman living a comfortable life. The position of a vicar involves easy work and a decent income. A clergyman position is socially advantageous because he can start his family earlier than a naval officer, who has to wait for a considerable time to get sufficient income.

Rev. Philip Elton, the rector of Highbury is allowed in to the best society due to his position. He displays an extreme social objective by proposing to Emma Woodhouse. After his marriage with Augusta Hawkins, he sponsors the villagers and attempts to repel Emma with his pretentiousness. Despite his faults, he appears to be extraordinarily devoted to his profession than other clergymen like Edward Ferrars or Henry Tilney.

Mr. Collins in *Pride and Prejudice*, serves as a bad example of clergyman. He is submissive towards the authoritative, haughty towards the feeble, sententious and crooked. He belittles himself to Lady Catherine De Bourgh.

"Mr. Collins was employed in agreeing to everything her ladyship said, thanking her for her for every wish he won, and apologizing if he thought he won too many." (PP, p.162)

Edmund Bertram, younger son of Sir Thomas Bertram accepts a career in church joyfully. The elder son Edward Ferrars also goes to church. Clergymen of Jane's novels are men of the world and they have no religious zeal or love. Mr. Elton, a clergyman in *Emma* postpones his visit to poor people on seeing Emma and Harriet on their return visiting poor.

"The wants and sufferings of the poor family, however, were the first subject on meeting. He had been going to call on them. His visit he would now defer; but they had a very interesting parley about what could be done and should be done. Mr. Elton turned back to accompany them." (EM, p. 77)

Henry Tilney is absent from his parish most of the time and enjoys his holiday in the town of Bath. Edward Ferrars is well known for his intellectual and moral qualities. He witnesses the poor commitment of certain clergymen towards their work. He serves as a living proof of a well-defined career as a clergyman. Though his family preferred a profession in the army or the Royal Navy for him, he "always preferred the Church.". He observes:

"We never could agree in our choice of profession. I always preferred the church, as I still do. But that was not smart enough for my family. They recommended army. That was a great deal too smart for me. The law was allowed to be genteel enough; many young men, who had chambers in the Temple, made a very good appearance in the first circles, and drove about town in very knowing gigs. But I had no inclination for the law, even in this less abstruse study of it, which my family approved. As for the navy, it had fashion on its side, but I was too old when the subject was first started to enter it..." (SS, p.88)

At that time, Protestantism was the official religion in England. A clergyman did not have to study theology, because most of them simply inherited it from their parents or relations. The universities of Oxford and Cambridge were renowned like it is now because a university education was not the focus of a student. Dealings and connections were more helpful to qualify one for the function of a reverent than academic studies. Clergymen decided for themselves whether they wanted to limit their social lives for religious or ethical reasons. There were literally no social restrictions on them.

As the clergymen's profession is looked honourable by the society and the pleasures associated with it desirable, many young lads of England craved for it. In the early eighteenth century it thus became customary for young men to prefer a life as a clergyman. They are not sacred but wanted to lead luxurious life at the cost of others. Next to joining the Royal Navy, many young men of England preferred to become clergymen. When compared to Henry Fielding and Goldsmith, Jane Austen differs significantly in her portrayal of the clergyman. Her characters, Parson Adams and Trulliber testify this.

Mr. Collins in *Pride and Prejudice* appears polite and courteous. He puts on a display of reverence to Lady Catherine de Bourgh in order to enjoy her wealth and property. Rev. Philip Elton, Edmund Bertram and Edward Ferrars are also presented ironically as worldly men by Jane Austen with no religious zeal. Only in *Emma*, do we find the clergymen, Mr. Elton visiting the poor.

Everyone of the clergy's living was owned by a patron or lord. The value depended on the tithes from the religious community and the glebe, which belonged to him. The glebe was often under lease. If the patron did not want a priest's son to get the living, he could sell it. Dealing with these livings was not traditional, but is very common at this time. The income of a clergyman differs a lot on the dwelling allocated to him. A small, poor, rural parish dwelling in Steventon could worth only about hundred pound annually, whereas a good parish could be worth nearly thousand pounds. The allocation of the living and the benefits attached to it was in the hands of the local lord.

Judging people by their material possession is a common criterion that is found in the English society of country gentry in the late eighteenth century. In *Northanger Abbey*, many of the characters appear to project themselves socially based on their material wealth. They are preoccupied with the acquisition of wealth and

upkeep of material wealth. Mrs. Allen, for instance, is ever bothered about ripping her latest ball gown. After coming to Bath, Catherine and Isabella squander sometime around the town every day, looking at the window displays. Isabella constantly compares her apparel with those of the other women.

General Tilney in *Northanger Abbey* is shown as a highly materialistic person. He devotes his life for outdoing his wealthy peers in the size, scale and expense of estate. Upon her arrival to *Northanger Abbey*, Catherine is always asked to compare and judge General Tilney's possessions against Mr. Allen's. General Tilney solicits Catherine's praise as a measure of his success. He is the consummate punter and values people on account of their property.

But in Jane Austen there is no suggestion of inter-class marriage. Her novels rather suggest that social disparity militates against happiness in marriage. One should not be ambitious to marry out of his or her class. Dissuading Harriet Smith from accepting a young farmer of the neighbourhood as her husband, Emma says:

"A young farmer, whether on horseback or on foot, is the very last sort of person to raise my curiosity. The yeomanry are precisely the order of people with whom I feel I can have nothing to do. A degree or two lower, and a creditable appearance might interest me. I might hope to be useful to their families in some way or another. But a farmer can need none of my help, and is, therefore, in one sense, as much above my notice, as in every other he is below it."

(EM, p.24)

English society, as portrayed by Jane Austen, is divided into watertight compartments. There is no intermingling of classes. Different social groups stand distinctly apart each other, but their relationship is one of mutual help and not of conflict. The stability of social life, Jane Austen believed, depended on each class knowing its own position and having due respect for the position of others. The characters of Jane Austen wholeheartedly accept their position in society. They are pleased with their allocation. They accept life in its way. Therefore her novels never demand change in social life. Revolution is an inevitable result of deep-seated social discontent. Jane Austen had no fear of social upheaval. With everybody assured of his or her position in social life, English society had a degree of stability that was unthinkable elsewhere.

Jane Austen's writing appears to criticise the snobbish attitudes of men and women of her times. As established by her famous novels it can be seen that Austen is humanist at heart than a satirist. Her humour is gentle and it is fortified with real affection and concern for her characters and their foibles.

WORKS CITED

- * Austen Jane, *The greatest Works of Jane Austen*, Maple Press Pvt. Ltd, 2014. Print.
- * Austen Jane, *Sense and Sensibility*, Peacock Books, 2014. Print.
- * Austen Jane, *Pride and Prejudice*, Peacock Books, 2014. Print.
- * Austen Jane, *Pride and Prejudice*, Orient Black Swan, 2008. Print.
- * Austen Jane, *Pride and Prejudice*, Penn State Electronic Classics Series Publication
- * Austen Jane, *Emma*, Peacock Books, 2012. Print.
- * Austen Jane, *Mansfield Park*, Rupa & Co., 2010. Print.
- * Austen Jane, *Northanger Abbey*, Surjeet Publications, 2006. Print.
- * Austen Jane, *Persuasion*, Surjeet Publications, 1997. Print.
- * Austen-Leigh, William and Richard Arthur Austen-Leigh. *Jane Austen, her life and letters: a family record*, Smith, Elder & Co., 1913. Print.
- * Daiches, David. "Jane Austen, Karl Marx, and the Aristocratic Dance", *American Scholar*. (1948:Summer