Abstract

Jane Austen is the English novelist generally credited with first giving the novel its modern character through her treatment of the details of everyday life in provincial English middle-class society. Being a woman and a debutant writer, Austen suffered her own share of tribulation to get the novel published. When Jane Austen was born the classical age had passed away. Formality in art, manners and ideas had given place to something which was emotional, imaginative and spontaneous. Though Jane Austen lived during the Romantic age, her works are highly influenced by the Classical age. The objective of the paper is to make a critical study on the topic, Age of Reason carried over in the works of Jane Austen. Her most important works Pride and Prejudice and Emma are analysed here and evaluated.

1. Introduction

Jane Austen is the last exquisite blossom of the eighteenth century. Though she was born in the age of Wordsworth and Scott, she is essentially classical in spirit as well as in form. She shares unquestionably the leading qualities of the classical age. That positive and realistic almost matter of fact temper that characterised the eighteenth century was essentially hers. She is classical in more than one sense. Her style is ironical, simple and witty. Her sentences are precise, clear, simple, balanced, yet refined and lively. Her attitude and approach to life are classical. By temperament and training she belongs to her austere and sedate eighteenth century. She shared with the classical poets and prose writers the qualities of wit and satire. She lived in a period which is visionary, fanciful and mystic but she was worldly, matter-of-fact and realistic. In an
age which was over flooded with emotions and visions she remains calm and cold. She was tranquil by the turmoil of French Revolution and Napoleonic wars. There are many classical elements in Jane Austen’s works.

2. Objective

The main objective of this paper is to make a critical study on the topic, Age of Reason carried over in the works of Jane Austen. Though Jane Austen lived during the Romantic age, her works are highly influenced by the Classical age. Her most important works Pride and Prejudice and Emma are analysed here and evaluated in this paper.

3. Reason

Jane Austen despises gush of emotions and lays stress on reason. She distrusts sensibility and worships common sense. In almost all her novels she denounces spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings. Her watchword is Reason rather than Emotion. She craves for prudence rather than unbridled feelings. She believes in emotions recollected in tranquillity. She ridicules her heroines who believe in the first impressions of their heart un-corrected by reason, observation and experience. She ridicules Lydia and Collins in Pride and Prejudice because they cannot restrain their feelings and passion. She ridicules all those heroines who take pride in unbridled emotions, unrestrained sensibility and take life to be adventurous and romantic. Elizabeth, the heroine of Pride and Prejudice, is mocked by Austen because she trusts the first impressions of her heart and she does not correct it by mature observations. She mocks Emma because she is complacently overconfident about reading the characters of others. She believes in her first impressions about others without correcting them by observation.

Romance

Jane Austen does not approve of youthful romance. Instead of expressing impulsive emotion directly, she traces brilliantly the effect of emotion, the way it heats a situation, modifies character; but she expresses it only by implication. She is practical realist and discourages romantic imprudence. Austen understands the working of love, but love and romance do not rouse her enthusiasm. To her marriage is more important than romance. The theme of her novels is to search a suitable and eligible husband for her heroines. She is not aware of the thrills of romance and hence she does not describe about it in her novels. She is a matter of fact utilitarian in the realm of love and marriage. The follies and vanity of Elizabeth and Emma in Pride and Prejudice and Emma respectively are thoroughly criticized by Jane Austen because they act on first impressions and impulse without guiding their actions by observation and common sense.

Nature

Unlike the romantics, she is indifferent to Nature. The rocks, streams, forests and castle which we find in the pages of Wordsworth and Scott are conspicuous by their absence in her novels. Though she was very fond of the country scenery, it plays no
great part in her novels. In her novels very vaguely she describes about nature. She is so much engrossed in her characters that she remains indifferent to the charms of nature. The rocks and the streams, the forests and the birds, which are the stuff of the romantic poets, do not find any place in her novels. Here and there we may find some glimpses, and that is all. There is a reference in *Pride and Prejudice* to the beauty of Pemberley woods. But she does not let us see the beauty of the woods by describing about it in detail. She is completely absorbed in human affairs and hence gives least importance to background sceneries. Jane Austen is closer to Cowper and Pope than to Scott, Shelley and Wordsworth. She is not mystic or a visionary like the romantic but like Pope, she believes that the proper study of mankind is man.

**Characterisation**

By the magic of her art Jane Austen has transformed the common things of real life into interesting creatures. Her characters are real, lively and life-like. The leading characters in her novels are always in the process of development, and therefore they are dynamic and round rather than flat. They are eternal and fresh because they have a life of their own. She never repeats the nature of her characters and never idealizes them. She has a remarkable understanding of human nature and can penetrate to the spring of the action. The result is that her characters are not flat, vague or false but psychologically convincing. There is no wonder then that she has often been compared to Shakespeare in the art of characterization, She possess the Shakespearian gift of individualizing her characters so that they look more real than our next-door neighbour.

She does not write of simple primitive souls and of poor men like Leech-gatherers stripped of conventions and artificiality. She can never express romantic sentiments as love may be found in huts where poor men live. She does not draw her characters from humble life and has no sympathy with them. Her characters come from upper middle class society and she knows nothing of the romantic idea that civilization is the fall of man from some paradise state of nature. It is civilization which she prizes. She has discarded all ranks above that of the baronet, and below the lowest middle class. *Pride and Prejudice*, for example is exclusively concerned with one class of people who never come in contact with anyone outside their narrow range of outlook. By subtle means, the reader is made aware of the attitude of these upper class gentlemen to the new emergent industrialists for whom they have a great contempt. Her touchstones by which she distinguishes the good from the bad are taste and sense-aspects of a civilized world. She has again, unlike the romantics, no love for children.

**Realist**

Jane Austen is an unwavering realist. The world of her novels are real and interesting, very much like our own. She has painted only those scenes which she has seen herself. Her heroes and heroines fall in love and are married as we do. No unexpected turn of events happen in her novels. She has described about people that we shall meet in every respectable house in London. She relates such incidents described in
her works probably might have happened to half the families in England. A nostalgic suggestion of the elegancies of a leisured age could be seen in her novels. Her dialogues reveal great skill in the constant mingling of the lively and intelligent with the common place and stupid. She can use abstraction freely. Her sentences can be carefully balanced. It is her tradition to naturally employ rhetorical repetition.

**Moralist**

Though she is a pure artist and does not moralise consciously, yet she is a moralist. Jane Austen does not trust the first impressions of heart without being matured by the judgment of mind. Elizabeth and Emma discover painfully that they have been committing mistakes about themselves and about others. The cause of the deception lies within their hearts. The subject matter of *Emma* is the self-deception of vanity. Emma discovers that she was blind to the reality because of her vanity into understanding others. She is spoiled by match-making. *Pride and Prejudice* deals with the folly of trusting first impressions uncorrected by mature observations. Elizabeth discovers that she has courted ignorance by liking Wickham and driving reason away by disliking Darcy. The theme of disillusionment and awakening or revelation is found in almost all the novels. Though we should not trust our first impressions, it is always better to follow the direction of one’s own heart than to be swayed by the opinions and advice of others. She upholds reason in her novels. She has used the abstract nouns of the classical English moralists unblushingly and uncompromisingly. Some of them are good sense, contentment, impropriety, ignorance, reason and indelicacy. These are the concepts by which she grasps the world.

Jane Austen was not a moralist like Johnson. She did not make it her business to preach. She was a critical observer of life. What we find in her novels is the process of education and experience. In *Emma* and *Pride and Prejudice* experiences teach that first impressions should not be trusted. She is a practical realist. She thought of love and marriage as intensely as the romantics. But she never romanticized love and never glorified the emotionalism. She lays stress on self-control and self-respect qualities which are classical.

4. **Conclusion**

Thus in spirit and temper Jane Austen is classical. She is not only unromantic but also sometimes anti-romantic. Classical in her attitude to characterization, she eschews the mystery of half-lights as much as the slovenliness of blurred outlines. She loves intricacy so that she may delineate with the clearness of a mosaic. A soul of goodness is never suggested in her evil things. She distinguishes characters lucidly but does not show latent affinities. Jane Austen felt herself outlandish in the Romantic age. Her natural affinities are with Pope and Johnson. In an age of ideals, visions and emancipations she stands aside and muses with a calm detachment. To conclude, though Jane Austen lived during the time when Romanticism was in full swing, she had the classical temperament, and had more kinship with the ‘age of good sense’.
5. References


