

Preface and Acknowledgements

To grasp the full meaning of the various incidents incorporated in the Austen novels, it is important to understand the world of the novelist. In general we can see that it was a period of such a nature as it gave way to a time of unimaginative changes. The changes had their due impact on the novelist as well as evinced in her attitude towards life and activities of the people of her time. Jane Austen was eminently fitted to take her place in an age of transition (late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries). While she helped to keep alive the former excellences, she did nothing to retard the processes of new birth. In the midst of a period restless, curious and impassioned, she preserved her faith in moderation and discipline. An insight into her novels reveals the truth that in her short lifetime, Jane Austen saw some of the assumptions on the complexities of family life and the difficulties of personal life in the society being questioned and partly altered by a change of feeling in her own class. Her attitude towards these changes has nicely been projected through her works. Therefore, her novels are

strictly and fundamentally the reflections of these changes to which the novelist responded from a radical's viewpoint.

The period between 1775-1817, the span of Jane Austen's life was punctuated by challenges to the traditional hierarchy of English class society and as a consequence, to conventional social roles and responsibilities. In England, the decisive cause of this change was not just the French Revolution but the more subtle, more gradual dissemination of the values and behaviour associated with Capitalism—first agrarian capitalism in the mid and late eighteenth century, then in the early nineteenth century industrial capitalism as money made itself felt in investment and capital return.

Jane Austen was constantly a critic of the society she had to live in and that she was concerned in her novels to discover how it could be altered for the individual's greater interest or happiness yet without sacrificing the benefits the individuals received from being a member of a high culture. We can, however, examine through her novels her changing attitude to the theory of society current in her youth and her response to the radical social changes

she lived through. Indeed, her novels are the results of the stimulus, which these ideas, widely circulated and discussed, provided.

When grown up, Jane Austen was fully aware of the eighteenth century social attitudes and conventions. She also experienced the extensive changes in social life that marked the advent of Regency period and the distinctive modes of thinking and life-style that age brought about. These changes were not merely of dress, furniture and architecture- the externals of social life, they were the result, and the expressions of changes in the very idea of society and of the individual's relation to it; changes at the time were so evident and so widely discussed that the novelist could assume a knowledge of them in her readers. Again, really speaking, each Austen novel is just a step forward in an argument or debate that the novelist has undertaken. In *Persuasion* she is found occupying the opposite position from the one she had started with (in *Sense And Sensibility*).

A close examination of her novels from the first onwards reveals that though Jane Austen there shows a desire to

find reasons for accepting the inherited social form, she was dissatisfied with it and is, through all her novels, a consistent critic of the society she lived in. She was concerned; so to speak, to discover how it could be altered for the individual's greater happiness yet without sacrificing the valuable benefits each received from being a member of a high or aristocratic culture. The Regency period was an age of optimism and social relaxation and this challenge to the eighteenth century values provided Jane Austen with her theme and subject matter.

In her novels it is also found that Jane Austen was too intelligent to endorse unconditionally all departures from the old pattern of conduct and she had misgivings about the new forms of Regency man and woman who appear in her *Mansfield Park* as Crawford brother and sister and are played off against both the older generation and two examples of the old fashioned younger generation (Edmund Bertram and Fanny Price). It is this delicate and responsible work of scrutiny and dramatized discussion that puts Jane Austen into the same class of novelists as George Eliot, Dickens and Henry James.

The revolution that came about in social and cultural aspects of life was given vent to by Jane Austen in her attempt to establish her radical thoughts in the pages of the novels. In *Emma* the realistic picture of the lovely family life surely imparts a totally different conception of family life from the old style, one prevailing in all the Austen novels up to *Mansfield Park*. The tender and valuable natural family feelings have evidently been released and are seen to co-exist with humour - the child resting its head against its father's knee so confidently and the young husband gazing adoringly at his wife who is playing the harp. The picture is decidedly 'cheerful', one of the Regency aspirations which differentiated it so from the eighteenth century. From the two pictures just referred to, alone we can see that the movement of civilization had made a radical change in the family life and social habits of even the highest class, a change that is charted in its various manifestations from *Sense And Sensibility* to *Emma* and *Persuasion*. The changes that the Regency introduced in its architecture, grounds, interior decoration and furniture were all in accordance with desire for a new kind of home and family life and were deliberately worked out, not achieved by accident or instinct or gradual change. In

its speed and extent it amounted to a revolution through recognition of the demand for emancipation from the tyranny of eighteenth century society. Jane Austen has been quite successful in her delineation of the pictures of changes affecting the lives of the people and this she has done through her immortal literary works- her novels.

In preparing this dissertation I have gone deep into numerous critical books on Jane Austen by eminent critics and scholars to whom I freely acknowledge my indebtedness. I have, with a clear sense of gratitude, referred to them in the Bibliography appended to the dissertation at the end. By all means, I take this opportunity to express my whole-hearted respect and gratitude to my Supervisor Dr. Girindra Narayan Roy, Reader in the Department of English, University of North Bengal as he guided and corrected me in my venture over a period of five years, actually I owe more than I can express. Without his help and guidance this dissertation would not have been a reality. I also took advice from my teacher Dr. B .K. Banerjee, Professor in the Department of English in the University. My respect is also there for all my teachers who taught me at different levels of my academic pursuits. I also fondly remember the co-

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