

Jane Austen novels Emerging Social Patterns Visa-Vis Social Mobility

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Abstract- Jane Austen's novels present a classic example of social mobility. Seen in her novels is change of culture, exposure to a new culture, a new set of values, virtues or morality. The novelist uses satire to poke fun at the behavior of some class-conscious characters. Changes in the domestic life of the people also find a place in the novels, but the change was primarily in middle class families. The most potent agent of this change was marriage. Women being dependent on their father before marriage and on their husbands after it, marriage was the most important event in the life of women to make or mar their future. The choice of a wealthy life-partner was therefore, necessary for their social security. Thus, it is that the most popular novel of Jane Austen begins with the subject of marriage. The paper presents picture of rural life in Jane Austen's novels, the Jane Austen's world being a small world, the world of a village or country town. Usually, the lives of only three or families dwelt upon. Of course the countryside and the scenes there find a prominent place. The paper takes up the emerging social patterns in regards to social mobility. Marriage and family being the most powerful agents of the social changes in the society Jane Austen was familiar with, the novelist dwells at length on these two only, to the exclusion of other agents.

Key Words- Social Mobility, culture, exposer, values, virtues, morality, satire, class-conscious, domestic life, potent agent, dependent, marriage, wealthy, traditional, social set-up, countryside, prominent

Purpose / Objectives

An attempt has been made in the following pages to bring into focus the state of social life in the times of Jane Austen and the agents that were effecting changes in the traditional social set-up of the Eighteenth century England.

I. INTRODUCTION

The novels of Jane Austen show the change from the old order to the new, from the traditional world of the eighteenth to the threshold of the modern world, beginning with the advent of the nineteenth century. The difference between her and the earlier novelists, like Daniel Defoe or Richardson or even Fielding for all his picture of eighteenth century life, lies in the fact that while the earlier novelists were not individual-centered, the values not following out of the characters in Jane Austen it is the comment of the novelist in the form of ironic presentation that sets the tone. For instance in Mansfield Park, The arrival of the heroine to the Mansfield estate sets the moral tone of the novel. It is the heroine that becomes the moral criterion, something that was to develop further in the nineteenth century.

Jane Austen represents this change from the eighteenth century novelists evaluation of a character against an absolute morality to evaluation of character from the values emerging out of her or his own actions.

It is a matter of much interest to notice that Jane Austen was not unaware of the changes that were going on in the society of her times. One major agent of social mobility was the institution of marriage. Though not married herself, Jane Austen shows remarkable insight into the institution of marriage and to bring out its importance in the social context of her times.

Marriage is regarded as the origin of change in her novels. As Julia Brown states "her subject is marriage, or how changes in the life of the society are brought about through selective mating"¹. Though examples of this mobility through marriage can be noted. In *Pride and Prejudice* Elizabeth attracts other members of her family to Pemberley and establishes a new family centre there. In *Emma*, the hero, Frank Churchill, moves into the heroine's environment and becomes a kind of father to her own father.

In every novel of Jane Austen changes are presented as taking place because of marriage. The great estates of Norland Park and Kellynch Hall change hands in the course of their respective novels, while Mansfield Park witnesses the slow infiltration of the lower middle class Price family.

It has been observed that the apparent stability of class position in the society of Jane Austen's time was an illusion as the process of change was slow through marriage. But marriages also brought about conflict. This conflict was between marriages of convenience and marriages of feeling. Sometimes, marriages brought about respectability apart from changing the social status of the individual.

Jane Austen was acute aware of the changes being brought about by changes in the institution of marriage. This makes her a dynamic social analyst. For instance, she portrays the shift from a tradition - directed to an inner directed society. She shows how social climbing is done by characters, either through marriage or in dubious other

ways, adopting the language of gentility, without, interestingly enough, adopting the behaviour that was required of genteel people. This discrepancy becomes the basis of much of Jane Austen's irony. In *Mansfield Park*, for instance, this ability, upward though, is captured in the very first page of the novel. The novelist says: About thirty years ago, Miss Maria Ward of Huntington, with only seven thousand pounds, had the good luck to captivate sir Thomas Bertram, of Mansfield Park in the county of Northampton, and to be there raised to the rank of a baronet's lady, with all the comforts and consequences of an handsome house and large income..... She had two sisters to be benefited by her elevation; and such of their acquaintance as though Miss Ward and Miss Frances quite as handsome as Miss Maria, did not scruple to predict their marrying with almost equal advantage.

While marriage is shown to be bringing about change in status, thus effecting social mobility, Jane Austen also shows how the economic status of people and families was being adversely affected too. For instance, the gentry were beginning to experience a state of financial decline during the close of the eighteenth century, that is at the time Jane Austen was maturing. The reason for this was the increase in population, particularly in urban population. This threatened the traditions of the small gentry. For instance, in *Mansfield Park* the gentry resists urban values, because these went against their interests.

Jane Austen also shows how there was a breakdown of the old social structure. The poorer classes were rising in prosperity because of changes in the economic structure and the coming in of industries and new ways of earning money. The lower middle class was also showing an upward movement, instanced by the rise in fortune and status of the Price children.

II. DISCUSSION

It is commonly held that Jane Austen was ignorant of the "great world", of history, poverty and royalty, and that her ignorance dictated her choice of a domestic subject. To many readers, the idea of social change would seem inconsistent with Jane Austen's concerns. As the first great woman author in England, Jane Austen gave meaning to domesticity for the first time in English fiction. Her novels are the first to fully assert the cultural significance of marriage and family, their role in social and moral change.

The picture of ordinary, middle-class domestic life of nineteenth-century England is not merely a convenient background for a comedy of manners and values, meant to teach us the limitations of our own lives. It constitutes, rather, a foreground of social and moral change conceived with an irony that accurately reflects its tensions.

All the Jane Austen's novels end in marriage, "the origin of change." "Matrimony, as the origin of change, ..."1. Her subject is marriage, or how changes in the life of the society are brought about through selective mating. The parties, picnics and country dances are the preparatory rites of marriage, and in their complex discriminations an ethic of selection is formed. To Jane Austen, the process of selection and marriage required no justification, because the individual lived in the society and accepted it as the environment of his expression, his actions had social significance.

Jane Austen believed that the marriage of ordinary persons is full of meaning and consequence. To her, the selection of a spouse is of crucial importance to the individual and society, for the individual is the agent of a social purpose, which is the moral education of the children, and of younger persons in general children who in their turn will rear and educate their own children. The wisdom of selection is imperative, for this one act contains the lessons of the past and the hopes of the future. Jane Austen's novels, then, have much to do with the possibilities inherent in ordinary existence. In her novels the choice of a husband is bound up with all sorts of actual difficulties, in the heroine's decisions about herself and her future and her adult posture. The first encounters with her future husband mark the beginning of the heroine's moral growth and her marriage is a stage in this growth.

In her later novels, Jane Austen does make large connections with the events and conditions of the time; Jane Austen carefully underplays them, and her last novel remains outwardly as unambitious as the first. She alternates between two structures, comedy and satire. The form of the ironic comedies (*Northanger Abbey*, *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma*) has its source in the social situation of the eighteenth century. The works of satiric realism (*Sense and Sensibility*, *Mansfield Park* and *Persuasion*) look forward to a nineteenth century social situation. Austen's vacillation between these two structures and her attempt to merge them do not reflect a mere involvement with form. On the contrary, they show that a fundamental shift in human relations was taking place during Jane Austen's life time.

Despite this structural contrast, Austen's novels are basically alike in their representation of social life. Each makes domestic life its centre. Without faith in either providence or individual will, she chooses concrete social relations as the place to make an argument. This argument has to do with the autonomy, the self generating capacity of social relations in themselves in particular, the power of marriage to bring together inner and outer experience.

All her novels involve three generations: past, present and the future. In the decisions of the present the future is implied. *Pride and Prejudice* opens with a view of the parent generation and closes with a glimpse of the future

married life of Elizabeth and Darcy, with Georgiana Darcy as surrogate daughter. In the last words of the novels is a recognition of the effect of this new marriage on Georgiana: 'Her mind received knowledge which had never fallen in her way before'². The moral centre of the novel lies in the connection between the parent generation and the present generation. In the choice of spouse, the men and women of the present either comprehend the lessons of the past or perpetuate its defects. Part of the problem is that the present generation unwittingly inherits the temperamental and moral deficiencies of its parents. Elizabeth possesses her father's ironic complacency. Until she acknowledges this inheritance, she is unable to see clearly enough to make an adult choice of husband and yet I meant to be uncommonly clever in taking so decided a dislike to him, without any reason. It is such a spur to one's genius, such an opening for wit to have a dislike of that kind. One may be continuously abusive without saying anything just, but one cannot be always laughing at a man without now and then stumbling on something witty'³. The psychological tension of character in Jane Austen is frequently based on the battle between will and origin. The sources of personality so constant a concern in *Mansfield Park*, are almost always understood by means of some complex interaction of factors; sex, status within the family, physical appearance, inherited temperament, and education all act on one another to produce a certain moral disposition.

Family is the abiding reality of Austen's world, relations within families and, through marriage, relations between them. Family is the opening concern of every novel except *Emma* and *Northanger Abbey*. The first chapter of *Pride and Prejudice* reveals the parents of the generation. Not only are the parents the psychological and moral source of their daughter's personalities, they also set the example of adult hood and marriage for them.

The social philosophy that underlies all her work is founded on this belief in the co-operative end of human life. Selection of spouse is the controlling act for both sexes in the novels because it represents the vital opportunity for individuals to co-operative with one another and to adjust and improve their existence.

In Jane Austen novels marriage confers a moral status upon the couple that gives the responsibility for younger persons in general. Georgiana Darcy can live with her brother at the close of the novel because he is married. Lydia can go to Brighton with Mrs. Forster because Mrs. Forster is recently married. The case of unmarried young people is an important issue at some point in the novels. Serious problems frequently result from deficient protection. The power to direct and guide younger members of society as well as one's own children makes responsible marriages a social and moral necessity. Perhaps more significantly, surrogate parents are necessary in society because natural parents are dead (Lady Russell takes Lady Elliot's place) or, more frequently, deficient (Mrs. Gardiner takes Mrs. Bennet's place).

Marriage has historically performed a complex function in feminine destiny: It establishes economic security and social status, through children. It provides a profession less class with an occupation that is potentially meaningful to the individual and a practical necessity to the society, it answers the psychic need of any vulnerable social group for a securely identified place in the universe. The state of marriage was not only essential to tolerable existence for most women, it was, for the English girl of Jane Austen's day, "the one time in her life when her destiny lay not in her family's hands, or in her husband's, but to a significant degree in her own. Ironically, Jane Austen's novels show that the period of courtship was the least frivolous period of a woman's life, the one moment in which her entire future-social, emotional, and economic was decided.

To women before this century sexuality could have no exclusive significance. No social provision was made for women who bore children outside of marriage, let alone for illegitimate children. It is understandable that the sexual act was regarded as a potential as well as an actual experience, a complicated and outside of marriage, dangerous undertaking. As second-class citizens the women cannot afford any considerable degree of passion. And this passion led to bad marriages.

In the society Jane Austen wrote about, marriage truly was the origin of change. The gentry and its land were highly mobile. Marriages made them so. In the early nineteenth century the nexus of social change was to be found in the lower and upper gentry, not in the aristocracy.

The six novels of Jane Austen also reveal historical changes in the institution of marriage, as a comparison of the marriages of Marianne Dash Wood and Anne Elliot shows. Through marriage, Marianne finds herself, "a wife, the mistress of a family, and the patroness of a village", at the Delaford estate⁴. By contrast, Anne Elliot's future is extremely uncertain. She has no estate and no village within which to place herself, and her husband's profession must "Pay the tax of quick alarm"⁵. Anne and Captain Wentworth have only each other. The only successful marriage portrayed in *Persuasion* is the appealing.

The great estates of Norland Park and Kellynch Hall change hands in the course of their respective novels, and *Mansfield Park* witnesses the slow infiltration of the lower-middle-class price family. *Pride and Prejudice* opens with the news "Netherfield Park is let out at last," to a nouveau riche from the north who Mrs. Bennet hopes will marry one of her daughters. If Mr. Bennet dies before the daughters are married, they will find themselves without a home and accustomed income, in circumstances very similar to those of the Dashwoods at the opening of *Sense and*

Sensibility: dependent on the chance liberality of a person of their class with a cottage to rent, if not in even worse straits. In Emma, the well born Miss Bates has dropped to a barely genteel poverty, while the heroine's governess has risen to be mistress of an estate. The apparent stability of class position created by the slowness of change through marriage and the extraordinary stability of class character, resulting from the chameleon-like adaptability of new families.

Experienced from within, this mobility through marriage took the form of a conflict between marriages of convenience and marriages of feeling. Alliances through marriage were the primary means by which the gentry kept itself afloat.

At the same time, however, forces were at work to counter the system of material alliances. Arranged marriages in England had been under attack for some time. The institution of marriage had changed greatly over the previous two centuries because of the influences of Protestant thought. The exaltation of marriage as an honorable state, as one not inferior to celibacy, and the emphasis on companionship that went with this exaltation led to an increase in young people's freedom to choose their own partners. We witness this change in Austen's novels. Every heroine except Emma Woodhouse must contend with the vagrancy toward moneyed alliances in her society. At the same time, each heroine is aware of some freedom of personal choice.

Broadly stated, the structure of Austen's novels records the shift from a tradition directed to an inner-directed society. There is more to this familiar generalization than may at first appear. They may indeed account for it and for the fact of her female authorship as well, the effect of historical changes on the lives of women in particular was prodigious. This is not to say that the increased freedom of choice in love and marriage did not affect men. Austen shows its effect on Darcy to be profound. Yet that effect is limited by the sheer plurality of his choices and opportunities in life, already there and (because of the increase in male professions) always increasing. The changes in the institution of marriage were however, to alter the situation of women's self-concept. The increased freedom of choice in marriage led to an emotional awakening in women that was revolutionary, it was the internal force behind the feminist movement of the early nineteenth century.

Austen's awareness of these changes makes her social analysis so dynamic. In Mansfield Park she portrays the shift from a tradition-directed to an inner-directed society with uncompromising irony. "The social form is benevolent, although the observance of it is vacant - and that contradiction is the scene's message, for it is precisely because of persons such as Lady Middleton (possessed of a 'cold-hearted selfishness') that rules are established. The social form that provides a disguise for Willoughby's cruelty also provides a protection for Marianne in her misery. This is the paradox of civilized life, felt in all Austen novels: society is a protection as well as a barrier between the self and the world. Just as table manners were originally established to allow people to eat together and later became party to the minutiae of social divisions, the social forms in Jane Austen are perceived as essentially tolerant, designed to give breathing space to the individual existing with others, even though potentially intolerant and capable of being used to isolate and suffocate him"⁶.

Like the perception of space, the perception of time in *Pride and Prejudice* is defined (equally) internally. Literal time is a few months, just long enough for the psychic distance of three generations through exposing the actions of the central generation. Austen's time is an eternal present, which encloses in its immediate alterations both the past and future. The individual is determined by his past, yet the very existence of this influence ensures the power of his will to affect the next generation. For this reason the choice of mate is the crucial act of life in *Pride and Prejudice*, the one most capable of effecting change and justifying hope.

Marriage of course, produces in great numbers, other chief acts of life: birth, initiation and once again, mating and marriage. The first responsibility of parents is to educate and prepare their offspring for participation in this most central process so that they will harm neither themselves nor others. Mr. and Mrs. Bennet are guilty of not preparing Lydia for mature initiation into this rite. As a result, her marriage is emotionally vacant and economically irresponsible.

Pride and Prejudice opens with the miscomprehensions and defects of a neighbourhood and a married couple, Mansfield Park opens with the spiritual condition of the gentry at the close of the eighteenth century. Mansfield Park envisions a world that struggles to renew itself, fails and finally succeeds minimally. It is a world that is in decline from the outset. The Mansfield estate itself is financially dependent on the colonial holdings in Antigua and no longer able to support itself. And the class described in the novel has failed to educate its young to receive their moral and material inheritance. The eldest son is a selfish and idle spendthrift, content to cheat his brother out of a future income, the daughters are indulged in, careless, egotistical. The arrival of the poor relation, Fanny Price, and the suffering she endures remain the only hope among many false hopes, for a spiritual regeneration of this world.

At the close of the eighteenth century, the gentry was beginning to experience the financial decline that would gather force through the century. The increase in population particularly in urban population threatened the traditions of the relatively small gentry. In Mansfield Park we witness the gentry's resistance to urban values. The weakening of

Christian orthodoxy is suggested during the visit to Sotherton's unused Chapel, which only a century before saw the entire household gather regularly for the family prayer. The gradual breakdown of a social structure of fixed classes is realized in the plot of the novel, which includes the rise to prosperity of the poor, lower-middle-class Price children. The challenge to traditional rights and duties of the gentry is felt in several spheres, Maria Bertram is numb (without feeling) to any sense of duty in her role as mistress of an old estate. (Marriage is no longer viewed as a social act, but as a commercial one). Mr. Rushworth does not feel any more inclined to oversee his estate than does Henry Crawford's, who rarely returns to Everingham. The effect of Crawford's absence is hinted when he describes how on his return, he found several families to be badly off. The economic organization of the village agriculture was changing generally because of its inability to remain self-sufficient.

All of these changes in the economic and social life of the nation are registered in the personal lives of the characters. Yet the personal life is not viewed merely as the passive receiver of exterior influences, the real crisis of the novel has to do with an interior failure- the failure of the individual human spirit to renew itself.

The uncertainty of mind, and hence the self scrutiny and melancholy that must arise from rapid changes in so many spheres of life is easily understood. In a time of change people feel unmoored and are more prey to their own irrationalities.

The desperation with which Fanny clings to an ideal conception of Mansfield reveals her conviction that this only remaining integrity cannot risk infection. The origin of this emerging concept of home is explained by Walter Houghton as a reorientation of a masculine attitude. In the eighteenth century the coffee house had often been the centre of masculine social life, but in the nineteenth century "men's life is more domestic, Mill wrote, because the wives became more than their husbands equals in education"⁷.

The desire for improvements at Sotherton reveals a craving for a new order of environment and the impulse to extinguish the old environment. The play acting represents a yearning for a new order of personality and a desire for the extinction of the old personality. In its unlikely and changing combinations, the catalogue gives an impression of social irrationality, overworked variety and exhaustive socialization.

Class divisions and difficulties are stressed, and moral traits are eventually viewed as possession of a particular class or class attitude. It reduces the society of Highbury to a pack of struggling types, in some manner creating order out of chaos. It is not the Highbury Emma sees standing on the doorstep of Fords one morning, "Mr. Perry walking hastily by, Mr. William Cox- Quite enough still to stand at the door"⁸.

Highbury, it is true, is made up of classes and their individual members. Yet however different the traits of personality and class, they are taken into a functioning society and reshaped by inner organizing forces. Miss Bates is perhaps the nearest symbol of Highbury. All classes join and cooperate in her, just as all gossip passes through her vacant mind. She is the repository of all that occurs and has occurred in Highbury. Her small apartment joins the older gentry (the Woodhouses and Knightleys), the new rich, the Coles, and the lower-middle to lower class townspeople and clerks. She represents Highburys fluidity and mobility, its tolerance of past and future classes, or part of the sensibility that helped England avoid a French Revolution.

Emma sets herself against this Highbury, as she does finally against Miss Bates at Box Hill. After every disagreement with Mr. Knightley she visits Miss Bates, as though humbly paying deference to Highbury itself. She does not like visiting Miss Bates for the very reason she should visit her : because it sanctions class fluidity. She does not wish to fall in with the "second and third rate of Highbury", she wishes to have her own "set". Her greatest sin in the novel is outing off Harriet's warm attachments to the Martins, as Lioner Trissing has said, she is a reactionary out to stop social mobility.

In trying to answer the question of Emma's relevance today, Arnold Kettle points out that it is not necessary for a novelist writing in Jane Austen's time to suggest a solution to the problem of class divisions and prejudice, but that it is morally necessary for the author to notice the existence of the problem. Jane Austen, he decides, fails to do so:

"The values and standards of the Martfield world are based on the assumption that it is right and proper for a minority of the community to live at the expense of the majority. No amount of sophistry can get away from this fact and to discuss the moral concern of Jane Austen without facing it would be hypocrisy. It is perfectly true that, within the assumptions of aristocratic society, the values recommended in Emma are sensitive enough. Snobbery, smugness, condescension, lack of consideration, unkindness of any description, are held up to our disdain. But the fundamental condescension, the basic unkindness which permits the sensitive values of Emma to be applicable only to one person in ten or twenty, is this not left unscathed? Is there not here a complacency which renders the hundred little incomplacencies almost irrelevant?"⁹

This is highly persuasive criticism of Emma, and Kettle is right in saying that "no amount of sophistry" can disguise the fundamental questions it raises. First of all, there are no "aristocrats" in the novel, even the Churchills are just inflated gentry nor does Jane Austen view the landed class in the novel as parasitic, she sees it as a functioning part of a changing organism.

The social world of the novel is peopled with upwardly and downwardly mobile individuals. It is viewed not from the perspective of frozen class division but from a perspective of living change. It is not France in the 1780s but England at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

Emma is wrong to snub the Martins, and to encourage Marriet to snub them, not because as a class the yeomany deserve to rise, but because she aims to break a moral and emotional tie between Harriet and the Martins that has already formed. It is on this level, the level of individual practice, that social damage is incurred in Jane Austen. From this point of view Kettle's broadclass complacency is an abstraction, an evasion. Changes in the quality of social life originate on the concrete, atomized level.

Yet, Highbury is an imperfect, changing society. It functions smoothly because almost everyone makes a constant effort to maintain it. "Some change of countenance was necessary for each gentleman as they walked into Mrs. Weston's drawing room, Mr. Elton must compose his joyous looks, and Mr. John Knightley disperse his ill-humour. Mr Elton must smile less, and Mr. John Knightley more to fit them for the place"¹⁰.

Many critics have pointed out that no one works in Emma. Yet everyone is working, morally and psychically, to sustain this cooperative enterprise of civilized living. As in Mansfield Park, a certain amount of sheer psychic energy is required to make the social order endure. In Emma, those who contribute relatively little to the cooperative enterprise, John Knightley and Jane Fairfax, are either involved or preparing to be involved in the working world. John Knightley has always seemed a curiously modern type, a computing professional man who divides his time entirely between word and family. He and Jane Fairfax lack the energy for Highbury, and through them Austen registers the effect that the breakup of a ruling, or leisure, class will have on refined and civilized values. Austen knows that a community like Highbury could be maintained only if its members took a constant, unflagging interest in one another's welfare. Perhaps more significantly, Mr. Knightley's move to Hartfield marks the first time in a Jane Austen novel in which the relationship begins to take precedence over the 'place' or 'estate'. Jane Austen was interested in the stability of form, in what kept the great basic plans of social organization.

The changes in English society that were to separate the world of Emma from that of portrait of a lady were well underway at the end of Austen's life, and she recorded them in Persuasion. In narrative mode, social view and character conception, it marks a radical change from all that has gone before.

Persuasion is the first novel by Jane Austen, for example, in which society is conceived of no longer as a meaningful whole, but as a series of disparate parts. Both Mansfield Park and Emma rely on an ethos of place for their sense of society; the organized propriety of Mansfield and the cooperative energy of Highbury provide each novel, and the characters in them, with a clear sense of context. But Persuasion is made up of a meaningless variety of places and the conflicting minor identities that attend them: Sir Walter's Kellynch Hall, Upper Cross Cottage, Upper Cross Great House, the Mayter's farm, the Croft's Kellynch hall, the various habitations of Lyme and Bath, and so on. It is perhaps for this reason that in Persuasion social structures are contemplated with almost systematic dissatisfaction.

In Persuasion her sense of the social world she wrote about had changed. The description of Sir Walter paging through the Baronetage in search of his own name and lineage, or contemplating his reflection in his mirror-filled room, is a psychological portrait of the dissociation of the self. Sir Walter is a man in search of an existence, in search of some exterior proof of his existence in the world. He derives his existence from the volume, and he bestows in it the existence of others. The nature of society in Persuasion makes assurance about the future impossible, and therefore causes a loss of personal assurance. Uncertainty about the future is what leads Anne to reject Wentworth in the first place.

In the first part of Persuasion until Anne's arrival at both, the separation of mind is primarily perceived as a separation of place. As Anne visits one house after another. She encounters different states of mind at Kellynch Hall, Upper-cross cottage, and upper cross, Great House, Lyme, Kellynch-Lodge and Kellynch Hall again with the Crofts inhabiting it. At both worlds seem to converge the Crofts, Elliots, Musgroves and Harvilles and Lady Russells, Anne, Wentworth all join there and two figures out of the past, Mrs. Smith and Mr. Elliot appear to make the convergence total. Yet the convergence is deceptive and the geographical unity only serves to set off the actual disunity of the society. Distinctions of street, as Sir Walter keeps reminding us. And the closer social milieu of Bath only seems to emphasize class distinctions in the minds of the people who lived there.

These disparities of view and personality are seen to originate in the disparities of age, experience, physical appearance and family. Lady Russell's manners are old-fashioned and Elizabeth Elliots are not, those who are in the navy see things differently from those who are not in navy, those who are young and attractive are different from those who are not young and attractive, Mrs. Musgrove is fat and Anne is slender.

John Henry Newman, who admired Jane Austen's novels, complained that the age was becoming "the paradise of little men, and the purgatory of great ones", and Matthew Arnold complained in a letter to A.H. Douglass that the society was becoming "more comfortable for the mass, and more uncomfortable for those of any natural gift or distinction". Although both had in mind the decline in 'great career' of men, their sentiment is fundamentally

analogous to Austen's institution of the burden that both the mediocrity and discontinuity of social life place on the intelligent and sensitive person"¹¹.

This resentment of social life takes us back to the first half of *Sense and Sensibility*, to Marianne exasperation with the insincerity of society. In the earlier novel, however, the burden is ultimately shown to have its source in the illiberal illusions of its sufferer, for several unfeeling supporters of society (from Mrs. Jennings to Elinor) turn out to be sincere.

In *Persuasion* we see the beginning of a failure to support traditions, a failure that led to nineteenth century reforms. The positive feeling toward the navy lies in its wide spread invigoration of domestic life. In the words of Sir Walter, the navy was the means of bringing persons of obscure birth into undue distinction, and raising men to honours which their fathers and grandfathers never dreamt of¹². As the closing times of the novel suggest, Austen rated the domestic advantages of this revitalization as equal to the military achievements of the navy. "Anne gloried in being a sailor's wife, but she must pay the tax of quick alarm for belonging to that profession which is, if possible more distinguished in its domestic virtues than in its national importance"¹³.

These alterations in social life are perceived as transformations within and among families. As always in Jane Austen, the basic instrument of both division and unity is the family of which marriage is the origin class feeling is an extension of family feeling, or pride of ancestry, as the opening of the novel makes. Anne's marriage to Wentworth represents an act of will to replace through marriage, the old inadequate family with the new adequate family an act that is at the core of the generational concept of every Jane Austen novel. The feminine concept of marriage, unlike the masculine one traditionally assumes loss as well as gain, because until well into the nineteenth century only the woman left her family when she married, the woman also lost her name and assumed a new one. A basic movement in all Jane Austen's novels is the heroine's struggle to create a new "family" for herself, to replace with a new relationship the unsatisfactory family in which she is unappreciated or unfulfilled. In her novels marriage represent a reorganization of social life. Anne sees her marriage as the formation of a new social group, and regrets that in that respect she can offer little "[Anne] had no other alloy to the happiness of her prospects than what arose from the consciousness of having no relations to bestow on him which a man of sense could value. There she felt her own inferiority keenly"¹⁴. The marriage that ends *Persuasion* is viewed as part of the general revitalizing of English society that took place upon the navy's return from the war.

In the earlier novels marriage is linked to the general functioning of the society and to the land, marriage is a form of participation in society. In *Persuasion*, society no longer offers the couple a defined context for their adult identities, compared to Elizabeth and Darcy. Anne and Wentworth are directionless after their marriage. Anne Elliot will no receive the social support and identity that Marianne Dashwood receives when, upon her marriage to colonel Brandon. She finds herself "placed in a new homogenous, a wife, the mistress of family, and the patroness of village"¹⁵. Mary Musgrove "would not change situations with Anne," for "Anne had no upper cross Hall before her, no landed estate, no headship of a family"¹⁶. Whatever social strength Anne and Wentworth's marriage possess will be created and sustained by them. For this reason the singular existence and quality of the marriage itself becomes vitally important. The closing marriages of the earlier novels seem to represent possibility more than necessity, a stage in the moral growth of the heroine.

In Jane Austen, social and personal changes are never absolute. She could not conceive of a total revolution of consciousness that is apparent in one of the most interesting minor incidents in all her novels. Personal and social change in Jane Austen comes about through the ceaseless reorganization of persons through marriage, in the words of her contemporary Erasmus Darwin, it consists of the power of 'delivering down those improvements by generation to its posterity, world without end!'¹⁷. In her earlier novels Jane showed that right marriage are socially and morally vital to the worlds in which they are realized. In the environment of *Persuasion*, in which the individual and social identity is in a state of collapse, the marriage of intelligent love' becomes, for the well-being of the individuals involved, a complete necessity.

History books often tend to assume that until women began to demand a political existence they had no existence at all. Some contemporary histories indicate a change of sensibility in their attention to the immediate social existence of a particular era and although Jane Austen's novels correspond well to the new. More integrated histories, few studies have undertaken to explore the connection. She knew all about the shortage of men, about the high cost of living, cost particularly about the vital part played by navy. She really was aware of the important thing after all the fact is that in *Persuasion* Austen was interested not in the war but how people got together afterward, in what finally the war was for. She was interested in how civilized existence stabilizes itself. Her deference to local, civilized history constitutes a conception of history, not an evasion of it.

Hough writes, "The world of which her novels present a corner was a world in convulsion, filled with wars, revolutions, the struggle for political liberty, black repression, miserable poverty and savage penal laws." It was also

a world in which communities continued to cohere and flourish in spite of these happenings, and in spite of knowledge of them”¹⁸.

In *Persuasion*, the war is seen to have a more effect upon society, it offers men of ability, like Captain Wentworth, the opportunity to make money and therefore to rise in the society. Jane Austen’s novels convey an idea of everyday existence centered around the experiences of marriage and family life.

The existence of a feminine consciousness is suggested in Austen’s first five novels. Although her women lead restricted lives, her novels are not about restriction, nor even about expression, but about the relationship between the two, about how women find ways to develop and assert their womanhood despite the restrictions placed on them. In the educated class of Austen’s society the influence of women was especially powerful, because they did not have experiences of poverty and illiteracy, educated women were more equipped to counter their political unimportance. They were also the members of a class that had reached a point never reached before in the cultivation of arts and letters. Many great and small houses of the gentry made art, science and letters as central to rural society as sport, agriculture and politics. And for the first time among gentlemen a regularized standard of manner and speech was observed. According to G.M. Trevelyan, “The country houses and the world of fashion did more for culture and intellect at that time than the dormant universities”¹⁹.

As eighteenth century fiction testifies, women were as actively present in this society as men. Austen seemed to be aware that women in her own class received better treatment than in any below it. When Fanny-Price returns home to visit her poor and starving lower-middle class relations, her family hardly notices her. All attention and praise go to her brother, whose career in the navy is the focus of the family’s hope.

The feminine consciousness may be seen as one such unacknowledged energy. For until the feminist movement began to succeed, feminine history was, by and large, a great tradition, a set of values and beliefs that were passed on through generations of women, from older to younger women from mothers to daughters. Austen’s novels were the first to voice this consciousness.

Austen’s novel is primarily located in her view of social life. Briefly this view is characterized by a generational definition of moral life, a concern for the actual and immediate quality of social existence, a belief in human interdependence and a value for social cooperation. The feminine consciousness was a mode of perception, a kind of social conscience, developed by Austen’s culture and by the women of her culture for the sake of collective survival as well as individual security and fulfillment. At the end of eighteenth century this consciousness began to disintegrate and change soon after. *Persuasion* is the first novel in which the value and importance of being a woman in her society is held in question.

In the first component a generational definition of moral life, the word “generation suggests the idea of evolution or biology. Yet the nature of the feminine consciousness as it is expressed in Austen’s novels is distinctly intellectual rather than biological. The generational structure of her fiction is above all a moral structure. This is why so little significance is attached to motherhood is established by character and feeling rather than by blood.

All the novels explore the connections between generations, the mistakes of the past and the hopes of the future. At the center of generational change stands that prototype figure, the uncommitted young woman. The strength of generations depends on the process by which she and the man, she chooses find their respective identities, fuse them in love and marriage, revitalize their traditions and together bring up the next generation, just as Elizabeth and Darcy are to bring up Georgiana at the end of *Pride and Prejudice*. In marriage, whatever dispositions have developed earlier in life become permanent. The moral characters of Charlotte Lucas and Lydia Bennet seem to freeze in time after their marriage choices, because they have become part of the whole process of production and procreation that marks adulthood.

The generational structure of Austen’s novels indicates a conception of time and history that is regenerative. Her social history is a perpetual reorganization of relationships through marriage. It is regenerative in the sense that changes renews, by forever producing new combinations of experience. Austen’s view of family survival is far more impersonal and uncertain- a movement from marriage to marriage, contingent on other persons, and therefore full of change and mystery.

The women in her society were forced by laws and customs to be dependent, but because she saw human interdependence as a universal condition. Before *Persuasion* she viewed limitations on women’s lives ironically, but not exactly negatively-although she undoubtedly owed some part of her unique, ironic style to the pressure of oppression. The lack of movement, the limited number of new acquaintances, the dominance of family, the unavoidability of neighbors, the need or escape through marriage, were all recognized as difficulties rather than as oppressions. Elizabeth Bennet is first seen trimming a hat, curious about the arrival of an eligible bachelor in the neighborhood. Emma has never seen the seaside and does not care to. The destinies of Marianne Dashwood and Fanny Price, which we may consider dismal, are nevertheless sanctioned by the whole social ethos of each novel.

As a result, the novels before *Persuasion* place a high value on cooperation and adaptability as social acts that do not entail a compromise of integrity. Austen consistently draws a distinction between cooperative integrity (Elinor Dashwood) and calculating conciliation (Lucy Steele). D.W. Harding's description of Jane Austen's society applies with complete truth only to *Persuasion*: "In such a society there are degrees of isolation. A high degree is created by the civil falsehood and polite evasion ('Emma denied none of it aloud and agreed to none of it in private') which break true social contact and leave the speaker in a position of tacit superiority but cut off from his hearers"²⁰. Harding describes the restraints required by society as producing "social detachment.

Austen perceives marriage as a cooperative endeavour, and as a morally uplifting experience because it is cooperative. All the novels affirm the function and potential of marriage to "improve" the individuals involved. The merging of classes in *Pride and Prejudice* is an extension of the cooperative instinct in individuals to marry in spite of class differences. Ironically, the feminine consciousness received its finest expression at a moment in history when social changes were beginning to make it disused. It is an indication of Jane Austen's artistic integrity that she acknowledged these changes in her last novel. *Persuasion* is the only Jane Austen novel in which social cooperation and personal adaptability are more than problematic virtues of all the novels. *Persuasion* is the most conscious of the deficiencies of feminine life, deficiencies both external and internal. Together with the inner weakness imposed on and expected of women, Anne Elliot suffers from the external failures of her class. *Persuasion* records the financial and social impoverishment of the gentry at the beginning of the nineteenth century. To understand the effect that professions would have upon women of this class who were, for example, moved to the cities, we have only to compare Isabel Knightley's married life with what we know Emma's will be like. Isabel is married to a London Lawyer who divides her time between work and family and has little energy for anything else: she spends all her time at home with her children and the doctor, Mr. Wingfield. Although these are latent suggestions, it is significant that John Knightley views his family as not the pleasure and the burden of his life. This suggests the modern male-professional view of the family. As women have fewer and fewer responsibilities, they became greater and greater burdens to their working husbands. The burden of wife is a topic of conversation in *Persuasion*- what does one do with Navy wives? Of course the women of Jane Austen's class rode in the hunt as well as the men. Because the women of the gentry had roles and responsibilities of their own, they were not as concerned with the real or imagined differences between male and female. Except in *Persuasion* Austen is unlike later women writers in her indifference to the occupations that generally excluded women. For Jane Austen was confident of the opportunities of feminine expression to a degree that was impossible for George Eliot or Charlotte Brontë. As Mary Beard's description of rural life suggests, the commercial and political changes that were fully realized in the nineteenth century changed the life and status of educated women for the worse.

It has become very popular of recent years in the Austen canon, and many of its admirers though not quite all, evidently find it attractive because they read into it social observation which is both penetrating and independent. "Is not *Pride and Prejudice* in the very movement of its plot the representation of a great change that was overtaking society, the movement of a formerly depressed class into a position of power, and of a formerly powerful class into position of compromise?"²¹. Elizabeth and her family (or the maternal side of it) represent a rising middle class, with its money made in trade, and its characteristic virtues of independence and value for the individual rather than for his status in society. Darcy represents the old aristocracy, whose family must learn to respect merit, whatever its origin. The novel moves towards a social synthesis as Elizabeth and Jane marry into higher ranks than their own: but the harmony of the conclusion is achieved largely at the expense of the pompous aristocrats and their hangers-on.

Her novels cannot deal with important political and social issues of her time. There is no mention of industrial revolution, the miserable working hours in the great textile mills and factories of England, the injustice of child labour or the zeal for reform. She is curiously untouched by these and other political issues. It was the period of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars but none of it is ever mentioned in any of her novels. From her novels we cannot gather any information about the occupations and interests of men. The one social issue Jane Austen takes up in her novels is the position of women in that society. Even educated women like Jane and Emma are restricted to the feminine accomplishments of their time—a thorough knowledge of music, singing, drawing, dancing and the modern languages. Jane Fairfax (in *Emma*) in spite of all her accomplishments and elegance of mind has only one option open to her other than marriage and that is of becoming a governess. In any case, the new middle-class requisites of money and property were strongly gaining, when they were not merely superimposed, over the requisites of rank and the inherited estate, and the standard of gentility smoothed over the roughness of transition. We might perhaps call her society "genteel" to give it the kind of unity she herself must have seen in it, but its base in her novels is so clearly economic that an economic term seems preferable in most instances.

Thus, the novels of Jane Austen present a fine picture of the social life of the early eighteenth century. The novels take up for consideration the changes that come about in families because of interaction and the coming together in

social inter course of various classes or families with different cultural backgrounds and even traditions. The complications and inhibitions of these social groups and families are brought out by the novelist through a presentation of their behavior and the dialogues they indulge in. Dominating social relationships and social inhibitions is the question of marriage. It is marriage seen in different situations or the prospect of marriage that brings out the deeply felt prejudices and preferences. Social superiority on grounds of better up bringing or internal prosperity tends to become snobbery and the problem besetting the social groups is varying below ones status or supposed social position. Jane Austen's art consists in bringing out the contradiction in the behaviour of people through the vehicle of satire. The Jane Austen world is a world of social change through marriage rather than through any other means. The landlord class or gentlemen farmers, who have lived in splendid relation, see change coming in their lives through prospective marriage. It is how they react to the impending change, how they weigh the pros and cons of mental equations that is Jane Austen's peculiar going to range.

III. CONCLUSION

The novels of Jane Austen can be regarded as a classic study of how social patterns emerge in a gradually changing socio economic scenario, how a basically agriculture based or rural society undergoes change because of small changes within the family caused by either marriage or occupation or changes of habitation. The novels show both an upward and downward mobility, some families improving their economic status and thereby their social position and some others going down financially, and consequently, socially. However, their loss of fortune or becoming poor does not much affect their hierarchical status in the community. Individuals as well as groups are seen moving from one set of cultural values to another. Such a change cannot be regarded as an upheaval, but it did certainly cause much readjustment in social relations. In the novels of Jane Austen the mobility of the newly rich is contrasted with the stability of the established classes in the rural sector, specially the landlord class, which are perhaps making its-last ditch stand against the inroads of commercialism and industrialism. There is also a clash of cultures noticeable in the novels during the process of social mobility. Thus, the rural culture in which Elizabeth Bennet is bred in *Pride and Prejudice* is in contrast with the traditional genteelism represented by Darcy, who is wrong in imagining that Elizabeth has outgrown her rural cultural and entered the world of 'genteelism'. This is seen in the other novels also, where change of culture or exposure to a new culture or set of values brings about a drastic change in the lives of the characters, since they are torn away from their ancestral roots and made to encounter new scenes and people. Since the novels of Jane Austen's are woman- centered, as well as family-centered, they show the change that was coming in the lives of women, especially those living in the rural areas and belonging to the middle and upper classes. One feature of this change was the sense of independence that was coming in these women in the choice of their husbands, although it was still the prerogative of the parents to choose life parents for their daughters. That marriage is the focus in the novels, is seen from the opening sentence of *Pride and Prejudice*: "It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife."

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