



REGENCY ENGLAND THROUGH THE REALISTIC LENS OF JANE AUSTEN

VIDUSHA ARORA

Research Scholar, Department of English, M.D.U. Rohtak

Email: vidushaa@gmail.com



Article info

Article Received: 06/3/2023

Article Accepted:28/03/2023

Published online:31/03/2023

DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.11.1.230](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.11.1.230)

Abstract

The Regency Era was remembered as an age of rich culture and literature. It was the time when an abundance of work has been done in the field of art, architecture, and fashion. Regency England is remembered as a period of refinement and culture, that was the tale of mainly the elite social classes, while the masses were poverty stricken due to a sudden population boom. Jane Austen was an excellent observer of human behaviour and psyche, that's what makes her novels realistic while at the same time humorous and witty. Austen through her works voices the plight of the women that were stifled in the patriarchal setup of the Regency era. Also, through the employment of subtle criticism, wit, and irony, she highlights the vulgarities and follies of the English upper classes. The paper explores Jane Austen's '*Pride and Prejudice*' and '*Mansfield Park*'.

The Regency Era was remembered as an age of rich culture and literature. It was the time when an abundance of work has been done in the field of art, architecture and fashion. Parliamentary Regency Act of 1811, was believed to give birth to the political and historical Regency period, which made the Prince of Wales, George IV as Prince Regent as his father "The Mad King George" was not able to perform the duties because he struggled with his mental health. Officially the Regency period is said to be between 5 February 1811 to 29 January 1820, but generally, it is considered to span for a longer period, loosely beginning from c.1795 and continuing till the Victorian era.

Regency England is remembered as a period of refinement and culture, that was the tale of mainly the elite social classes, while the masses were poverty stricken due to a sudden population boom. The period was mainly characterised by its emphasis on style by the aristocrats who lived in fashionable locales and were deaf to the struggles of the people living in the slums, during this period it was believed

that for a civilised world to run smoothly the distinction among ranks should be strictly adhered to. Even relationships be it friendships or marriage should be among this particular niche that the society has created for them and any straying from it was regarded as scandal and such individuals were treated as an outcast by society.

Being the weaker sex, in accordance with societal norms women's fate depended on their being able to secure a good marriage. Even though some independent women in their inner circles advocated that the notion of marrying just for a happy life with money is wrong but despite this claim, the practicality of the situation was acknowledged by everyone. In a world where girls' whole upbringing is narrated by their need to secure a socially and economically approved husband by not only their families but also by several manuals and conduct books that elucidated the role and duties of women in society.

Mary Astele, a feminist In *Some Reflections Upon Marriage* writes:

What poor woman is ever taught that she should have a higher design than to get her a husband? Heaven will fall in of course; and if she makes but an obedient and dutiful wife, she cannot miss of it. A husband indeed is thought by both sexes so very valuable, that scarce a man who can keep himself clean and makes a bow, but thinks he is good enough to pretend to any woman, no matter for the difference of birth or fortune, a husband is such a wonder-working name as to make an equality, or something more, whatever it is pronounced. (62-3).

The Regency era has been romanticised throughout history for showing gallantry towards women but the real truth behind this facade is the underlying principle of this era, the fact that it is universally acknowledged that men are always right and women need to follow them as men are superior to women, also the laws and society allowed several securities and freedom to men that women of that era can't even dare to dream about as they were deemed subordinate in every relationship be it marital or filial. According to Young: "Their identity and their fate —were defined and controlled by men – fathers, husbands, or seducers" (119).

Jane Austen is a literary giant that has revolutionised the genre of the novel through her realistic portrayal of Regent's era landed gentry. Known primarily for her six major novels ranging from *Sense and Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Mansfield Park*, *Emma*, *Persuasion*, *Northanger Abbey*, and *Lady Susan*. Her plots explore the journey of women as they sail through several waves of life in the pursuit of economic and social security, which as Austen critiques can only be achieved through matrimony. Through her works, she critiques the novels of sensibility of the second half of the 18th century and is part of the transition to 19th-century literary realism.

Austen through her works voices the plight of the women that were stifled in the patriarchal setup of the Regency era. By showing women as dependent on marriage as means of their economic survival and social security. Austen satirises the

ideals and tendencies of the age that boasts about its civility and ideas of liberty.

Sir Walter Scott while admiring Austen's realism says:

the art of copying from nature as she really exists in the common walks of life, and presenting to the reader, instead of the splendid scenes from an imaginary world, a correct and striking representation of that which is daily taking place around him (59)

Despite having undertones of social criticism her novels have a spring of wit and humour which makes her works according to Polhemus, "a representation of life as may excite mirth"

Pride and Prejudice is a story of two warring hearts. When first written between 1796 to 1797 the novel was titled *First Impressions*. It was the first written book by Jane Austen but not the first published, as when sent out for publication it was rejected but later on, when published in 1813 it took the literary world by storm.

Pride and Prejudice tell the story of the Bennet sisters in their journey that was somewhat painful but that resulted in a happy ending to gain a good marriage. The opening line tells the theme that is echoed throughout the novel, "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife" (1).

In the Regency era, women did not have any right to property or if any were very limited. In the novel, Bennet's estate was entailed to a male heir, and as the family had only daughters, it was to pass to Mr. Collins, their distant relative. The fear of being turned out and being a recluse in the world was the cause of anxiety for Mrs. Bennet who made her sole purpose in life to see her five daughters married, although created as a comical character it is through her that Jane Austen has shown the fundamental predicament of women in Regent Society, as she has realised that is only through marriage that her daughters can live comfortably as women at that time had no way to earn their living and live a life of wealth and prestige. The desire for this stability is so predominant that when she gets to know about the

marriage of Lydia and Wickham, she was very happy, even though she was aware of the circumstances in which the wedding took place. She says: "Well! I am so happy. In a short time, I shall have a daughter married. Mrs. Wickham! How well it sounds. And she was only sixteen last June" (295).

Also, even though she disliked Darcy throughout the length of the novel, when she was informed of the proposal between Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth, she relished in the idea of getting a son-in-law who owns a very wealthy estate and was all praise for him, forgetting her earlier disdain towards him.

I am so pleased- so happy. Such a charming man! - so handsome! So tall! – Oh, my dear Lizzy! pray, apologize for my having disliked him so much before. I hope he will overlook it. Dear, dear Lizzy. A house in town! Everything that is charming! Three daughters married! Ten thousand a year! Oh, Lord! What will become of me? I shall go distracted (367).

In addition to being a gender that is treated as a commodity for marriage, women were considered to have a limited set of skills. *Pride and Prejudice* shows a society where women were treated as subordinate to men and their whole persona is depicted by their ability to manage domestic aspects and not achieve any financial or social success. In the novel when asked about accomplished women, Mr. Bingley, says, "All of them (are accomplished), I think. They all paint tables, cover screens, and net purses. I scarcely know anyone who cannot do this" (35).

Pride and Prejudice era was filled with false civility and decorum where there were set standards of social propriety and whoever strayed away from them was seen as wild and uncouth and was subjected to harsh criticism. Even when Elizabeth, concerned about her sister's health, walks miles to Pemberley instead of being received with admiration, was considered unladylike. Miss Bingley says in a conversation with Mrs. Hurst: "She has nothing, in short, to recommend her, but being an excellent walker. I shall never forget her appearance this morning. She really looked almost wild" (32).

Jane Austen through her novel has shown a distinction between distinct social classes, how they are stratified in their class struggle and pretension, where the aristocrats always have an air of superiority and condescension towards people who belong to lower classes. In some cases, by seeing others as inferior, aristocrats feel an artificial and selfish sense of superiority. As when Mr. Collins says feeling that Elizabeth might be embarrassed about her dress says that Lady Catherine a woman of a high social class will not mind it. As "She likes to have the distinction of rank preserved" (167).

Also, Mr. Darcy even while professing his love to Elizabeth embarrasses her for her low connections, as he says, "Could you expect me to rejoice in the inferiority of your connections? To congratulate myself on the hope of relations, whose condition in life is so decidedly beneath my own?" (186).

The emphasis on his reluctance to pursue and subdue his affection as it is deemed unworthy according to society's laws shows the wide disparity among classes in the Regency era. While depicting an age that was filled with profound gender discrimination, class snobbery, and suffocating etiquettes, she creates a story where two lovers having distinct social standing, overcomes all obstacles and realizes that they fulfil each other's imperfections and thus are a perfect match for each other, thus through their example of progression towards a more liberal society, Austen was able to make a little dent in the 19th-century age-old tiresome ideals.

Mansfield Park has been called "the first modern novel" by Mrs. Leavis and acts as a foreboding to George Eliot and Henry James. According to Cassandra's *Memorandum* and Austen's note, It was the first work Austen wrote after she moved to Chawton, written between February 1811 to June 1813 and was published in the middle of 1814 "by the author of *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sense and Sensibility*".

Although brilliant like Austen's previous works, *Mansfield Park* is distinctive in its central message because there is not one but many, either an allegory on Regency England, religion, slavery, or

education or the difference between reality or facade, and the list goes on. According to R.W. Chapman the theme of the novel is very puzzling which is the result of the puzzling in which it was written:

The ostensible moral of the book, which is almost blatantly didactic, is that education, religious and moral, is omnipotent over character. It is true that this theory is often voiced by the more priggish of the persons: solemn Sir Thomas, his virtuous son, and his pensive niece. But it is plainly endorsed by their author, who was perhaps at this time too much under the influence of her favorite divines or secular moralists (194).

Though like the previous novels, *Mansfield Park* also follows the idea of love, courtship, and marriage. But the idea in talking about this sacrament bond takes a slight shift in *Mansfield Park*, as, in the previous novels, marriage becomes a social prospect, a way for an economic, religious, and socially stable life. But in *Mansfield Park*, the heroine, Fanny Price can be seen advocating for a marriage that is built upon mutual love and respect and socio-economic status has no part to play in this union.

Education while it aids in learning also sharpens one's character preparing individuals to face whatever life has to offer be it good or bad. Austen reveals that the only education that is worth having is the one that reaps a good character, morals, and sensibility. Education be it achieved through an institutionalized manner or through experiences shapes the lives of individuals. The novel while displaying good facets of education does not miss to show what a bad education does for the children as Mary and Henry because of being accustomed to the licentiousness and loose morals of their stepfather, the Admiral, with whom they lived in London. But this lack can also be seen in Maria, Julia, and Tom's characters as their father laments their bad upbringing which was left in the care of Mrs. Norris.

This is Jane Austen's most sexually aware novel. So much talk of sexuality is done for the very first time and maybe the greatest number of times among all of Austen's novels, through various incidents but it becomes most pronounced when the

play *Lover's Vows* by Elizabeth Inchbald was being rehearsed by the characters in the novel. It was as if they were satiating their sexual desires through the facade of the play. Henry flirts with Maria while snubbing Julia, Maria also readily accepts the flirtation by agreeing to play the role opposite Henry, while Julia hurt by this and desperate for attention shows affection towards Yates. Thus, through acting, they created an escape from reality and all the social mores where they can shun their moral obligations.

Mansfield Park echoes the idea that setting is of utmost importance as setting can directly or indirectly affect the characters in the novel. Settings of city and countryside are used as motifs where the city resembles vices and follies the world has to offer whereas country life is characterized as having high morals and adherence to social mores. The fast-paced city life of London gives chance to give cover to the questionable behaviour that the characters indulge in, but the coming of Henry and Mary from city to country acts as a mingling of the two thus bringing vices and corruption to the traditional ways of the country.

The novel showcases characters belonging to distinct layers of the social ladder; aristocratic Bertram's, fashionable Crawford's, and the down-and-out Price's. Austen showcases that one doesn't have to be superior by birth but what counts is the ethics one exhibits. Austen portrays through several characters that virtue is of chief importance as characters despite having all the economic benefits could not get a happy ending as virtue and class is not synonymous, as characters belonging to the high class can be seen having an iniquitous character, whereas Fanny Price who originally belonged to lower class through her constant adherence to goodness and her inherent ability to be the flag bearer of ethics and familial responsibility outshines all the other characters.

Austen employs satire and critique masked under the guise of mock to explore the layers of social hierarchies and class struggles. Critic Robert Pohelmus writes:

To appreciate the drama and achievement of Austen, we need to realize how deep was her passion for both reverence and ridicule ...

and her comic imagination reveals both the harmonies and the telling contradictions of her mind and vision as she tries to reconcile her satirical bias with her sense of the good(60).

Jane Austen went beyond what her period dictated and was more concerned with the goodness of human nature rather than society or traditional aspects the age exhibits, as the underlying source of her inspiration in writing her magnanimous works, and claims that the social characteristics of Regent England were abominably amiss.

Jane Austen through her novels has criticised the social constructs which have created a gap among the sexes which has idealised women as angelic figure, who was bound to do everything right, but who was not given any rights. Austen also highlights the vulgarities and follies of the English upper classes: the importance of rank, the stigma of social inferiority, and the system of patronage are played out via balls, visits, and society gossip.

Through lively and sharply drawn characters and witty dialogues, Austen succeeded in holding a mirror up to the vices and follies of Regent society while at the same time probing at the ideals of manners and morals of her times.

Works Cited

Austen, Jane. (1814). *Mansfield Park*, London: Oxford University Press, London, 1953.

Austen, Jane. (1813). *Pride and Prejudice*, Republished by Global Grey London, London, 2018.

Asteel, Mary. "Some reflections upon marriage". In *Eighteen-century women: An anthology (ed.)* Bridget Hill, Oxen, Routledge, London. 1984.

Kloester, Jennifer. *Georgette Heyer's Regency world*, London: William Heinmann, UK.2005.

Polhemus, Robert M. "Jane Austen's Comedy". *The Jane Austen Companion*. Ed. J. David Grey. New York: Macmillan. 1986.

Chapman, R.W. *Jane Austen: Facts and Problems*, Oxford Publication. 1948.

Scott, Walter. "Walter Scott, an unsigned review of *Emma*, *Quarterly Review*". *Jane Austen: The Critical Heritage*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul. 1968.

Young, Arlene. *Culture, class and gender in the Victorian novel: Gentlemen, gents and working women*. London: Palgrave Macmillan. 1999.