

JANE AUSTEN'S PRIDE AND PREJUDICE: PORTRAYING THE HARMONY OF REASON AND EMOTION

Shashank Shekhar Shukla
Research Scholar
Department of English
Banaras Hindu University
Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh 221005

Jane Austen appeared on the surface of English literature as a vital link which connects the two contrastive time periods in the history of English literature- Romanticism and Neo-Classicism. A consideration and an in- depth analysis of all the works of Jane Austen, including her unfinished work *The Watsons* led to the consequence that within the certain dimension of only six novels, she had very aptly and pertinently portrayed the vitality of the age of romanticism to which she actually belongs, and to the age that could be termed as artificial in the words of William Wordsworth- the neo- classicism.

As a novelist Jane Austen dealt beautifully with the two “binary oppositions such as reason versus emotion; objectivity versus subjectivity; control versus spontaneity.”(Kiston 35) Taking into consideration these two opposite tendencies of reason and emotion, she showed a new way out of looking at the world. The portrayals of her characters visualize the enlightened as well as the emotional approach towards the different issues of life.

Austen was very keen to portray a picture of her contemporary society, particularly the position of women of her times. Being a woman herself she emphasized the vitality of marriage in a woman's life and at the same time she wanted to convey the fact that since marriages based on only one aspect, either rationality or emotion, could not be termed as ideal or happy, while those with both are. Her concerned approach towards the stability and mobility of the women of her age could be best seen in a conversation between the two sisters from the novel *The Watsons*, “*I'd rather be a teacher at a school than marry a man I did not like*”. As a reply the other sister says, “*I'd rather do anything than be a teacher at school.*”

The statements reflect the point that women in 18th and 19th century England were not left out with too many options. They were very much confined within the limited vocational possibilities- one was marriage and the other one was teaching.

Marriage was one of the main options for social mobility but it depended on the women's personal wealth. Thus the opportunities in marriage market were reserved only for the privileged few. Austen was well aware of the importance of marriage to a single woman in society since it was the only economic alternative left open for her. This concern is very much visible in the initial line of the novel *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.*”(1)

Marriages in her novels resolve round two axes- 1. Pragmatic/Sensual/Rational pairs and 2. Emotional pairs .The illustration of various marriages in *Pride and Prejudice* show a picture of both of these contrastive ideas.

Charlotte marriage to Mr. Collins is based on social convenience. She is described as a person who possesses intelligence but lacks the emotional instinct. She is so much practical in her approach towards marriage that she agrees to marry a man whom she does not like emotionally. Austen describes Charlotte as:

Mr. Collins, to be sure, was neither sensible nor agreeable; his society was irksome, and his attachment to her must be imaginary. But still he would be her husband. –Without thinking highly either of men or matrimony, marriage had always been her object; it was the only provision for well-educated young women of small fortune, and however uncertain of giving happiness, must be their pleasantest preservative from want. (Austen 120)

Her decision to marry Mr. Collins is completely rational and practical. Her marriage only survives because of her practical nature towards this emotional bondage called- Marriage. She applies her intelligence to keep Mr. Collins and herself apart as much as possible and chooses to ignore the silly and embarrassing things he does. Their relationship reflects no emotional feelings towards each other as she says, “Happiness in marriage is entirely a matter of chance...”. Charlotte decision to marry him was a rational decision not out of emotion or love. What she desired was security and not the marital bliss. Through this marriage Austen shows the fact that both of these aspects- reason and emotion is key to any relationship.

Lydia’s marriage with Wickham is another example that is based on fleeting emotions and lust. Again there is the lack of harmony between reason and emotion. She is a flirt and runs away with Wickham when the chance presents itself. She always had a fascination for the ‘red coats’ ie. Army officers’ .It was not that she was particularly attracted to Wickham only, any handsome soldier could have moved her, but just because he was the favorite among women, she grabbed the opportunity to elope with him. The marriage resulted out of lust as it can be seen:

Austen writes, “*They were always moving from place to place in quest of heap situation, and always spending more than they ought. His affection for her soon sunk into indifference; hers lasted a little longer*” (366). Lydia’s marriage reflects her sensuality which should not be the essence of a marriage. Not only does their lust and attraction soon fade, but also they have nothing else to fall back on within their marriage. This shows the recklessness of acting only on emotion, with disregard to reason.

Mr. and Mrs. Bennet’s marriage shows a symbol of total failure. Mr. Bennet married his wife based on her youth and beauty, and their marriage is comical at best and ruinous at worst. Mr. Bennet admits to having no respect for his spouse. The Bennets’ marriage not only affects them, but also negatively affects their children’s own chances in life. This marriage shows the negative consequences of basing important decisions like marriage on just temporary emotions.

Elizabeth’s marriage to Darcy shows female autonomy to choose her own partner resisting social pressure, believing her own integrity. Elizabeth relationship with Darcy represent the other side of this equation: what is possible when emotion and reason come together. Reason and emotion both play a vital role in Darcy and Elizabeth deciding to marry. Elizabeth and Darcy acts as a catalyst in teaching each other sincerity from romantic affection, heart and rationality. She fights the battle against the society to show that only a very few can afford to have an ideal marriage. She had a very little money but she had the integrity to refuse first a man who has security, Mr. Collins and then a man with an annual income of \$ 10000. When Elizabeth decided to marry Darcy, it reflects her rational as well as emotional nature, she knows that he is a person she can respect, and that their personalities, while different, will complement each other. She was well aware of the fact that he can also provide a good life for her, which she realized while

visiting Pemberley. These are the rational thoughts that go into her decision. However, the emotional aspect of her personality also plays a role in her decision; she is attracted to Darcy and has fallen in love with him. While in tears, Elizabeth tells her father, ‘*I do, I do like him, ... ‘I love him’*’ (Austen 365). Darcy’s personality also reflects the harmony of reason and emotion very aptly. He is a rational and sensible man, but also one who can be moved by feeling, as seen in the ardor of feeling he shows for Elizabeth by proposing to her despite her silly family and against the wishes of his family. This combination of reason and emotion makes their marriage the happiest, and most ideal, in the novel.

Another couple in the novel that displays this combination of reason and feeling is Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner. The two have a good, happy marriage because each possesses both of these qualities. Mrs. Gardiner shows her rationality when she warns Elizabeth not to get too close to Wickham. Her depth of emotion is evident in the way she senses that there is something between Elizabeth and Darcy. Mr. Gardiner also shows this combination in the way he handles Lydia’s elopement. He is capable of dealing rationally with the situation when the Bennets are not, but he is also thoughtful and caring enough to do this for his niece.

One literary critic, Alice Chandler, writes:

Where Elizabeth’s parents illustrate the possible future miseries of marriage, the Gardiners and their children suggest its promises. Can one doubt that they are comfortably wedded? Their constant conjectures about Elizabeth and Darcy suggest intimate bedtime conversations and their slow arm-in-arm walk at Pemberley (arranged to allow Elizabeth time to be with Darcy) implies a tacit understanding of their common aims. They are actually surrogate parents to both Elizabeth and Darcy. Their highly practical and highly principled handling of Lydia’s elopement sets a standard for warmth and firmness that Elizabeth and Darcy must learn to combine before they marry. (101)

Chandler’s interpretation reflects the fact that the Gardiners shows a path that Elizabeth and Darcy try to follow in their own marriage. Austen shows, through the Gardiners’ marriage, all the positive outcomes possible when people use both their reasoning and emotional skills. This message is evident in how she presents them so ideally and happily married.

Throughout this novel the vitality of the role played by reason and emotion could not be ignored, it could also be titled as reason and emotion or rationality and feeling. These forces of mind and heart, often considered opposites, are shown to balance each other out in the novel. Austen beautifully portrayed the combination of the two forces as the basic foundation of marriage through the development of the two main characters, Elizabeth and Darcy. This combination culminates in Elizabeth and Darcy’s marriage. It is the marriage of these two supposed opposites that shapes the novel’s characters and the choices they make for the better.

Reference:

- Austen, Jane. *Pride and Prejudice*. London: Penguin Books Ltd., 2003
- Pride & Prejudice*. Dir. Joe Wright. Perf. Keira Knightley and Matthew Macfadyen. DVD. Working Title, 2005.
- Chandler, Alice. "A Pair of Fine Eyes': Jane Austen’s Treatment of Sex." *Studies in the Novel* 7.1 (1975): 88. Literary Reference Center. EBSCO. Web. 21 Apr. 2010.