

Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*: Depiction of Social Reality

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Jane Austen is an established name in the history of English Literature. She has created wonder by incorporating the common themes like marriage, human relationships, women's status and patriarchy in her novels. Six specific novels that are responsible for tagging her as an excellent novelist, contribute to the requisite theme of life and society. In the present paper the object is to talk about Sense and Sensibility as depicting the true picture of the society of her time. The novel, published in 1811, is set between the years 1792-1797. The story centres around the Dashwood family. Through the characters of the novel the writer has tried to unveil the real world of that particular period. Definitely Austen's objective, ironical and humorous approach is appreciable.

Keywords: Jane Austen, marriage, human relationships, women's status and patriarchy.

Any Janeite, to use a recent mark of distinction, who was asked which is the best of her novels, might excusably fall back on the one last read. But it is improbable that, even without much thinking, he would propose Sense and Sensibility. A general vote would surely declare for Pride and Prejudice; critical as distinct from popular opinion would perhaps choose Emma; and those most interested in scales of values and their application to the conduct of life would undoubtedly plump for Mansfield Park. Then Persuasion has the exquisite charm of self-betrayal, the escape of a tender emotion, long repressed; and Northanger Abbey the appeal of youth and a captivating heroine. But Sense and Sensibility no one would cite as her masterpiece. Nevertheless, it is a masterpiece, and may reasonably be pronounced the finest example yet seen of one kind of realistic fiction, the Burney and Edgeworth kind, and to have all those superiorities of matter and manner which she was to exhibit later in a more mature and more exquisite degree (Baker 70).

Jane Austen is a well-known name in the realm of English Literature. She (born in 1775 and died in 1817) belongs to the later phase of the eighteenth century, and most of her creative works were produced during the first phase of the nineteenth century. Primarily, she is known for penning down the six popular novels—*Sense and Sensibility* (1811), *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), *Mansfield Park* (1814), *Emma* (1816), and *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion* (published posthumously in 1817). Jane Austen belongs to that period when society was not that much

liberal for females. Even women writers were not privileged enough to come ahead with their illustrations and exhibitions. The society was governed by patriarchal rules and disciplines. Apart from this, there were many other social aspects like class hierarchy, materialism, and behavioural issues in family relations that dragged Austen's attention. She intended to portray the real picture of life of the time. In fact, all intricate details related to human follies and other social practices are imprinted very nicely through her pen. Whatever she writes displays the image of natural human behaviour and traits. As Virginia Woolf has said rightly: "Whatever she writes is... set in its relations not to the parsonage but to the universe" (qtd. in Jane Austen – Critical Responses – A Useful Fiction). Therefore, it would be pertinent to say that all her novels depict the real social picture comprising all human virtues and vices. Sense and Sensibility is not an exception to it. The object of this paper is to highlight those truths of society that are discussed in this novel.

First, it is noteworthy to add that a writer is impacted by his/her social scenario. It is true in Austen's case as well. To understand

the stories of Austen, it is necessary to know the contemporary society of her time. Austen is associated with that part of the nineteenth century that is identified by its own social, political, economic, and literary traits. It was a progressive period that witnessed multiple developments and transformations in society. Politically, it was the reign of King George III (1738-1820) who ruled Britain and Ireland from 1760 to 1820. In his regime, the age witnessed many political events like the American Revolutionary War, the French Revolution, the Industrial Revolution, etc. These political affairs caused change in society in the form of urbanization and class identity. This gave rise to the avaricious and selfish attitude of the people. It was a patriarchal society. So, the issues related to male dominance, female's dependence on men, and their sufferings were common affairs of the day. The financial laws like primogeniture also added to the problems of women. According to this law, the right owner of the property could only be the male member of the family. However, with the emergence of writers like Mary Wollstonecraft, the idea of feminism came into existence. Her *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* was published in 1792. She advocated the cause of women in her book. In literature also, this age bears an established name of the Romantic period. Many acclaimed writers like Wordsworth, Keats, Shelley, and Byron shaped this period.

In a nutshell, if the study is categorised into political, social, and literary heads, it can be said that Austen does not touch the political aspect except in few cases. She majorly concentrates on the social behaviour of people.

And if literary affair is talked about, she is not that much romantic as her contemporaries were. Literature of this period puts emphasis on traits like the use of imagination, subjective approach, significance of the common man, nature, emotion, and the influence of the French Revolution. Austen is a little different from her contemporary writers. She is more inclined to present the real human world in its original form. She talks about love, feelings, emotions, marriage, happiness but she tests everything at the standard of realism. She is not that much romantic like her contemporaries. She focuses more on the presentation of truth. She talks about the people of rural England. Most of her novels deal with the day-to-day lives of the characters of this society. For example, in that society, marriage was meant for the upliftment of status and not for love. Social class and mannerism were important. Austen has dealt with these subjects in her works. She has also talked about different familial relationships, such as between husband and wife, mother and daughters, and siblings.

As it has been mentioned repeatedly that Jane Austen concentrated on the depiction of life in rural England among the landed gentry, *Sense and Sensibility* also tells the tale of a family that is part of the same society, bounded by the discipline that regulates the life of each there. The narrative centres around the two Dashwood sisters. They live happily in Norland Park with their parents. However, destiny had some other plans for them. Unfortunately, their father, Mr. Henry Dashwood, dies very early in the story, leaving his wife, Mrs. Dashwood, and three loving

daughters in a deprived status. Before he expires, he tells his son, John Dashwood, whom he had from his first wife, to cater to the needs of his stepmother and sisters. John was a good person, but his wife Fanny was against this. Though Mrs. Dashwood and his daughters had been living in the same house for a long time, now they were bound to live under the subjugation of John and Fanny. The patriarchy and primogeniture system were responsible for the discomfiture of the Dashwood family. Due to the primogeniture system, the property right was given to the male of the house. Therefore, after the death of Mr. Dashwood, they were in tight corners. As Juliet McMaster notes, "Austen highlights the injustices of this system of inheritance" (primogeniture) (qtd. in Jane Austen – Critical Responses – A Useful Fiction). This was an inheritance law commonly practiced in society. Austen's intention was to depict this side of life that was responsible for the unfortunate condition of the women of the house.

Fanny's brother, Edward Ferrars, on a visit to his sister's place, falls in love with Elinor. Fanny guesses the budding feeling of love between her brother and Elinor, but she does not accept this relationship. Despite being Edward's sister, she is bothered more about her own selfish ends than emotions for her brother. She speaks ill words to Mrs. Dashwood. Due to Fanny's displeasure, Mrs. Dashwood must listen to the suggestion of Sir John Middleton, her distant cousin, and move with her family to Barton Cottage at Devonshire. John Dashwood, the stepson of Mrs. Dashwood, too, feels helpless at such a

situation created by his arrogant wife. Here, this episode successfully portrays the superficial relationship between a brother and sister and a husband and wife. Selfishness and greed for money supersede human relationships.

At Barton Cottage, the Dashwood family experiences a new way of life. They meet people like Mrs. Jennings, mother-in-law of Sir John, his wife Lady Middleton, and Colonel Brandon, Sir John's friend. Colonel Brandon, though a mature man, falls in love with Marianne. However, Marianne feels attracted to a young man named John Willoughby. During this episode, Marianne has been shown as an emotional young girl who believes in expressing her feelings. She spends time with Willoughby and wishes to marry him. Elinor tries to make her alert in the relationship, but Marianne does not pay heed to her. Austen has presented the relationship of both sisters beautifully. Elinor represents the quality of head and Marianne represents the quality of heart. They have different approaches to life, but both suffer in the due course of the story. Marianne's love for Willoughby remains a failure as it is revealed later that Willoughby is engaged to a rich woman. Marianne decides to rely on her sister's wisdom. In Elinor's case, Edward Ferrars visits Barton Cottage. But soon, through Lucy Steele, the fact is revealed that she was engaged to Edward. Elinor feels displeasure at this news, but later towards the end, the story takes a new turn. Lucy marries Edward's brother, and Edward expresses his love for Elinor. Finally, the novel ends with the marriage bells of two weddings—one of

Elinor and Edward and the other of Marianne and Colonel Brandon.

After all this discussion, it remains to point out that Austen's realistic presentation has its own special feature. It is ironical and humorous. She has used humour and irony as tools to peep into the social realities. For instance, the group of people whom we meet in Devonshire represent that section of society that believes in leading a merry life, enjoying the company of people. Not only this, but the way the facts regarding Lucy's marriage are revealed surely comments on the mean-mindedness of people. The characters of Lucy and Willoughby represent the selfish money-makers of the time. Austen has taken care that the decisions of Elinor and Marianne should be justified and reasonable, too. Elinor marries Edward, and Marianne chooses a mature man, Colonel Brandon. This is how the novel reaches its culmination in the wise hand of Austen, who was privileged enough to have an observant family that prepared a strong background for Austen to study the requisite pattern of society and incorporate her ideas into novels. As it is said rightly:

A point of exact correspondence is that they were all three members of large families—the Austens had eight children—and all three keen-eyed observers of what was going on around them. Like Fanny Burney, Jane made this her quiet hobby, and long before she was out of her girlhood started writing down her observations, without any such prompting to tell a story and improve the shining hour as Maria Edgeworth had from her pedagogic father, with no other motive indeed than the best of all, to amuse herself. It has been recounted often enough how she used to sit for hours at her writing-desk in the general sitting-room, undisturbed by the coming and going, and would not have the creaking door at Chawton repaired because it gave notice of every arrival, and she was unwilling that anyone not belonging to the family should be

too curious about what she was writing. Her life was very uneventful, if compared with that of her two predecessors, or, to put it differently, the events were on a very small scale, more intimate, more ordinary, extremely insignificant except to herself and those like Cassandra who shared her feelings and her confidences. But she made the most of her opportunities, and amassed the material she needed. The knowledge that she required was very thorough at the time she wrote her best fiction; she knew the middling classes of society through and through; and for her such a strip of society was a world in itself in the range and diversity of character that it enfolded, even though many of the types interesting to other novelists were missing. To one who was neither a social philosopher nor a romancer, but only intent on the comedy of human nature, it was a source practically inexhaustible (Baker 59).

The most beautiful thing about Austen's expression is her objective approach. The way she describes her characters reminds us of the Shakespearean world. She knew the basic nerve of human psychology, and therefore her real-life delineation is excellent. To conclude, only it remains to quote that, "Macaulay made no extravagant claim for Miss Austen when he said: 'Shakespeare has had neither equal nor second. But among the writers who, in the point which we have noticed (character drawing), have approached nearest to the manner of the great master, we have no hesitation in placing Jane Austen, a woman of whom England is justly proud.' She is, indeed, our greatest woman novelist as indubitably as Shakespeare is our greatest dramatist. Her scope is limited, as she herself well knew when she spoke of the 'little bit (two inches wide) of ivory on which I work with so fine a brush as produces little effect after much labour'. Her plots may appear insipid to palates which have been vitiated by Grand Guignol and the cinema. But there are no more

flawless works of art in English than her novels; her sparkling and apparently easy style is quite inimitable; and as a delineator of characters who are alive in every limb, she has no superior and but few equals" (Patterson 48-49).

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