

Self-deception vs. Self-realization

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Abstract

The main concern of Jane Austen seems to be focused on the individual's relationship with the society as well as the self-realization of the individual. Her protagonists learn from their mistakes and have the ability to analyze their own actions. For this reason they go through a process of change from self subjectivity to objectivity where they are not only able to see within themselves and know their own weaknesses but are able to understand the stance and limitations of others. This creates in them tolerance and understanding which provides them happiness, peace, and contentment. The blissful reward elevates their character and helps them live a satisfied life. Only those go through a process of self-realization that are ready to adjust with the changing times. Those who become aware of their failings also learn how to overcome them to live a harmonious life. In Pride and Prejudice Darcy and Elizabeth change positively and manage to elevate socially, intellectually and morally. While characters like Wickham/Lydia and Collins/Charlotte remain suffering from self-deception and hence they live a discontented life.

Keywords: Jane Austen, Darcy, Elizabeth, Self-realization, Self-deception

*The insipidity, and yet the noise; the nothingness, and yet the self-importance of all these people!*¹

The characters in Pride and Prejudice live a routine conventional life and as much they do not come into clash with the others around them. Jane does not find anything amiss in the attitude of the Bingley sisters because she accepts them as they are, being socially superior to the Meryton community. But to Elizabeth they are snobbish and rude for they fail to mix with the others around them. They are conscious of their wealth and status and that is

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where they exist. They dislike Elizabeth for they fear the strength of her personality while Elizabeth manages to “individuate” herself for she possesses the desire to be “actualized”.²

The aspects of Eighteenth century contemporary life reverberate in *Pride and Prejudice* in the form of unconscious submission of most of the characters to the conventions of that time but what makes the novel interesting is Elizabeth’s behavior that defies all prevailing norms. Mrs. Bennet, Elizabeth’s mother is a restless woman who fails to grasp the reality of the world around her and because of her “weak understanding”³ she fails to develop a solid relationship with her husband. She is not even conscious of the distance and lack of respect that she receives from her husband. She lives in an atmosphere of superficial values with a single concern to get her daughters married. We see Elizabeth living a very different life though sharing the same house. She lives in a different state of existence where suffering is private and there is no rest till she comes to terms with herself. She manages to dissolve all her fears and doubts by going through the process of self-realization.

In order to see their true ‘self’ the males and females of a society have to liberate or emancipate from the age long ideas of orthodoxy of feeling and mind set. Emancipation comes from the others being social in origin but liberation comes from within for it is something personal. Once they manage to sidetrack from the mainstream, and go through the process of self analyses leading to self-realization, they embark on a discovery of individuality; worthy of as much respect and honour as males of their society.

Elizabeth manages to free herself from the snares of the hard and fast rules of propriety and decorum that chained female freedom and follows her own ideals. She has to rid herself of “undeveloped domestic ideology”⁴ to attain her recognition as an individual. The misguided conceptions must be rectified through the force of a powerful personality challenging Darcy that if he is there; here is someone else too. Interestingly one cannot fail to realize that both Elizabeth and Darcy have a justified pride in themselves to some extent. Their egos match: both must make each other realize their weakness: they educate each other.

Darcy must learn Elizabeth’s stance and look at the world from Elizabeth’s point of view for only then will he be able to understand her. The first features in her person that captures his attention as a man is “a pair of fine eyes on the face of a pretty woman”.⁵ From then onwards he is forced to acknowledge her figure to be light, pleasing and finally her movements start

attracting him and he is caught by their easy playfulness. Soon, it is succeeded by his “wish to know more of her”.⁶ Elizabeth too, senses his rising interest in her when she observes him “listening” to her “conversation”.⁷ All of Darcy’s physical faculties are involved and one by one, he is deprived of his earlier reservations. His own ‘eyes’ and ‘ears’ are at war with his reasoning faculty that keeps on threatening him of dire consequences – love. Elizabeth’s plan of revenge is quickly planned for she cannot forget herself being called “tolerable”⁸ so bracing herself to meet the enemy she decides “if I do not begin to being impertinent myself, I shall soon grow afraid of him”.⁹ She knows that if she shows any weakness she will be treated like other females of her society, while she intends to appear different by “express[ing]” herself “uncommonly well”¹⁰ on different topics.

Though quiet and ill at ease in Meryton, Darcy is in his element among the grandeurs of Pemberley. There we meet him as a very different person. All the reserve is shed off. In Meryton he is cocooned in his self-created extreme isolation and he shows extreme reserve. He is a stranger there and recedes in the background while the rest of the company are enjoying themselves. Mr. Darcy considers the Meryton society as vulgar and “a punishment” for him “to stand up with”.¹¹ Yet he is soon fascinated by the “easy playfulness” of Elizabeth’s manners which are in contrast to his reservations and it surprises him. Like the prodigal son he reveals the social legacy that he carries within himself and though he tries to stay aloof and alienated he falls short of his efforts. We observe that Darcy’s letter makes Elizabeth conscious of the vulgarity of her family’s behaviour so when she meets them she observes their behaviour in a detached manner. She is shocked to hear Miss King called “such a nasty little freckled thing” and “the coarseness of the expression”¹² does not escape her. This is her society and now she can understand “that total want of propriety so frequently, so almost uniformly betrayed”¹³, by her mother and sisters, which deprives Jane of her happiness.

Darcy has to surpass all class differences, relax the hard and fast observance of manners if he is to open his heart before Elizabeth. It is the discourse of emotions that she understands well. Only then he can achieve domestic felicity. Elizabeth also must learn that all rich people are not like Lady Catherine and Miss Bingley. She must distinguish between them and Miss Darcy whose “manners were perfectly unassuming and gentle”.¹⁴ She

learns to honour Mr. Darcy's "generous compassion"¹⁵ in comparison to his aunt's snobbishness.

Elizabeth and the other heroines of Miss Austen's novels become "matured, chastened, cultivated, to whom fidelity has brought only greater depth and sweetness instead of bitterness and pain."¹⁶

With dignity and grace they manage to leave a favourable impression on their male counterparts; teaching them respect and esteem. The protagonists must move from their environment so as to increase their knowledge of other people, their opinions and ideas. They must be allowed time to reflect and make comparisons so as to view their own set beliefs comparatively and objectively. In this way they are able to bridge the gulf that ultimately causes alienation.

There are times when Austen's stance becomes the projection of our own desires and understanding and hence we as readers look forward to the entrance of a single man with a large fortune. We perceive the availability of eligible ladies and wait impatiently, like Mrs. Bennet, how and when he will take notice of them. The suspense grows and even a cynic, like Mr. Bennet, who never stirs out of his study, is caught by the fever and becomes the first to visit and satisfy his curiosity about Mr. Bingley.

Human nature here is reflected without exaggeration and weaknesses revealed without spite. Society reveals itself in these small instances of daily routine that its members follow unassumingly. The insignificant jealousies of life do not harm people when there is so much goodwill to compensate. The Meryton assembly unanimously, and without conflict allows Bingley to pay attention to the most beautiful girl of their community and their liberal admittance "To be sure that did seem as if he admired her – indeed I rather believe he did".¹⁷ The generosity and goodwill is based on love and understanding and hence the prediction of Bingley's interest in Jane is a familiar outcome. The psyche of the society is reflected in the psyche of its individuals.

Darcy's habit of meditation helps him see beyond the surface "I have been meditating on the very great pleasure which a pair of fine eyes in the face of a pretty woman can bestow".¹⁸ The Meryton magic has worked on him; he is soon captivated by the 'eyes' of a "tolerable" woman when he observes more closely. Not only does he manage to see the "beautiful" behind the "tolerable" but when Elizabeth looks at him "archly, and turned away" he is not "injured" but starts "thinking of her with some

complacency”¹⁹ He learns to contrast the life of “eat, drink, and play cards”²⁰ to that of ‘talking’, ‘dancing’, ‘visiting’ and ‘reading’.

He knows that he possesses excellent manners but has to discover if he possesses self-awareness. He is forced to argue with himself whether he is “all politeness”²¹ or needs to behave “in a more gentlemanlike manner”²². Darcy’s views go through a gradual transformation about the same person in question. It begins from “tolerable” to “a pretty woman”²³ and a time comes when he declares her as “one of the handsomest woman” of his “acquaintance”.²⁴ All these reactions reflect the views of different social standards that go through a change with interaction. The same difference of opinion exists about Mr. Darcy, till Elizabeth learns more about him when she visits Pemberley and realizes that “Mr. Darcy improves on acquaintance”.²⁵ We, as readers feel that

*Elizabeth does not approve the behaviour of her sisters and her mother but does she moralize on good behaviour or practice of propriety, well no! All she does is speaking of her fears before her father when it comes to Lydia while she would ‘blush’ at her mother’s behaviour.*²⁶

It is at Pemberley that she becomes painfully aware of the moral deficiency of her family. The “wretched business”²⁷ of Lydia’s elopement further intensifies her sense of guilt which earlier she did not feel. She learns to see the faulty behaviour of her family with a new perspective. Her visit to Pemberley not only educates her about human behaviour, it makes her analyze her ‘self’. She finally achieves self-realization; “She was humbled, she was grieved; she repented”²⁸.

The marriage of Darcy and Elizabeth is a union of two points of view about life as reflected in the places where they live. They carry in their personalities peculiar tints of their environment. Pemberley, though outwardly a paradise on earth, needed to synthesize with Meryton to make it wholesome and complete. Pemberley becomes the symbol of elegance and grace, “the park was very large, and contained great variety of ground...with beautiful wood stretching over a wide extent”²⁹. The great house “was a large, handsome, stone building, standing well on rising ground” backed by “high woody hills” with a “stream of some natural importance was swelled into greater” which forced Elizabeth to think “that to be mistress of Pemberley might be something”. The housekeeper is “much less fine, and more civil”, the interior had rooms “lofty and handsome, and their furniture

suitable to the fortune [ten thousand pounds] of their proprietor”³⁰. All the epithets used for the description of the house, “large,” “great,” “wide,” “handsome,” “rising,” “swelled” etc. bring something very majestic to mind till one feels a pigmy before its stature. It is at this moment that Elizabeth unconsciously agrees with Charlotte’s statement of Darcy having a right to be proud.

In comparison to the union of Elizabeth and Darcy we see three other marriages. Jane and Bingley share a “general similarity of feelings and taste”³¹ but both lack the intelligence and sense of Darcy and Elizabeth. This is why Mr. Bennet very aptly remarks about them saying that

“You are...so complying, that nothing will be resolved on; so easy that every servant will cheat you; and so generous, that you will always exceed your income”.³²

Yet, they will manage to remain happy. While the marriage of Mr. and Mrs. Collins is a sham, which will be carried on successfully because of Charlotte’s excellent management, where as Lydia and Wickham are “always moving from place to place in quest of a cheap situation, and always spending more than they ought”³³ devoid of domestic felicity.

The same process of self-awareness we observe in Jane Austen’s Emma. The protagonist’s disdain for Mr. Martin is based strictly on class difference. Emma fails to realize that Harriet is socially a ‘nobody’, while Martin is a farmer. Emma tries to do all in her power to find an eligible match for Harriet. She thinks that Harriet’s connection with her will make her socially superior. She consistently voices such ideas and makes a mess of Harriet’s life for the society refuses to agree with her. Mr. Elton’s proposal to Emma makes her revise her views regarding class differences and the evils that arise due to it. She soon learns the truth “who can think of Miss Smith when, Miss Woodhouse is near!”³⁴ Emma’s appraisal of Mr. Elton as “proud, assuming, conceited; very full of his own claims, and little concerned about the feelings of others”³⁵ mirrors her own self and for that she has to go through an education of self-realization. She learns that so far she has been deceiving herself.

Self-deception is another important issue that prevails in Miss Austen’s novels. She proves it to be a common failing, that hinders one from acknowledging the truth, and because of it individuals as well as society suffer. Emma a believer of regulated behaviour must learn about her own irregularities as does Elizabeth in *Pride and Prejudice*. Though Austen avoids discussing the

socially tabooed evils but in Lady Susan Vernon, a materialistic widow in the novel *Lady Susan* which is also written by Jane Austen. In this novel we get a glimpse of a moral agenda though the author would never state it. Lady Susan resorts to all sorts of mean tactics and moral degradation in order to marry a rich man, and get a rich husband for her daughter, so as to enjoy a comfortable life. Through this character the readers becomes conscious of such characters scattered in their own immediate society. They are those whose vision cannot penetrate beyond the physical. They deceive themselves by forming wrong notions of happiness and hence suffer inwardly though they manage to achieve physical comforts.

In the sensitive world of *Pride and Prejudice*, even Lydia with her limited idea of happiness is treated with compassion. She is not condemned by the people to the extent of social excommunication for the people realize that her error was done due to faulty upbringing. By presenting Miss Darcy as a contrast to Lydia, Austen subtly proves a point. Miss Darcy, who had been brought up to be a lady and much attention paid to her education, also falls in the same snare that entraps Lydia. Georgiana has a moral sense which guides her to disclose her guilt and the timely intervention saves her while Lydia left to her scanty discretion fails to see the negative implications of her actions. Miss Darcy is not only ethically sound, but naturally intelligent; which becomes her social attribute, while Lydia like her mother lacks wisdom. Interestingly, Miss Anne de Bourgh, who has been brought up with more than usual deliberation makes us realize that too much care has spoiled her. She is overshadowed by her domineering mother. This has harmed her so much that she has virtually no confidence in her own self. Deprived of any personal independence she becomes reticent and timid. Elizabeth is intelligent enough to understand her problem of being a lonely child who is expected to do more than her capacity; hence she retreats in the background.

Without presenting any ideas of an ideal way of rearing good individuals Miss Austen simply presents her characters; leaving them open to the readers of all times and all ages in their particular era to decide for themselves as to what their faults are and what improvements are required. There are Darcys, Collins, Catherines and Bennets, around us even today! *Pride and Prejudice* does not aim at resolving class conflicts, ideological and religious controversies, and intellectual debates. Rather the focus is on truth and harmony in the form of relationships based on understanding. The day to day events help the characters clarify

the intricacies of the confused social order and prove their existence as well as define their own limitations. They are able to adopt themselves with changing times in a positive manner. When it comes to landed gentry Austen's art reveals a certain regard for those who look after the welfare of their estates rather than ignore making provisions for future development.³⁶

The real touchstone of social progression is between interaction of the members of the society so as to broaden their horizon and understanding especially those of the upper class who move in their own circle and stick to their preconceived notions of civility. Darcy would have remained "proud"³⁷ and "conceited"³⁸ had he not come in contact with the people in Meryton. It is Elizabeth whose "little endeavour at civility", jolts him up. He goes through the painful process of humanizing "against his will", "reason" and "character"³⁹ and understands the motives, conduct and views of others to get an insight into life and become "better people."⁴⁰

Those who believe that "Jane Austen's perspective is to reinforce traditional values by showing the errors that result if one deviates from them"⁴¹, ought to remember that traditions and conventions have to undergo a change. Austen's attitude towards the different classes of her society reveals it. There is no place in the future for people like Lady Catherine who refuse to comply with the changing norms, believing in the preservation of feudal ideals by her objection to Elizabeth/Darcy relationship. If she wants to remain a part of the new society she must learn to adjust her idea with those of the new world.

Our desires and criteria as well as concept of eligibility differ with our situations in life. The lesson that we learn is that change is necessary; what goes up according to the law of nature has to come down whether it be material objects, unsubstantial intense human desires, emotions or social norms. The rules, traditions and codes of behaviour of society in general, ought to go through a change with the changing times. People who accommodate others and the points of view of others experience true happiness. Those who get stuck in their own beliefs and visions never see beyond their restricted self. The reader, like Miss Austen's characters, also goes through education of self-realization.

Notes & References

- ¹ Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (London: David Campbell Ltd., 1991), 24
- ² C. J. Jung, *The Development of Personality* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1954), 179 C. G. Jung believes that the “mechanism of convention keeps people unconscious, for in that state they can follow their accustomed tracks like blind brutes, without the need for conscious decision.
- ³ Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, loc. cit., 3
- ⁴ Catherine Gallagher, “Nobody’s Story: gender, Property, and the Rise of the Novel”, *Modern Language Quarterly*, Vol. 53, No. 3, (1992)
- ⁵ Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, loc. cit., 24
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, 20
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, 20
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, 9
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, 20
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 21
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, 9
- ¹² *Ibid.*, 207
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, 187
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 243
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 345
- ¹⁶ B. C. Southam, *Jane Austen, 1870-1940* (London, UK: Routledge, 1995), 167
- ¹⁷ Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, loc. cit., 15
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 24
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 23
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, 31
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, 23
- ²² *Ibid.*, 182
- ²³ *Ibid.*, 24
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, 253
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, 220
- ²⁶ Mary Waldron, *Jane Austen & the Fiction of Her Time* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 52
- ²⁷ Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, loc. cit., 261
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, 292
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, 228
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, 229
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, 328

³² Ibid., 328

³³ Ibid., 166

³⁴ Jane Austen, *Emma* (London: David Campbell Publishers Ltd., 1991), 131

³⁵ Ibid., 135

³⁶ Mr. Darcy's keen interest in his estate is shown by the attention he pays to the improvement of his library and his estate brings prosperity and affluence. In *Emma* Mr. Knightly would rather make improvements in his estate than have special horses for his carriage. Those who exhibit talents are shown to be rising in the social order and hence we see Captain Wentworth increasing his wealth and proving eligible for Anne Elliot in *Persuasion*. Mr. Gardiner, in *Pride and Prejudice* we note, uses his cool common sense thus not only increasing his wealth by being able to afford trips but also bringing up harmony in the discordant household of the Bennets. All these characters are introducing improvements in some way or the other which is very positive for the welfare of the others too.

³⁷ Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, loc. cit., 80

³⁸ Ibid., 11

³⁹ Ibid., 180

⁴⁰ D. D. Devlin, *Jane Austen and Education* (London: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1975), 1

The phrase appears in D. D. Devlin's book *Jane Austen and Education* where he says that "Education, for the heroines [and other characters], is a process through which they come to see clearly themselves and their conduct, and by this new vision or insight become better people."

⁴¹ Mary Eagleton and David Pierce, *Attitudes to class in the English Novel from Walter Scott to David Storey* (London: Thames and Hudson Ltd., 1979), 29