Chapter V
Conclusion

Every author has a definite purpose for writing and the writing manifests the feelings and aspirations of the writer, no matter how hard one tries to warp them. After studying the six novels of Jane Austen, what one finds common in all the novels is the theme of “love and marriage” which forms the basic ingredients of human relationships. This last chapter sums up the whole thesis in justifying why and how Austen dealt with only certain subject or theme, neglecting so many important events of her period. Her persistent confinement to one particular theme and society is because “her intention was microcosmic – to create a world in little... and an accurate model of the total social world...” (Daiches 1985: 745). A life, a society, a limited area she knew well and identified with is what she represents in all her works. She wants a harmonious social world as against the rigid class conscious society she belonged to in the later eighteenth and the early nineteenth centuries.

Jane Austen’s concept of an ideal marriage is built on love, respect, understanding and friendship and outside this marriage is not of true minds. Although she lived in an age where marriage was the chief preoccupation of a particular middle class British society, she places high ideal of marriage based on mutual love and esteem. Brought up amidst six brothers, with whose marriages she had personally been closely associated, she had a firsthand knowledge of what it means to be married and saddled for life with unsuitable partners. All her brothers, save one, were married with big families. She wanted a cordial and harmonious atmosphere between the married couples as well as with their children and other family members. As a sensitive observer of mankind, nothing escapes the keen eyes which capture everything that comes her way – the good and the bad sides of family atmosphere. She must have felt intensely about her brothers’ marital state and so incorporated her feelings in reflecting the lives and obsessions of her society through her characters. The disparity seen in the married lives of her brothers might have set
her to write about compatibility of mind and heart in seeking a marriage partner. Since such matching of human relationships cannot happen in real life or within her power of control, she expresses them in fiction. The first convert of her campaign was her niece, Fanny Knight, daughter of her benefactor brother, Edward Austen Knight who took her advice in averting a marriage of convenience with a former suitor, for whom she had no mutual affection. Jane Austen knows that marriage is not always a blessed state but tries to inculcate ideals to achieve a perfect marriage in her fiction so that the younger generation can learn from it.

As a social reformer she has also dealt with the issue of gender, status of woman, (both at professional and domestic level), the age of marriage and even the size of a family in relation to class and economy in the second chapter. As she is of the opinion that marriage and children are a girl’s natural and best aspiration, she “advocates sincere attachment, material prudence and circumspect delay in the choice of a marriage partner. If the appropriate conditions were met, then marriage should follow” (MacDough 1991: 74). Jane Austen insists that man should be able and in a position to shoulder the task of providing for his family before considering marriage. For this, Austen is often criticised for her emphasis on money in considering marriage but she is not to be misunderstood as materialistic as her concern is not sheer economic or materialistic enhancement but that income is necessary as basic requirement to start a family. She is in fact conscious that the young lovers should not “become victims of penniless adventures under the influence of sheer romantic passion but keep their feet on the ground” (Singh 1995: 207).

In dealing with the consciousness of class, she has brought out the merit and demerit of the British tradition of primogeniture. The aristocrats’ way of grooming their children with great distinctions among the siblings is deliberated as a foil in society. The eldest sons are sent to best universities to lead a life of indulgence, the younger sons trained to the profession of clergy, law, army or business and daughters to private schools for what is called the “accomplishment” of a lady. The accomplishment is confined to the ability to draw, sing, play music and learn French or Italian solely for the purpose of attracting husbands and nothing to fend
themselves against any uncertainties in life. Jane Austen insists on women’s education because “education is not simply a matter of acquiring certain branches of knowledge, but of the refinement and expression of the individual intelligence” (Hardy 1984: 11). She advocates education of daughters to prepare them to nurture future generation.

Amidst all the restraints of tradition and social differences existing in the middle class English society between the aristocrats and the gentry, Jane Austen brings out the essential human nature that overcomes social barriers, parental authority and tradition by meticulously portraying the characters of her protagonists to show that it is the individual and not tradition that determines the future of the society. Among her heroes, Darcy and Knightley are wealthy landlords, Edward, Edmund and Henry are clergies while Wentworth is a naval officer. They are all from aristocrat families except for Wentworth. Amongst the heroines, only Emma and Anne are of good background but Elizabeth, Fanny, Elinor and Catherine are from the lower middle class. When these protagonists fall for each other, there are obstacles to their marriages due to the differences in status and fortune. Love being the binding force in their relationships, they end up happily in the end by overcoming all the hurdles, thus proving the futility of class distinction.

In dealing with the treatment of love and marriage of her protagonists, we can see Jane Austen’s painstaking exploration of various marriages in her novels. In seeking marriage partner, one can see how the parental supervision has shaped the psyche of the children. Jane Austen advocates a sincere and devoted parent-children relationship. To achieve this goal, she has emphasised the need for a compatible union to enable them to bring up a new healthy generation in all her novels. She views that the “errors and follies of the young are . . . the result of faulty upbringing” (Allen 1954: 111). She puts the blames of the wickedness and wayward behaviour of Lydia Bennet on the foolishness of Mrs Bennet and the irresponsibility of Mr Bennet. Mary Musgrove’s insecurity and envious nature can be traced back to her father Mr Walter Elliot’s negligence during her childhood. The Thorpes and the Crawford siblings are nuisance to their friends as they have no proper guidance and education from their parents or guardians. The Bertram sisters, despite receiving the
best education, fail to come out as responsible citizens due to strict discipline of the father without motherly love and care.

The marriage of Elizabeth and Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice* has been a good representation of Jane Austen’s model of ideal marriage. Both the protagonists have to undergo a process of educating themselves to accept each other from their pride and prejudice before they take the final plunge and get married. Their marriage has a scope of nurturing a healthy generation as their love and experience would mould their off-spring in the right direction. Setting good examples in life is more than what could be learned from institutions. “The power to direct and guide younger members of society as well as one’s children makes responsible marriage a social and moral necessity” (Brown 1979: 10).

Elinor and Edward’s marriage in *Sense and Sensibility* overrules status, wealth and fame. They love each other and have strong bond of friendship even in the face of opposition and uncertainties due to their difference in class and fortune. Their good sense and common interest in life make them an exemplary before others in their society. Elinor’s strong sense of propriety matches Edward’s principle and integrity to stick to his commitment. They have a common affinity towards the vocation of clergy which Edward takes up as against his mother’s wish for him to become an orator.

Catherine and Henry’s love in *Northanger Abbey* and Fanny and Edmund’s in *Mansfield Park* are pure and innocent without any concern for status or fortune. A platonic relationship where the hero teaches the heroine about the ways of the world is seen in the relationships of these young lovers. Catherine’s ignorance and poverty is no bar to Henry so also Fanny’s prudence and lack of fortune to Edmund despite the heroes’ fathers’ objection. Their amiable nature and common love for literature and clergy profession unite the young hearts in marriage discarding parental disapproval.

In the marriage of Emma and Knightley in *Emma* one sees the author’s approval of marriage within the same community to preserve the tradition but not wholly in materialistic sense. Love and esteem for one another and a strong bond of
friendship is still uppermost to Jane Austen in establishing such marriages. Another compatible couple found in the novel is Harriet and Martin who have affection for each other and belonging to the same background as well. Preserving the aristocrat tradition seems to be Austen’s concept.

The most trying and well deserved marriage is that of Anne and Wentworth, a naval officer in *Persuasion*. They have to undergo “test and trial” experiment in order to realise that their love is never at loss even after a separation of eight years. They have been separated in younger days by reason of prudence by Anne’s family. Their marriage heralds the new profession of the navy into the aristocrat, bringing in a harmonious co-existence amongst the warring classes in the society.

Masculinity in men to Austen is associated with social responsibility and not with physical amorous powers. As such her seducers like Wickham, Willoughby, and Henry Crawford “enter her stories with a masculine swagger as Romantic heroes, but leave them as dependent, isolated, and reduced figures. In their reduction lies their effeminacy” (Miles 2003: 113). They surface as charming gallants to beguile the innocent ladies but that’s all they could perform and nothing for the society. As such Austen sidelines them behind the curtain the moment their purpose is served in the novel. We also have scheming but attractive angel-like female characters like Mary Crawford, Lucy Steele and Isabelle Thorpe who are fortune-hunters whose main purpose in life is to look out for rich husbands.

In exposing the different modes of marriages, Jane Austen seems to be cautioning the young generation against the futility of sticking to convention just for the sake of it. She idolises the marriages of love and respect of the main characters so as to attract the would-be married couples. Mutual love and compatibility of mind and heart can overcome any hurdles faced by the couple as well as enable them to overlook one’s errors and foils. Austen also exposes the minor characters with their flaws to warn against such characters who deceive others with their charm and attractive appearance.

Jane Austen writing as a woman about women in her novels should not be compartmentalised into a genre because even if her emphasis is on women
protagonists, all she ever wanted to convey through her work is for the good of the society at large and not so much on promoting a women’s propaganda. Jane Austen wrote as a woman about what she knew and experienced intimately as a daughter, sister, lover and an aunt. Having tested the bitter-sweet romance that could not be matured into marriage during her early twenties, Jane Austen knew what it means “to love and to have lost” and as such her expression of her heroines’ experiences of joy and happiness as well as their anguish and disappointments come alive to us when we read their love affair in the novels. The consistent deliberation of her theme also shows her concept and avowal of an ideal relationship which is reflected in the marriages of her protagonists.

Austen’s determination to write so many (when weighed against the restraints of male writers) novels, to express her feminine concern or personal experiences, places her as one of the most prominent writers not only among the women but among all the British writers. It has been remarkably said that: “Excepting Jane Austen’s, the novels published between ‘Humphry Clinker’ (1771) and ‘Waverley’ (1814) were written mostly for the amusement or the instruction of the day, and, having served their purpose, they deservedly lie gathering dust in our large libraries” (Cross 2001: 82). No wonder, Virginia Woolf praises her for her gift of writing by rightly commenting that among Jane Austen’s finished novels, “there are no failures, and among her many chapters few that sink markedly below the level of the others” (Woolf 1963: 22). The theme she chose and the style of her writing is timeless. Although she did not enjoy popularity in her lifetime, she is undisputedly the crowning woman writer in English literature.

Studying the work of Jane Austen, makes one recall Ruby Langford Ginibi, an Aboriginal woman writer who states that: “I can say, from my side of the fence, that the writing of my three novels has been the best therapy I’ve had, as it took the pressure from my old body and left them on the pages I wrote” (qtd. in Rani: 2007: 232). The fact that Jane Austen could write six masterpieces even up to the end of her life, leaving behind three novels incomplete, could be a proof of enduring her sickness and misgivings in life. Propriety, the key to her conduct book, might have restrained her from making frank comment which the new generation women
writers are at liberty to do freely today. Joan Rees applauds her as “the most courageous performer in English Literature, which must arouse admiration for both Jane Austen the woman and the writer. Few are brave enough to mock at illness in the face of death” (Rees 1976: 185).

All the novels contain some traces of the author’s autobiographical elements. She polishes them with such subtlety that not one character is explicitly ridiculed or exploited. Elizabeth’s humiliation and insult at the hands of Darcy and Lady de Bourgh in *Pride and Prejudice* reflects her rebuff by Tom Lefroy and his aunt, Mrs Lefroy. Charles, the youngest brother gifted “gold chains and a pair of attractive topaz crosses for his sisters, a generous action commemorated forever in the similar kindness of William Price to his sister Fanny in *Mansfield Park* (Rees 1976: 87). So also Mary Crawford’s disapproval of Edmund entering the clergy runs parallel to Eliza influencing Henry, Jane Austen’s favourite brother, to join the army in real life. “That Henry was influenced by Eliza . . . is supported by the fact that when he was later forced again to change career, he entered the Ministry with every sign of a vocation” (*ibid.* 87-88). Anne’s assertion that a woman’s love is more enduring than man’s in *Persuasion* seems to suggest that “Jane Austen never entirely forgot Tom Lefroy” (Halperin 1984: 62).

To Jane Austen “the strongest human beings in her fiction are those who are at best able to live harmoniously with others, and the value of living harmoniously, and without exaggerated individualism, is a lesson which several of her heroes and heroines have to learn” (Evans 1987: 76). The strongest depiction of “exaggerated individualism” who has yet to learn the art of living as a social being can be seen in the character of Mrs John Dashwood in *Sense and Sensibility* who resembles her sister-in-law, Mary Llyod, wife of her eldest brother, James. She refused to mingle with and the rest of the family. As reported to Cassandra by Jane, “[James] has come to Steventon ‘in spite of Mary’s reproaches’” (Halperin 1984: 78). Mary seems more like Mrs John Dashwood when she complains of “lack of funds despite relative prosperity” (*ibid.* 159).
Jane Austen’s assertion as an individual is taken as a resistant to her period’s temper, because of which she is viewed as a “feminist” of her time but an in-depth study of her works will prove that she is truly a conventionalist and a supporter of traditional values of her time. “A recurrent theme of her novels is the heroine’s resistance to the efforts of the patriarchal community to force her into a social role at the cost of her identity” (Mukherjee 1995: 27). Although most of her women protagonists rebel against the norm, it is done not against the convention as such but as a plea for a space for women to participate actively as a member of society, not as a passive subordinate. The saying “Behind every successful man is a woman” is not coined without reason. Women’s role at domestic level has enabled men to come out successfully in society and it is this recognition again that Austen cannot be misinterpreted. They are as vital as men in the set up of a society.

Jane Austen has passed the test of time and is still one of the most popular British novelists whose books are studied in academic institutions. The subject matters which were disregarded as trivial in her days are of great importance today. It is recommended in colleges and universities as instructive and educative for moral, social etiquettes and language refinement. It is frequently remarked that “more than almost any other novelist Jane Austen can be read and reread with increasing delight. This quality comes from the sentence-to-sentence brilliance of the novels, which speak of the moment-to-moment brilliance, the transitory meaning, of the everyday life she describes” (Brown 1979: 155). This appeal of Austen’s work has surprisingly an adverse reaction to the American novelist Mark Twain who states that: “I haven’t any right to criticise books, and I don’t do it except when I hate them. . . . Every time I read “Pride and Prejudice” I want to dig her up and hit her over the skull with her own shin-bone” (qtd. in Southam 1987: 232). It is unthinkable how brutishly Twain reacts to Austen’s book. It only shows his male chauvinism which is worse than the male writers two centuries ago who did not want to encourage women writers. He is fortunate that the prudential lady was not alive when he made the statement or else he would have been forever commemorated in one of her novels like Mr Collins.
Despite all odds, Jane Austen is still read and enjoyed and her books are recommended and prescribed for degree programmes for their enduring values – good stories, human relationships, intricacies of love affair among young men and women, the transparent domestic activities, difficult levels of love before marriage, the role of parent generation and its impact on the next generation children. The moral and ethical values are both aesthetic and didactic, but as far as the latter is concerned her design is not very palpable as to reduce her work to mere messenger of virtue and vice. She is praised for her gift of writing as there is “entire absence of self repetition . . . her young men . . . are by no means doubles of each other: and nature could not turn out half a dozen girls more subtly and yet more sufficiently differentiated than Catherine and Elizabeth, Marianne and Fanny, Elinor and Emma, and finally the three sisters of *Persuasion* . . .” (Saintsbury 1998: 305). As her theme is on “Love and Marriage”, which is a universal theme of mankind, Austen’s appeal to society will remain forever fresh and her books would always occupy the topmost place in literature. She has reached the pinnacle of success which she never might have dreamt of when she wrote persistently in the face of the strong male literary tradition. Posthumously Jane Austen enjoys the fruit of her hard labour and she has left behind a towering monument – a legacy of woman’s space in literature.
Works Cited


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