Chapter I

Introduction

The proposed thesis, “The Treatment of Human Relationships in the Novels of Jane Austen”, is a study of Jane Austen’s advocacy of an ideal society through the institution of good marriage. Of the many facets of human relationships found in her novels, the present study would confine exclusively to the relationship of man and woman in relation to love and marriage. She brings to light the major preoccupations in life as being the establishment of suitable relationship between marriageable young girls and young men because marriage is something that ensures promotion of one’s all round comfort in terms of social status and economic security. How one determines one’s future would depend on how one chooses one’s partner would be deliberated on according to the practice and aspiration of her society and period.

Jane Austen, in all her novels, is presenting a small group of British middle class people of the late eighteenth and the early nineteenth centuries which was not affected by the Industrial Revolution nor the Napoleonic Wars. No impact of the waging wars was made on the daily life of the people living in the small country towns. Except for the mention of soldiers as “attraction” to the young marriageable girls and their mothers, the novelist deliberately avoided their worldly affairs as her intention was to present an area she knew best – a society of the gentry class with “their pretensions and ambitions, of balls and visits and speculation about marrying and giving in marriage” (Daiches 1985: 744). David Daiches has aptly illustrated the marriage scenario as a ballet where the dancers have to select their partners, for girls of negligible fortune genteelly brought up must secure their man or else they may face a precarious spinsterhood with few opportunities of personal satisfaction or social esteem. However, when one tries to acquire one’s suitable partner, the means differ from person to person. This makes various dynamic forces work towards achieving the same goal. The thesis is to exhibit the various kinds of relationships existing in the novels of Jane Austen necessary for the ideal union reserved for happy marriages.
An ideal relationship in a marriage institution is what Jane Austen advocates. As such she takes pain to portray a suitable partner for each of her heroines. In trying to portray this genuine union in a society, she brings out the essential human nature in its various aspects. How she combines the traditional values with that of an individual’s assertions without compromising “the match-making tradition to the conventional goal, a handsome husband, satisfactory marriage settlement, and a happy elegant home” (Baker 1929: 93) is discussed as the focal point of this thesis. Austen’s ideal relationship is present in all her six novels. All her heroines are well settled at the end of the novels with deserving heroes. The novels taken up for the study are *Pride and Prejudice, Sense and Sensibility, Northanger Abbey, Mansfield Park, Emma* and *Persuasion*. The flair of Jane Austen was to choose for all her novels “love and marriage” as the theme, as such it would therefore be helpful to take a peep at her life to understand why she confined her work to this particular area of human relationships.

Jane Austen (1775-1817) was the seventh of eight children, six boys and two girls, of Reverend George Austen and Mrs Cassandra Leigh Austen. She was the younger of the two sisters. Her father was an Oxford graduate and served as the Rector of Steventon church under the patronage of his wealthy cousin, Thomas Knight. Her mother’s lineage is higher than her father’s lineage in terms of academic and connection, as the Leighs had been associated with royalties and nobility. The influence of both the families might have contributed to the development of the young Jane Austen’s passion of writing since the age of twelve and nobody could dissuade her from pursuing her hobby which in later years matured into novel writing.

Jane Austen and her elder sister, Cassandra were mostly at home except for the two years spent at Oxford and Southampton in 1783, and then from 1785 to 1786 in Reading. They were taught by their father as Reverend Austen used to keep pupils at home whom he tutored along with his children to compensate the income of his family and there was no dearth of books in his house. Being an ardent reader, Jane Austen relished on the abundance of the books which is reflected in her novel *Pride and Prejudice* when Elizabeth defends herself against Lady de Bourgh for the lack
of a governess. She states that “such of us as wished to learn, never wanted the means. We were always encouraged to read, and had all the masters that were necessary” (140). She seems to prefer education at home to the “accomplishments” which are taught in the boarding schools for ladies as the rite of passage, as it was the common practice of the period.

Jane Austen’s tryst with writing starts from 1787-1795 with the *Juvenilia*. Her keen observation of her society provides her the material needed to start her maiden works primarily for the entertainment of family and friends. When the brothers came home together during the holidays, it was often a part of their entertainment to stage a play at the barn in the summer or the drawing room in the winter. Watching her seniors arrange, enact or modify the plays, to suit their need, must have also spurred her little mind to try her talent in short plays. The *Juvenilia* contains “short tales, sketches, fictional letters, scraps of epistolary novels, bits of plays, some highly English history” (Halperin 1984: 35). It is said that *Sense and Sensibility* was earlier written in epistolary form but having found it unsuitable, she wrote it in its present form. As Jane Austen did not maintain a diary, nothing of her real life could be known for certain except from her letters sent to her sister (which were mostly burnt out fearing intrusion into the private life of her dear Jane), her brothers, nieces and nephews and some reflections of her relatives and friends. If not for the letters exchanged between the sisters during their separation to attend to the calls of sisterly assistance to the ever growing families of the Austen brothers, nothing of her personal life would have been known.

That Jane Austen had led a fairly good life amidst the big family of eight growing up siblings could be seen from the way her father and brothers helped her in promoting her zest for her writing. Despite the period known for the rigid stricture on women writers by male writers and the fear of infamy of their daughters’ reputation on being exposed as professional woman writer by the fathers, it is fortunate that her father tried to find publisher for her novel *First Impression* which was later revised and renamed *Pride and Prejudice* in 1797. Later Henry, the fourth brother, became her consultant in publishing her novels as a mediator. The first published novel was *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) followed by *Pride and Prejudice*
Mansfield Park (1814), Emma (1815), Northanger Abbey and Persuasion (1817). All the novels were published in pseudonym except the last two which bore her name posthumously. Family support and encouragement in her endeavour helped her to get all her novels published, even the three incomplete novels, Lady Susan, The Watsons and Sanditon. Though only in fragments, the end of all the three novels could be predicted as they were written alongside the published novels. Only Lady Susan is slightly different, as the protagonist who bears the title name is portrayed as a wicked mother trying to marry off her daughter to an odious old man. The fact that the manuscript had been in a state of fair copy suggests that Jane Austen must have thought of publishing it. Margaret Drabble, who introduces the three novels in a single publication, wonders if Jane Austen would have wanted them published: “It is impossible whether or not she would have wanted them published” (Drabble 1984: 7). She further states that there was a debate as to its print between Jane Austen’s niece Anna and nephew James Edward Austen Knight but the latter judged that public be allowed to read them and had his way.

Jane Austen never had a room of her own. She always shared a room with Cassandra but the lack of privacy did not deter the young lady from writing. Brian Southam gives a vivid picture of Jane Austen’s homely attitude while writing her novels: “The memoir evokes a comfortable, approachable figure who put down her needlework to pick up her pen – who wrote in the odd moments snatched from the daily round, who scribbled to please herself and entertain the family, who sat quietly in a corner, silently observing the world go by (Southam 1987: 3). An unmarried sister or an aunt was never at a loss to demand to help out the large family of numerous nieces and nephews. Even while she tended to her mother or Henry when they were sick, it is said that Jane would be either “working or writing” (Rees 1976: 165). Jane Austen’s zeal for writing did not seem to be dampened by circumstances. She wrote as and when she was free from the domestic obligations or when she was suddenly stirred or inspired by an idea or image which sometimes must have made her seem like a “mad woman”, a term used by the modern feminist writers.

Questions arise as to why Jane Austen never marries when she is so much interested in the theme of “Love and Marriage”. It is not that she did not have suitors
or proposals or that she was not interested in romance. There have been reports of her being the prettiest, silliest, most affected, husband-hunting butterfly as a teenager and to have remained a spinster, a fact that must have bewildered those who knew her well. The readers, in our present context, have better understanding of her mental psyche and are not at all surprised by her choice of remaining a spinster. Studying and analysing her work give us a fairly good reason for her singlehood. In fact we appreciate her all the more for giving us such entertaining and lively characters or else we would not know of the courtships and romances of the earlier British society. The first young man who had seriously engaged Jane Austen’s feeling in 1796 at the age of twenty was Thomas Lefroy. He was the nephew of Jane’s beloved friend Anne Lefroy, who was her neighbour and twenty five years her senior. Tom was described as a very gentlemanlike, good-looking, pleasant young man and though Mrs Lefroy was fond of Jane Austen, “it is possible that she warned her nephew against the impetuous attachment perhaps based on only a fleeting attraction” (Rees 1976: 56). Lack of fortune on her part has led to the estrangement of this budding romance. Joan Rees’s opinion is substantiated by Nancy Mairs in her review of Claire Tomalin’s work *Jane Austen: A Life*, where it is stated that: “Since neither of them had any money, his family kept them apart and saw him safely married to a wealthier woman, though he confessed in advanced age that he had loved Jane Austen” (Mairs 1998 Web). Jane Austen’s first love was nipped in the bud by none other than Jane’s own friend, who preferred a richer lady for her nephew.

The other most probable reason could be her sister’s fate in love. Cassandra was in love with one of her father’s pupils, Thomas Fowle. They were engaged to be married but he had gone as an army chaplain to West Indies in order to amass some income before marriage. Unfortunately, he died of fever just before his return in 1797. He however left some amount of interest for Cassandra by which she could maintain herself honourably. She never again fell for any man as “she had loved, she had known the best, and she would never compromise for a lesser good” (Kennedy 1969: 27). Jane Austen tried her luck at marriage at the age of twenty six in 1802 with Harris Bigg-Wither, a wealthy son of a family friend. They were engaged but
after an agonising night of deliberation, she broke it off the very next morning as she
could not think of marrying someone whom she did not love. Though there were
some suitors later, Jane Austen never again contemplate on marriage again. Her
devotion to Cassandra, in their mother’s words, is remarkable: “If Cassandra’s head
had been going to be cut off, Jane would have her’s cut off too” (qtd. in Harman
2011 Web). She might not have thought of falling in love when her dear sister
remained forlorn. Moreover, the mortality of child bearing mothers, who died at
thirty five after the birth of eleven children (Elizabeth, wife of Edward died three
days after childbirth), must have spurned her desire of marriage.

As quietly as she chose to live and write, she died quietly after suffering from
an incurable disease in 1817 and “early in the morning, so as not to interrupt the
regular 10 a.m. service – the body [of Jane Austen] was buried in Winchester
Cathedral” (Halperin 1984: 3). So ends the life of an aspiring lady who wants to
reform a society she dearly loved and cherished but did not live long to know of her
fame or acceptance of her cause. Although Jane Austen’s area is restricted to three
or four country houses, the society she describes is a whole picture of the British
middle class of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. George Lewis’s
praise about Austen’s limitation is that though her “circle may be restricted, but it is
complete. Her world is a perfect orb, and vital” (qtd. in Watt 1963:5).

The social set up in which Jane Austen started writing amongst the male
writers and how she managed to emerge successfully as a woman novelist is
discussed in the second chapter. It also deliberates upon all the social concerns
which are predominant in the period especially the plight of woman as writer, wife,
sister, widow and how they are treated according to tradition and social demand.
Education, employment, inheritance of property, class distinction among the gentry
and their impact are discussed in relation to the heroes and heroines. The period in
which she lived being transitory, the aspirations of the lower class gaining
momentum in terms of status and wealth, a symptom of the aftermath of war were
not welcomed by the aristocrats who were landowners. In fact Jane Austen’s
concern for the improvement of her gentry class is predominant which is why all her
heroines except for Emma are all from middle class background. The chapter also
centres on the rising demand for literature in novel form among the women, and how Jane Austen’s contribution helped in promoting the new genre. In short, her novels reflect all the lifestyle of her period with all its human intrigues and aspirations.

Jane Austen’s novels are a model for exquisite love and marriage. The most common human preoccupation is marriage, and she takes it up in its diverse forms as essential to all adolescent young men and women. An ideal relationship being the chief concern of Jane Austen, she brings out, in the third chapter, the different aspects of relationships basing on one’s own choice of suitable companion in marriage which would decide their destiny, an important point in the whole thesis. Compatibility of partners in one’s marriage is fundamental, as incompatibility leads to marital disharmony and consequential upbringing of children. To explore the different types of relationships we come across various types of marriages in relation to the parents of the protagonists and the effect of such marriages on the psyche of their children. Attention is given to this aspect of marriage when each of her novels is discussed individually. Most of the parents’ marriages are based on physical attraction of beauty and youth, while those of the siblings, the protagonists, are based on love and esteem for their partners in their search for ideal and best forms of marriage. There are others who marry for convenience’s sake or some ulterior motives which Jane Austen exposes as flaw in a married life. Mr and Mrs Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice* and Mr and Mrs Bertram in *Mansfield Park* are victims of physical attraction. Youth and beauty of young ladies of negligible fortune captivate the hearts of young handsome gentlemen with some means of income which itself becomes a subject of criticism and unhappy marriage. With just physical attraction to build up a relationship is temporal as seen in the lives of the Bennets and the Bertrams.

Mr Bennet cannot tolerate Mrs Bennet’s nagging and silly obsession with catching young eligible gentlemen for her daughters and so isolates himself in his library leaving the world of their children to his wife. They cannot see eye to eye in any matter even after twenty three years of married life. Mr Bertram too is not in accordance with Mrs Bertram in the family life. She takes no responsibility for
rearing the children, and thus leaves the task to her husband and sister, Mrs Norris. In trying to compensate her role, Mr Bertram takes the reins of nurturing his daughters with such strict rules that instead of endearing himself to them, he only alienates them. They are happy in his absence and are not able to laugh in his presence. The role of both parents plays an important part in a child’s mental set up to face any situation in life. Neglect of one has its disadvantages as seen in these two novels. Mr Bennet’s neglect leads to Lydia’s elopement with Wickham and Mrs Bertram’s to the elopement of his daughters – the already married daughter, Maria with Henry and Julia with Yates. Had the parents done their part of proper upbringing of the children, much scandal could have been averted.

Another concern the novels expressed in this third chapter is the economic security in marriage. Jane and Bingley in *Pride and Prejudice* and Marianne and Brandon in *Sense and Sensibility* are good examples who manage their relationships well. They marry after they sort out their differences but there are some who enter into this type of marriage for other ulterior reasons. They marry for the sake of what it could afford them. Maria and Rushwood of *Mansfield Park*, Mary and Charles in *Persuasion*, Fanny and John in *Sense and Sensibility* are examples of those who maintain the surface harmony of marital bliss as divorce was unthought-of in Austen’s time. Maria however fails to keep up the pretence and is thus scandalised when she elopes with her lover, Henry who later deserts her.

Love and esteem in Austen’s world are the only surviving means of a stable marriage. Each has to love, respect and understand their partners to sustain a lasting relationship. Elizabeth and Darcy’s marriage in *Pride and Prejudice* is a perfect example of this mode of marriage. Elizabeth refuses to marry Collins on grounds that she cannot love nor respect him although marriage to him would settle the entail problem. She marries Darcy only after he sheds his aristocratic pride and is humbled. Similarly, Fanny in *Mansfield Park* refuses to marry Henry who can give her economic security because he has been callous with her cousins. No prospect of marriage is at hand when she refuses Henry as Edmund, whom she loves, is far from being a likely suitor as he is enchanted by Mary. However in the end she marries Edmund after his obsession with Mary wanes.
Let us look at Anne in *Persuasion* and Elinor in *Sense and Sensibility* who are dejected and suffering in silence yet never stop harbouring goodwill for their beloveds. Wentworth, in retaliation to Anne’s rejection eight years back, is seen openly flirting with the Musgrove sisters. His action causes enormous pain and anguish to Anne yet she remains faithful to her love for him. Edward’s passive demonstration of love for Elinor, because of an earlier engagement to Lucy, is found out by Elinor. This does not dampen her love and she maintains a cordial relationship with him. She understands his youthful attachment and so still cherishes their friendship. Such loyalty and perseverance of Anne and Elinor cannot go unrewarded and in the end when the heroes are free from their encumbrances, they are happily married.

In *Emma* again, it is Emma who is so engrossed in match-making that she almost loses her beloved Knightley. In trying to enhance her protégée, Harriet, to higher status by marrying her to Mr Elton, she only gets mortified when she is proposed by the same Mr Elton himself. This part of the chapter dealing with Emma will discuss other intricate but interesting points concerning marriage and class consciousness in the aristocrat society of Highbury. Treatment of love and marriage in different light and shade will be discussed in *Northanger Abbey*. A case of mistaken identity leading to the courtship and dismissal of a naïve young girl, Catherine (mistaken for an heiress), by General Tilney, the father of Henry is humorously reflected in this part of the chapter. Catherine and Henry however, are attracted to each other oblivion to their differences in class and fortune. Thus Jane Austen in all her novels demonstrates that marriage is a complicated social and domestic matter, open to all but the approach to it is extremely tricky for one’s success and harmony in life depends on how one chooses his or her spouse.

After all discussion of the novels of Jane Austen a proper estimate of the novelist as a woman writer is also made to mark her as consistently a conscious creator of woman writing tradition within the male creative tradition in the fourth chapter. But her stance as a woman writer is not political in the sense that feminist writing is political, subversive and radical. She inaugurated the woman centred theme, subject-matter, and history of female writing tradition, thus changing the art
of fiction writing from the exclusive zone of male writing to some sort of gynocritics, that claimed a space for women during her period. In her own way she is bold and radical in that she as a woman writer fearlessly took up the cudgels representing the voice of women never heard so strongly in the past. Each novel is a distinctive female achievement, which shows Jane Austen’s clear understanding of life, love and marriage, and their complications. She is a representative of what Showalter calls “Feminine Phase”. One would value this, and without this chapter the thesis on Jane Austen will not be commendable at the present moment.

In the concluding chapter of the thesis, an effort is made to justify why and how Austen is concerned with only certain subject or themes, neglecting so many important events of her period. Her persistent confinement to one particular theme and society in all her novels is because she is committed to her, what David Daiches calls, “microcosmic” world. The depiction of a life, a society, a limited area which she knows well and identifies herself with as a member of her society and as an active advocate of a social, moral world is of historical significance, indeed. It is evident that long after her death her novels still attract serious academic attention all over the world, a fact which testifies her far-sightedness, and universality of her subject matter. She is hailed as one of the founders of the great tradition, and as the only writer who comes closest to the great classical dramatist, William Shakespeare in her portrayal of characters.

For the sake of convenience, the thesis is divided into the following chapters:

Chapter I: Introduction

Chapter II: 18th & 19th Centuries: A Study in British Social, Political & Intellectual Aspects vis-a-vis Jane Austen

Chapter III: Treatment of Human Relationships in relation to Love and Marriage (novelwise discussions):

(i) Pride and Prejudice
(ii) Sense and Sensibility
(iii)  *Northanger Abbey*
(iv)  *Mansfield Park*
(v)  *Emma*
(vi)  *Persuasion*

Chapter IV:  Jane Austen as a Woman Writer

Chapter V:  Conclusion

   Bibliography
Works Cited


