

Jane Austen as a novelist

Undoubtedly, the 18th Century produced a number of creative novelists who helped the growth and development of novel. Richardson, Fielding, Smollett, Oliver Goldsmith and Jane Austen etc were great novelists of English literature. Jane Austen has to be hailed in the context of the 18th century fiction. She made fun of the novels of terror. She had more of Addison, Goldsmith and Fanny Burney in her than of Fielding, Sterne or Mrs Radcliffe. Her novels are read for delicacy, calm and irony. There are definite influences of 18th century prose writers on Jane Austen. Samuel Johnson's thought coloured her view of life, William Cowper's phrases lingered in her memory, Goldsmith and Crabbe were her favourite writers. F.R. Leavis has remarked in 'The Great Tradition': -

"Jane Austen inaugurated a tradition in English fiction which was maintained by George Eliot and Charles Dickens."

Jane Austen was one of the greatest woman novelists of English literature. She came quite late in the 18th century. She produced fiction between 1796 and 1806. Her work is known for calmness, delicacy, exquisite touch, subtle irony and miniature grace. In the half dozen novels, she set herself to study the ways of feminine affection, the delicacies and distresses of young and sensitive but not passionate hearts, their mistakes and their sorrows in first love.

Jane Austen's novels are of psychological importance. In her novels there are both vertical and horizontal movements. Vertical movements in a novel means that the novel deals with a character intensively and analyses his moods, feelings, thoughts and attitudes. Horizontal movement means that the novelist deals with the inner problems of the characters. The movement in one is on a mental and psychological plane while in the other it is on the surface. Jane Austen stands for vertical movement in fiction.

Titles of Jane Austen's novels take us to abstract ideas. 'Pride and Prejudice' centres round Darcy's pride and Elizabeth's prejudice. Similarly 'Sense and Sensibility' takes us to an abstract idea. Jane Austen is interested in ideas. Her outlook is philosophical. She is like a 18th century philosopher contemplating by looking upon old days. The habit of abbreviating or magnifying was very common in 18th century. Swift could conceive of either a Lilliput or Brobdingnag. He could not imagine a middle path. Jane Austen was by instinct more of 18th century than of 19th century. Fiction was in a fluid state at that time. The interest of contemporary novelists was in men and things. Jane Austen questioned this theory.

Jane Austen was influenced by French novelists who tried to make philosophical study of human behaviour. Novels in the hands of these philosophical writers became a kind of philosophical treatise. Entertainment value of novel disappeared to a certain extent. Jane Austen belongs to this tradition.

She has quick sensibility so far as oddities of human behaviour are concerned. Her writings are based on a belief that individuals have certain obligations to society. She stands for certain moral and social values like the Victorians. Hypocrisy is attacked a like by Jane Austen and Victorian novelists. Her purpose is not didactic, it is psychological. Like Henry James, Jane Austen rejects melodrama and sensation in her novels. Secondly, she traces the processes of man's mind. Thirdly she has elusive prose style.

However, there are certain basic shortcomings in Jane Austen. Her novels are not novels of realism. Life in the pages of her novels is anaemic. Jane Austen saw life from the window of her drawing room. She was a spinster and so she had little 'experience of life'. This temperamental limitation is visible in writings. But at times, this temperamental limitation has been turned to the advantage of her art in as much as she can study human characters more dispassionately. In comparison with the novels of Scott, Jane Austen's novels show a sick constitution. There is lack of movement, action and drama in her novels.

If we compare Jane Austen with Charles Dickens, we will arrive at certain useful conclusions. Jane Austen is superb in plot-construction. The plots of her novels are like all other things in her novels, ~~are~~ home made. She does not present even in one of her novels the plot of suspense, in which

for example, the orphan boy beggar like Oliver Twist turns out to be the long lost heir of millions. There are very few surprising twists in her plot. Jane Austen is too gentle and lady like to indulge in the Dickensian variety of satire. She, at the most, wields the gentle weapons of irony, and loves to give pin pricks. The novels of Dickens move in London and its slums, but Austen's world is rural and the quietness of the countryside pervades her novels.

Thus, we can safely conclude that Jane Austen occupies a very important place in the history of English fiction. She is great by virtue of her achievements, she is also great in the historical content. She turned romance in to novels. Thus, Jane Austen may be considered the first great novelist of England. The great critic Garrod has rightly called her - "truthful and apt."

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