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Threadbare Morality and The New World in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*

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Abstract

Jane Austen's attitude towards morality has always been a debatable topic for those who consider morality as an integral part of religion. Though the daughter of a clergyman, she never discusses religion in her novels which is why she remains popular to this day. Austen, a keen observer of her society, can see that times change with new ideologies, inventions and contact with others at universal level because of modern means of communications. She knows that acceptance and respect for the opinions of others can lead to greater understanding and world peace. Her art of creating a microcosm which she calls "little bit (two inches wide) of ivory" [1] conveys the message through the stories of few families. This paper is an attempt to search how she tries to harmonize the characters of her novel belonging to different classes and social groups, by making them realize that if they keep on sticking to their old worn-out beliefs, they will never be able to bridge the gap with the others and taste the fruits of wholesome relationships.

Keywords: Society, values, threadbare morality, change, self-realization, harmony

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Introduction

Though often regarded a secular author due to the absence of religion from her novels, "Austen's novels critique the faults of the human personality and the flaws of human institutions including marriage, society, and the church. . . . as she sees [them] reflected in the human relationships (Griffin, 2002). As such, "Jane Austen

was able to combine the stuff of the novel . . . with the matter of the sermon" in a very seamless manner (Giuffre, 1980:17). Essentially a Georgian (1714-1830), Jane Austen's vision is also Georgian, a time when the state and the church still co-existed in an organic unity (Giffin, 2002). However, her world view or her concept of order for that matter is a living, dynamic order, not static imposed by the society and the church (Jackson, 2000).According to Rodham:

> Austen's novels critique the faults of the human personality and the flaws of human institutions including marriage, society, and the church. She conducts this critique as a devout believer within the established church who accepts mainstream Anglican "truth" as she sees it reflected in the human relationships (Rodham, 2013).

This paper contends that Austen's world and ours, though three centuries apart, offer similarities in the dynamics of society and reactions of the people living then and now regarding their attitude to morality. There are still some who prefer to adhere to the old social order and worn-out beliefs, thinking that the new social order is based on corrupt thinking. They find a sort of shield in religion posing to be more righteous than others and deliberately turning a blind eye to the challenges of the new world. They fail to realize that this will create problems of compatibility and understanding with the rest of the world because observance of religious practices does not mean that the person is morally elevated. Austen reveals the shallow beliefs of such people through her characters and the way they are ignored by the others because their shallowness is obvious to the others. Their tragedy is that they fail to see their own self and hence remain unconscious of their own weaknesses. As a result they end up alienating themselves from others. Such characters live like lonely souls within the world and have no friends. In their efforts to pose distinct and be morally superior to others they openly criticize the others and marginalize them for their mistakes.

Threadbare Morality in Pride and Prejudice

In Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*[2] we are first introduced to the phrase "threadbare morality" (56) through a description of Mary's fixation with the texts of writers who love to moralize without practising that which they teach. This inculcates in her a habit of philosophizing things unnecessarily.[3] Though Jane Austen comments on Mary's preoccupation with "deep study of thorough bass and human nature", yet she is not judgmental in her remarks. Mary Bennet lives in an almost isolated cocoon, life couched comfortably in her moral philosophy, while her sisters involve themselves in active participation in the events around them. They enjoy their social life and gossip about the affairs of the "regiment" and the activities of their

neighbours. Mary's occasional moral pronouncements are not taken seriously by the Bennets while she is seemingly self-satisfied in her own limited world, occasionally showing her resentment and bitterness towards the others. Disregarding the others she gravely disapproves of their manners, yet, all her objections are mere hollow words, not taken seriously by her family members. This makes her almost a stranger in her own household.

Though Mr. Collins and Mary are quite similar in their ethical views and pedantic disposition yet not even once do we hear a conversation between them. Mary holds him in great reverence but she considers him "by no means so clever as herself", still she thinks that he can be improved to become "a very agreeable partner" (119) which reveals their vanity. Contrary to her expectations, she is totally ignored by Mr. Collins when it comes to marriage. No friendship exists between the two though "Mr. Collins had only to change from Jane to Elizabeth — and it was soon done — done while Mrs. Bennet was stirring fire" (66). Yet after Elizabeth's refusal, he does opt for Mary though, both holding similar views on 'right' and 'wrong'.

Struck in self-righteousness, they become self-centred and pretentious. Both are deficient in understanding human frailties and having a sympathetic view of the weaknesses of the others. Mr. Collins luckily finds a potential fulfilment of his cherished ideals in the person of Charlotte Lucas, who possesses a realistic approach to life and has enough patience to endure his high claims. She manages to handle his eccentricities well for she possesses self-control. Her marriage to Collins is a conscious contract of relationship; so, all that Elizabeth could detect of Charlotte's consciousness is a "faint blush" which does not last long. To rescue her familial sanctity, she gives many silent sacrifices. Miss Farrell comments that "Austen's blushes seem sometime to work as natural and involuntary signals of embarrassment, vexation, anger or love. Jane Bennet, for example, blushes at the warmth of her inner feelings for Bingley though she verbally denies their strength" (128). These blushes indicate the sensibility of the characters and the realization of their own weaknesses and limitations when they fail to openly express their feelings. At times this becomes a gesture of self-degradation.

Compromises upon compromises have to be made so as to be a part of the community. People fail to understand the implication of evil deeds and dire effects of levity are not made public rather they are tabooed by the so called social morality. For this reason, Wickham's earlier sexual exploitations as well as his later immoral acts communicated to Elizabeth by Darcy remain a secret; though Elizabeth thinks about making them public yet she fears that it "will ruin forever" while there is a

chance of his "re-establish[ment]". Though no social reproof follows yet Elizabeth is afraid that socially rejection will make him "desperate" (312).

Contrary to this we hear Mary and Collins; the 'religious characters', openly criticizing Lydia's elopement and passing judgments on her, that she is "naturally bad" advising Mr. Bennet to "leave her to reap the fruits of her own heinous offence" (278). Religion hence becomes a social persona that refuses to show any relaxation or sympathy with the victimized. Here Austen seems to differentiate between religion and morality as two different ideals. If Lydia had been aware of the full impact of her elopement would she have agreed? For her it's a "joke".

Mary's morality is confined to books and sermons and she remains or tries to remain oblivious of the reaction of society considering her own self as an epitome of virtue. Like many others she confuses religion with morality. Mary's vanity is confined to criticizing others; which she mistakes for moralizing; a marked disregard for the others. Collins and Mary are stuck in their personas marked by a sense of their own worthiness; she of an indifferent preacher and Collins, in his hollow shaming civility.

> Collins' show of humility before those who are rich makes him lose his self-respect as the general belief and behaviour of the common men and women as well as the nobility of that time reflected that "status is value-laden" (Duckworth, 117). [4]

Furthermore Mr. Collins' letter of introduction to the Bennets reveals the superficiality of his conviction. The words that he uses to convey his regard for them are hollow and meaningless. They lack depth and sincerity. He had been to a college for a formal religious education and from there he has learned rhetoric of ceremonial language. His conversation is fashioned for the high ups and not for the commonality. He pathetically exposes the limitations of the religious beliefs of his time.

The way Mr. Collins sermons on proper behaviour seems to circumscribe the parameters of punishment and reward in religion but no social mobility. Such speeches stress people to abstain from sins and immoral conduct for fear of punishment and not because these are socially harmful. The characters are not made aware of the consequences that they might suffer due to immorality in their daily life: that it would harm their relationships and mar their characters, alienating them from their fellow human beings. People are not acquainted with facts but kept in ambiguities from across-the-border realities. That is why the moment the

common men and women are out of the church they forget all the lessons of good ethics and beliefs. They immediately indulge in the scheduled activities of day to day life for that is what they seem to understand.

Collins is a church functionary; hence a self-proclaimed religious man. He never aims at values that provide eternal happiness. He never talks of the advantages of a sound mind and inner peace. As a church functionary he is expected to have a good influence at least on his cousins but no intimacy exists. He keeps a certain distance with all of them and his superficial modesty is very revealing. Even a harmless girl like Jane fails to befriend him. He is dissatisfied at the way his cousins act and when Lydia interrupted him while he is reading a passage from Fordyce's Sermons after rejecting a novel he expresses his displeasure, 'I have often observed how little young ladies are interested by books of a serious stamp, though written solely for their benefit. It amazes me, I confess; — for certainly, there can be nothing so advantageous to them as instruction' (64).

Quite ironically, he never dwells on these "advantages" neither does he state the benefit of "instruction" which further reveals his self-importance and flimsy morals that are vague abstraction. His sermons are not original rather they are the extracts from someone else's writings. They are ineffective and boring because they lack persuasion being impractical. As he himself does not practice that which he preaches so all that he states fall on deaf ears.

Though there are characters in the novel that are morally superior to others yet we do not meet "moral saints"[5] in Austen's novels. She lightly cross-sections Collins and in this way she exposes the evil practices of her society that were subtly harming the minds of the people by keeping them ignorant. She hence proves a harbinger of practical and personal salvation and becomes an instrument of augury for her society. She seem to dread the threat that religion might become if people do not become conscious of what the likes of Collins and the institutions that they represent whom Jung calls "educational monstrosities"[6] would do, because the tool that they have make them more dangerous than ignorant people. The reader is led to recognize that ill feelings or misunderstandings are mostly the cause of strife among the members of society so they must be duly recognized and hence redressed.

There are no strict moral statements in the novel[7]. Even the emotional state of the characters does not cross the limits of decency to which Miss Charlotte Bronte objects in her criticism of Jane Austen. The arguments between the characters, no matter how heated they may become, never cross the limits of propriety and

decency. The reason might be the refinement of Austen's immediate family, and her characters bear a stamp of it.

Elizabeth and Darcy both suffer tumultuously within, and the reader is made to feel their suffering with grace and equanimity out any strong language — and here is positioned the art of Miss Austen. She adds grace even to her suffering characters. Even Mr. Collins does not show a violent reaction after being refused by Elizabeth. He accepts her refusal though with a heavy heart, yet no violent scene is created, and the matter of his marriage resolves very quietly and quite reasonably. It is only Mrs. Bennet that we see making a fuss because when she is "discontented, she fancied herself nervous" (3). Mrs. Bennet's philosophy, if she is supposed to have any is that "those who do not complain are never pitied" (108).

The protagonists in the novel are conscious of the worth and value of moral "goodness" hence those who do not prefer wealth and status over contentment achieve contentment. Wickham is doomed to suffer dissatisfaction and Charlotte Lucas is condemned to live with her "blush" (148), for the choice they made is consciously done. They have staked their moral obligation over physical comforts without realizing the consequences. Substantially they lose human values and bruise themselves ethically as they have degraded themselves to achieve comfort at the expense of peace of mind. Materialistically expedient, they become spiritually bankrupt. They have been led by the demands of the society without daring to come into conflict with its unreasonable expectations. Mooneyham believes that "the central conflict in each novel is between the hero and heroine; their moral, intellectual and linguistic opposition defines the progress of education and growth" (ix). But it is not always so, for it is not only the hero or heroine that are in a state of conflict rather the whole functional world and its people that contribute to social progression are at variance, so they go through the process of education for social realization. An individual's realization is but a step towards higher social awareness. It's a moment that triggers a movement towards truth. They make erroneous judgments and experience the repercussions but it is through these experiences that they become capable of rectifying their wrong conceptions. Elizabeth might have lost Darcy for good if she has not realized that her assumptions were based on prejudice so unreasonable.

Austen never blames the people of the wrongs that they are led to commit hence her tool of making them realize their errors is irony and humour. She softly laughs with her characters whose follies and foibles were the raw material of her novels.[8] `In P & P, the fallible characters are victims of their educational environment too. Even the people belonging to the same class differ in their behaviour. The stark

difference can be seen in the Bennet girls and the Bingley sisters. They know how to read and write, and would compliment writers on the art of writing and reading. Their foremost consideration is making additions to their "family library" in order to add to the "beauties" (34) of their houses, and not because they want to improve their mind.

Bingley wishes he had as big a library as Mr. Darcy's though he never expresses his desire of reading the books that he would collect. This is shown in his mental deficiency. The reason can be traced in his lack of interest in reading books. Though Bingley's sisters are educated but they are deficient in true spirit of education and as a result they become snobbish. They are not taught how to make use of the knowledge that they have acquired in "one of the first private seminaries in town" (12) for too much stress was made on manners rather than practice. For them education means superficial accomplishments like "through knowledge of music, singing, drawing dancing and modern languages" (35, 36). Though experts in the art of social rhetoric they fail to value matters of heart. The children of Mr. Bertram, in *Mansfield Park*[9] , also fail to come up to their father's expectations though he tries his best to provide them the best of education, and he later regrets:

> Here had been grievous mismanagement; . . . He feared that principle, active principle, had been wanting; that they had never been properly taught to govern their inclinations and tempers, by that sense of duty which can alone suffice. They had been instructed theoretically in their religion, but never required to bring it into daily practice (MP, 477).

We note that the older generation fails to set fine models. They do not help their children in adjusting with the modern requirements and progression of society which is constantly going through a change. They are so involved in their own pursuits and their worn out beliefs that they forget that the first and foremost duty of a parent is the improvement of mental capabilities of their children and to help them adjust with the changing world. They are to prepare their offspring to meet the challenges of life. Their tragedy is that they lack balance and moderation in themselves. Though we cannot generalize from this laxity on their behalf but it does help the reader to detect and understand their fault. Mr. Bennet shares the total neglect of his daughters' education with Mr. Bertram in MP, while Mrs. Bennet's constant reference to wealth in marriage as only source of achieving happiness spoils her younger daughters' concepts of a good life. They fail to acquire clear concepts of social ethics. Miss Austen does not criticize or blame the parties involved openly because she disclaims being knowledgeable about ethics

and morality, which is why we do not find moral extracts in her novels regarding good behaviour or ethics.

Conclusion

To say that Austen's novels deal superficially with the ethics[10] is debatable, for she wrote as a member of the society in which she lived and was fully aware of the superficiality of their moral condition. She teaches her characters, through their own actions, lessons of virtue and vice without sermonizing. She has unlimited sympathy even for characters like Collins and Mary for she considers them the product of their environment and so her treatment of such characters remind one of what Hazlitt says in his essay on Jeremy Bentham that "In ascertaining the rules of moral conduct, we must have regard not merely to the nature of the object, but to the capacity of the agent, and to his fitness for apprehending or attaining it" (7).

Her praise for a substantial character is obvious in the way she portrays that character. There are no angels nor demons but simple men and women who do not know themselves. They have to know themselves before they could claim of knowing the others. Her characters reveal themselves through their actions and dialogues and the reader finds them in a deep moral muddle. They struggle to get out of it without openly revolting against their society's set norms, but their tragedy is that they cannot afford to live outside it, for then, it will be the bitterest of punishment imaginable and Austen knew it. Even her evil characters are human beings with human weaknesses.

In *Pride and Prejudice*, Jane Austen succeeds, as Guiffre (1980:29) remarks, in 'imbuing the fable with a moral in such a superlatively decorous way that nowhere the narrative is felt to be oppressively coloured by the author's ethical concerns.'

Notes

[1] Letter to J. Edward Austen, then aged 18, December 16, 1816; *Letters to her Sister Cassandra and Others*, Collected and ed. by Chapman. R.W. (London: Oxford at the Clarondon Press 1932. Letter 134), Pp. 468-69.

[2] All subsequent references to this novel *Pride and Prejudice* are indicated by the letters, P & P for the sake of brevity. Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (London: David Campbell Ltd. 1991).

[3] Miss Austens own involvement in the issue makes her use the phrase threadbare morality as she describes Marys obsession of quoting moral extracts with no reason and so without any effect.

[4] The term appears in Alistair Duckworth, *The Improvement of the State: A Study of Jane Austens Novels* Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1971)

[5] The term was used by Susan Wolf in her article *Moral Saints* in *The Journal of Philosophy* > Vol. 79, No. 8 (Aug., 1982), pp. 419-439 Stable URL: http://links.jstor.org

[6] Jung believes that giving the duty of education to those who themselves are ignorant can be very harmful. In his work *The Development of Personality,* he states that that no one can train the personality unless he has it himself (Jung, 171).

[7] Austen refrains from severely criticizing the weaknesses of her characters. It is through the use of irony that she makes the reader discern the nature of her real intent. Collins with all his faults remains a human being with pluses and minuses. This speaks of her mastery and excellence for she manages to retain decency.

[8] D.W. Harding, *Critics on Jane Austen*, ed. ONeill. Judith (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd. 1970), pp. 17-18.

[9] All references to the novel *Mansfield Park* will henceforth be written as MP for the sake of brevity. Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park* David Campbell Ltd. London. 1992.

[10] The term ethics comes from the Greek word Ethos, means character. [It] is the systematic study of the nature of value concepts, good , bad , ought , right , wrong , etc., and of the general principles which justify us in applying them to anything, also called moral philosophy . Britannica, 725

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