

## On Jane Austen, Very Briefly

Serajul Islam Choudhury, PhD

*Professor Emeritus of English, University of Dhaka*

Jane Austen was great, quietly great; and gently mischievous. Her greatness is known to the world, and the greatness is added to by her sense of humor and irony which she makes use of to hold the supercilious and the dull up to ridicule, and more importantly, to question, the adequacy of the patriarchy under which she was obliged to live and write.

I remember when I was a student, decades ago, I was struck by an observation made by a discerning critic that Jane Austen was a Marxist even before Marx was born. The critic was not particularly enamored of Marxism, but had noticed, tongue-in-cheek, how decisive money and property were in the life of men, even more in that of a woman. Money and property not only determined the status of people, but also contributed effectively to their nuptial prospects, which, for women, was almost the only gateway to a comfortable living. And comfort was a more sensible proposition than happiness in Jane Austen's culture. It is not without significance that most of her characters have an income sixty times, some even a hundred times, above the national average. This is a fact that Thomas Picketty, an economic historian, has pointed out in his book on *The Capital*. This French economist finds Jane Austen as dependable on early nineteenth-century European economy as Balzac, although Balzac wrote about the whole spectrum of social life and Jane Austen confined herself to three or four families in a country village, to what she famously called "a little bit of ivory, two inches wide."

She was, as we know, a contemporary of the Romantics, but was wide apart from them. Born in the year of the American War of Independence, she lived through the French and the Industrial Revolutions, and was aware of the Napoleonic war, two of her brothers having been in the Royal Navy and one in the Militia. Unlike her Romantic peers, she was indifferent to children and did not care for nature, unless it added value to private property. Like her very dear creation, Elizabeth Bennet, she was full of feelings, but had the Augustan good sense not to be carried away by sentiments, and, as a novelist, she never missed an opportunity to poke fun at sentimental girls whom she found, invariably, silly. Romance was beyond her, and she told a member of her family:

I could no more write a romance than an epic poem. I could not sit seriously down to write a serious romance under any other motive than to save my life.

Her letters tell us that the world she lived in and the happenings she was familiar with were dull and trivial; but she had transformed these unpromising materials into living works of art using her power of imagination. Refusing to be fanciful, she was vitally imaginative in the Coleridgean sense. Jane Austen held on to the neo-classical tradition of wit and urbanity, and remained an unassuming but unflinching moralist, separating the sheep from the goats. And what is meaningful is that the moral quality of her characters is not unconnected with their economic strength. Who can forget the opening lines of her very first novel, *Pride and Prejudice*?

It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in need of a wife. However little the feelings or views of such a man may be on his first entering a neighbourhood, this truth is so well filled in the minds of the surrounding families, that he is considered as the rightful property of some one or other of their daughters.

And she knew that the rightful source of property was rent from land, and was also aware that the more powerful of the families in the countryside had profitable investments abroad. That the rent-receiving Darcy's ancestral Pemberly Hall will decline, yielding place to the plantation entrepreneur Sir Thomas Betram's Mansfield Park is dutifully acknowledged by her, despite her native inclination to refuse to bring the unpleasant truth of the slave-trade component of Sir Thomas's enterprise to the fore.

Calling Jane Austen a Marxist will not be complimentary either to Marx or to her, for she was comfortably ignorant of class struggle, and would not accept, heaven forbid, working-class seizure of state power. And she was fully assertive of the dignity of the middle class into which she was born. Elizabeth Bennet's refusal to be brow-beaten by the supercilious Lady Catherine and her firm declaration that she was as much a gentleman's daughter as Darcy was a gentleman is certainly backed by Jane Austen's full approval and warm admiration.

And it is this unwavering affiliation to the middle class that D.H. Lawrence found particularly detestable. Lawrence's words are quotable, for they indicate the working-class view of middle-class social affiliation. Lawrence says in his *A Propos of Lady Chatterley's Lover*,

In the old England the curious blood-connection held the classes together. ... We feel it in Defoe or Fielding. And then, in the mean Jane Austen, it is gone. Already this old maid typifies 'personality' instead of character, the sharp knowing in apartness instead of knowing togetherness, and she is, to my feeling, thoroughly unpleasant, English in the bad, mean, snobbish sense of the word, just as Fielding is English in the good generous sense.

It is equally revealing that Joseph Conrad, belonging as he did to Polish aristocracy, found it bewildering to hear of the praise of Jane Austen and did not understand what was there in her novels.

But that Jane Austen is artistically great is admitted even by Lawrence in spite of his hatred of her social attitude. He would put her alongside Dickens. In a review of a novel by the Italian writer Grazia Deledda, Lawrence writes,

We can hardly bear to recall the emotions of twenty or fifteen years ago, hardly at all, whereas we respond again quite vividly to emotions of Jane Austen or Dickens, nearer a hundred years ago.

I recall that one of my early attempts at literary criticism was on Jane Austen, wherein I had tried to confront the question whether her heroes were adequate. What I found, as any reader would do, was that her heroes were quite adequate in relation to the social and political world

in each of her six novels, particularly because the women needed them as persons to depend on; but the heroes were not as lively as the anti-heroes for whom she had a subterranean liking.

The fact of the matter is that her acceptance of the patriarchal system was not uncritical. Most of her fathers fail in the discharge of their duties. Her submission to patriarchy was due to her knowledge that male support was indispensable for the provision of comfort and protection of stability of the family. She herself had not married; not because she did not want to, but because no likely suitor was available. In fact, it is known that, taking advantage of her father's office as Rector, she had entered her name in the Church Register, not once but twice, as engaged to marry. The girl called the imagined grooms Fitzwilliam and Edmund who were to become Jane Austen's favorite heroes, novelistically.

In the English language, women have been more readily drawn to the writing of fiction than to poetry. Perhaps, this was due to their sense of realism made effective by material circumstances. Even when they are romantic, as Emily Brontë is, the economic and social reality is accepted by them as the base of the happenings. Emily Brontë's hero, Heathcliff, was a dark child, picked up from a street in the port city of Liverpool, where slave-trading was in practice during the time reported in the novel. Heathcliff has all the qualities of a romantic hero but is doomed because of his lack of inheritance and respectability. Setting him aside, Cathy marries Edgar who has the advantage of a rich inheritance. Emily Brontë disapproved of class difference, but was unable to ignore it. That made her a great novelist, and not a writer of cheap romance. Emily Brontë might have found, as her elder sister Charlotte did, that Jane Austen's women were fine as ladies but incomplete as human beings; and yet she shares with Jane Austen the sense of realism that bases itself on economics.

There is yet another circumstance that brings them together. Socially, neither Jane Austen nor Emily Brontë was encouraged to write. Of Jane Austen's six novels, two were published posthumously, and two did not bear her name on the title page during her lifetime; they were known to have been written by "a certain lady." Emily Brontë, who came four decades later, was also obliged to appear in public pseudonymously. And, one recalls, Mary Evans had to disguise herself as George Eliot to make her appearance as a writer.

Emily Brontë's world was even more circumscribed than Jane Austen's; but, unlike her more famous predecessor, she was rebellious in temperament. The difference is reflected in their choice of subject, use of language, and method of presentation. Jane Austen wrote in the neo-classical tradition. Emily Brontë is akin to the Romantics – in content as well as style. Jane Austen's plot construction is deliberate; her stories move to a logical conclusion. Emily Brontë's story of passionate love and unbearable anguish needed, almost in contrast, a complicated yet vibrant narrative which could not be accommodated within the conventional well-constructed plot.

Writing four decades after Emily Brontë, Virginia Woolf found the established notion of the form even more difficult to put up with. Virginia Woolf's world was metropolitan and much more complex and advanced than both Jane Austen's and Emily Brontë's. Her concern with the

world within was deeper than Emily Brontë's. Virginia Woolf has a metropolitan informality and her prose is fluid and poetic, being at several removes from that of Jane Austen. True, she was not required to write anonymously or pseudonymously, but she found the middle-class tension of a war-devastated England intolerable and killed herself by drowning. Whereas Jane Austen was able to laugh, even if gently, at the follies and incongruities of patriarchy, neither Emily Brontë nor Virginia Woolf was prone to do that. They suffered, and paid for their suffering. Emily Brontë did not live beyond thirty, and Virginia Woolf escaped through self-annihilation. Patriarchy's accomplishments are many and indeed various.

Like all works of art, Jane Austen's novels demand close attention; and the more we pay that the more significant they become, artistically as well as historically. Her novels have endured, and her readers will have many reasons to be grateful to her.

---

Spoken at the second death-centenary celebration of Jane Austen at the University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh

