

SOCIO-ECONOMIC SCENARIO IN JANE AUSTEN'S NOVELS

By

Reeta Dwivedi

Assistant Professor, MIER College of Education, Jammu, J&K, India.

Abstract

No study of Jane Austen can be complete without dwelling on the way the novelist focusses attention on the social life of the times, particularly the social relationships and changing patterns in the lives of the middle class families, largely based in rural countryside. Living as she was in a crucial period of European and British history, Jane Austen could not help but notice the changes that were taking place in the lives of the families around her. This small area was for her a microcosm of the state of society of the times. Changes in the domestic life of the people also find a place in her novels, but the change was primarily in the middle class families. The most potent agent of this change was marriage. Women being dependent on their father before marriage and on their husbands after it, marriage was the most important event in the life of women to make or mar their future. The choice of a wealthy life-partner was therefore necessary for their social security. In her novels, Jane Austen reveals that she had a high esteem for marriage, which she regarded as a vehicle for the overall wellbeing of society and mankind. Marriage was one way in which middle class people could aspire to improve their conditions and achieve genteelism or respectability, as the term came to be known during Victorian times. The paper takes up the socio-economic scenario in Jane Austen's novels. Interestingly, the industrial revolution and the nineteenth century capitalism had not impinged on it. With menfolk hardly any professions available to the menfolk, most of them opted for either the navy or the army being regarded as unobjectionable.

Keywords: *revolution, countryside, microcosm, socio-economic scenario, unobjectionable.*

Introduction

Ironically, Jane Austen, the novelist who confines herself to the domestic world, supposedly unaware of the great events that were taking place outside her study room, like the Napoleonic Wars and the beginnings of the Industrial Revolution, emerges

as a social critic of the first order, if one were to study her five novels from the point of view of social criticism.

Surprisingly, the novels of Jane Austen namely *Pride and Prejudice, Sense and Sensibility, Emma, Mansfield Park and Persuasion* reveal much of the social

conditions of the times, especially the social change that was taking place in the middle class families of England families based in the rural countryside and apparently unconcerned with the larger world outside. Though not stories about nouveau riche, the novels do describe the slow but sure change being brought about in life styles, in mental attitude, in social and economic conditions of people belonging to the middle classes. In her novels, Jane Austen shows the intimate relationship between marriage and money and also between marriage and social status.

Julia Prewitt Brown in her study on social change in the novels of Jane Austen, states that there is a misconception about Jane Austen as an unconscious artist, whose genius consisted merely in recording the life around her.

The novels of Jane Austen show the change from the old order to the new, from the traditional world of the eighteenth century to the threshold of the modern world, beginning with the advent of the nineteenth century. The difference between her and the earlier novelists, like Daniel Defoe or

Richardson or even Fielding for all his picture of the eighteenth century life, lies in the fact that while the earlier novelists were not individual-centered, the values not following out of the characters in Jane Austen, it is the comment of the novelist in the form of ironic presentation that sets the tone.

Objectives / Purpose

The purpose of this work is to study the changing social patterns in the man-woman, family-to-family and class-to-class relationship in the novels of Jane Austen and to relate these relationships to the economic and social forces at work in the transformation of English society in the early 1800s.

Discussion

In Jane Austen's novels there is hardly a single male character who does any work particularly. She only accepts the professions as the army, navy, the church or clergyman and the law. Of these professions, she has considered only the army and navy as unobjectionable. But we will remember that in *Persuasion*, Anne Elliot was not permitted by her family to marry Captain Wentworth because

her father thought it as a very degrading alliance. To quote the words of the character in the novel namely Anne Elliot:

“The navy, I think, who have done so much for us, have at least an equal claim with any other set of men, for all the comforts and all the privileges which any home can give. Sailors work hard enough for their comforts, we must all allow”.

Sir Walter does not like this profession but Captain Wentworth has a great desire to rise in society and to get everything that he wanted through his profession. In the words of Sir Walter,

“Captain Wentworth had no fortune. He had been lucky in his profession; but spending freely what had come freely, had realized nothing. But he was confident that he should soon be rich: full of life and ardour, he knew that he should soon have a ship, and soon be on a station that would lead to everything he wanted” (Jane Austen 1225).

As a profession, the navy is regarded by Jane Austen and her characters as a means to earn a position or money. The other professions like the clergy and the law were also considered good by the novelist Leonard Woolf ‘s

comment on the professions of the male characters of Jane Austen is:

Out of her six heroes three are clergymen or prospective clergymen. But none of them seem to work as clergymen... This attitude towards ‘work’, profession and trade is, characteristic of a landed aristocracy or gentry. Otherwise the economic determination of Jane Austen is of the type which one usually associates with a capitalistic bourgeoisie. The social standards are almost entirely those of money and snobbery. It is remarkable to what an extent the plots and characters are dominated by questions of money... The axis of the plot in every novel except *Emma* is money or marriage or rank and marriage. The social standard, ideal, and duty of a woman is assumed to be to marry as high or as rich as possible, and we know, on Mrs. Bennet’s evidence that, according to the tariff, £10,000 a year was as a lord....

Studies on Jane Austen’s representation of economic and class issues also flourished under the influence of Marxist thought. Jane Austen’s attitude to economic matters

was most wittily expressed in W.H. Auden's *Letters to Lord Byron, Part-I*.

You could not shock her more than
she shocks me;
Besides her Joyce seems innocent
as grass,
It makes me feel uncomfortable to see
and English spinster of the middle-
class
describe the amorous effects of
'brass,' (4)

reveal so frankly and with such sobriety the economic basis of society.

The economic approach to Jane Austen was translated into the terms of literary criticism by Mark Schorer in his important essay, "Fiction and the Matrix of Analogy" [1949]. Here the values of "Commerce and property, the counting house and the inherited estate" are traced in Jane Austen's characteristic diction and metaphor." Logan Pearshall Smith finds *Pride and Prejudice* 'both didactic and mercenary' (Choudhary 34).

From the novels of Jane Austen the readers get the impression that a well-bred society must have been established and was also running forward in the latter half of the eighteenth century. The advancement

was not only in moral standards but also in sensitiveness and refinement. In fact, there had been a step forward in many respects: in the cottage, in the farm, in the manor house and at the court. The aristocracy and the landed gentry had not felt that impulse for improvement which encouraged or forced the class of the unlanded gentry.

In her novels, the readers find that the definition of a 'gentleman' has changed. A gentleman was originally a man property who did no work of any kind. Here, property meant land. This can be proved by a quotation from her last novel *Persuasion*. "Wentworth? Oh ay! Mr. Wentworth, the curate of Monkford. You misled me by the term gentleman. I thought you were speaking of some man of property." (Jane Austen 1250).

The landed gentry established its position at the end of the sixteenth century when the Reformation took place. But the manor house families were large and the number of acres in England remained the same. As time went on there came to be more gentleman upon the ground but that ground could not support them. Thus, it became necessary that the younger sons should do something to support themselves.

Since the medical profession and trade were banned at that time, there was not much which a gentleman felt himself to do. But banking was permitted. A commission might be brought for him in the Army and constant sea warfare brought them quick promotion and plenty of prize and money in the Navy. But the church was the great resource, the aristocracy and the landed gentry held most of the best living in their hands, and sold them a regular source of income. These livings could be bought for or presented to younger sons and sons-in-law. Thus they could secure a comfortable income for them without doing any work. The task of baptizing, marrying and burying the peasantry was carried on by ill paid curates, who were never regarded as gentlemen.

As the eighteenth century rolled on, a large number of people who were lying or depending on these gentlemen increased. They took their living by doing the work of these gentlemen, for which they were paid.

As Plumb observes in *Studies in Social History*,

“The families which rose by business, were affluent enough to enable some of their children to pursue their scholarly studies in

leisure; but they had neither the wealth nor the inclination to become magnets and were always liable to have to save a brother whose affairs had failed to prosper. In any event a fortune divided among forty grand-children did not give the cadet branches the chance to live extravagantly. The Anglican families tended to be less well to do. In the case of both, sound commercial principles were allied to ascetic habits. Even on their meager stipends the poorer dons thrived and, as few of them were permitted to marry, they saved. Sedgwick wrote to his mother at the age of twenty-six from Trinity, ‘I find that I have save £ 1700 and hope to save £400 a year as long as I stay here: in spite of all my travelling, books and the extremely luxurious life...”.

Many circumstances helped in improvement of manners, morals and refinement among the wealthy parsons. The position of these men protected them from the two great evils of the age: the arrogance of the rich people and the degrading humility of the poor. Their short income preserved them from the materialism of the great wealth. They were alive to the advantages of education because

their sons must be self-supporting. An aristocrat could educate his son to be what he has himself been but he cannot imagine any possible improvement. A poor man hopes that his children will go further than he has. He wants to see them prepared better to face the world. He prepared his daughters in such a way that they can set and maintain their own homes.

Plumb says, "Great as their influence was in politics and intellectual life in the middle of the century perhaps it was even more important at the end. For then the restraints of religion and thrift and accepted class distinctions started to crumble and English society to rock under the flood of money. The class war, not merely between labours and owners, but between all social Strata of the middle and upper classes began in earnest. The Awkward Age, The Way We Live Now, The Massarenes and Belchamber are only four of the novels which deal with the corruption of society by money." (Plumb 252).

Trevelyan in his book *English Social History* writes, "The social gulf between rich and poor clergy was still almost as wide as in mediaeval times. But the proportion of the well to do was greater, for they now included not only prelates and pluralists, but a

number of resident parish clergy of good family and connections, living in the parsonage and attending to its duties. The rise in the value of tithes and glebe farms, with the improvement of agriculture, helped this development.

In Queen Anne's reign, out of some 10,000 livings, as many as 5597 had been worth less than £50 a year; a hundred years later only 4000 were below £150. Throughout the eighteenth century, country gentlemen came more and more to regard living in their gift as worth the acceptance of their younger sons. The ideal arrangement, well established by the time of Jane Austen, as her readers know was a good Rectory, with a bow window, built in a pleasant spot a mile from the manor house, and inhabited by a son or son-in-law of the squire. The family group was kept together in that way, and the religious needs of the village were served by a gentleman, of education and refinement though perhaps of no great zeal-for it was only after the beginning of the nineteenth century that the gentleman parson was likely to be 'serious,' that is to say, evangelical." (Trevelyan 359-360).

In *Pride and Prejudice*, one can see that the values and standards of the

Hartsfield world are based on the assumption that it is right and proper for a minority of the community to live at the expense of the majority.

The term 'entail' is often used in her novels. An entail was a legal device which was used to prevent a landed property from being broken up or from going in the hands of the female line. This is a logical extension of the generally experienced practice of leaving one's wealth or real estate to one's eldest son or 'heir,' thus Darcy has an income of £10,000 a year, representing a wealth of about £ 200,000 while his sister has £30,000. Similarly, Bingley has £ 100,00 and his two sisters £20,000.

"Her husband, however, would not agree with her here, for besides having a regard for his cousin, Charles Hayter was an eldest son, and he saw the things as an eldest son himself." (Jane Austen 1225).

Entailed property is usually inherited by male or by the nearest male-line descendant (son of son etc.) of the original owner of the estate, "About a month ago I received this letter; and about a fortnight ago I answered it, for I thought it a case of some delicacy, and requiring early attention. It is from my cousin, Mr. Collins, who,

when I am dead, may turn you all out of this house as soon as he pleases." "Oh! My dear," cried his wife, "I cannot bear to hear that mentioned. Pray do not talk of that odious man. I do think it is the hardest thing in the world that your estate should be entailed away from your own children; and I am sure, if I had been you, I should have tried long ago to do something or other about it." (Jane Austen 267).

The ancestry of the original owner, in each generation goes through the eldest son who has left living male line descendants, thus the male line descendants of the second son of an owner will not have a chance to inherit the estate until all the male-line descendants of the eldest son have died out. For example we can see in the first case that Mr. Bennet had no son and he has only five daughters that is why his estate will be, entailed away by his cousin Mr. William Collins. In *Persuasion*, Mr. Elliot is the heir to Sir Walter. Entailment also prevents a father from disinheriting his eldest son.

Women generally inherit only if there are no male-line heirs left, and if there is more than one sister, then they are all equal co-heiresses, rather than only the eldest sister inheriting, the estate. "Mr. Bennet's property consisted

almost entirely in an estate of (2,000) two thousand a year, which, unfortunately for his daughters, was entailed, in default of male heirs, on a distant relation; and their mother's fortune, though ample for her situation in life, could but ill supply the deficiency of his. Her father had been an attorney in Meryton, and had left her four thousand pounds" (Jane Austen 246).

Of course, any property that a woman possessed before her marriage automatically becomes her husband's, unless it is settled on her. Sometimes a man marries a woman only for the sake of her fortune and after the marriage, the woman and her money are legally in the husband's power. This is the reason why Wickham tries to elope with Georgiana Darcy, who has £30,000 a year.

The other side of the same thing was the forced marriage of an heiress, to ensure that her money passes into the approved hands of the family. This appears in *Sense and Sensibility* in Colonel Brandon's story. The groom's income and the money that the bride may have had "settled" on her, such as Georgiana and Darcy's 30,000 pounds (*Pride and Prejudice*) was by contributions from one or both of their

families, with the view of marriage as an 'alliance,' between the two families. Sensible people thought that marriage was not only for life but also for social security. Therefore it was foolish to marry without having a more or less guaranteed income in advance: As for example, in *Pride and Prejudice*:

Mr. Collins to Elizabeth: "My situation in life, my connections with the family of de Bourgh, and my relationship to your own, are circumstances highly in my favour; and you should take it into further consideration, that in spite of your manifold attractions, it is by no means certain that another offer of marriage may ever be made you. Your portion is unhappily so small that it will in all likelihood undo the effects of your loveliness and amiable qualifications" (Jane Austen 297).

"Lady Catherine to Elizabeth, "Because honour, decorum, prudence-nay, interest, forbid it. Yes, Miss Bennet, interest; for do not expect to be noticed by his family or friends if you willfully act against the inclinations of all. You will be censured, slighted, and despised by everyone connected with him. Your alliance will be a disgrace; your name will never even be mentioned by any of us.

“My daughter and my nephew are formed for each other. They are descended, on the maternal side, from the same noble line; and, on the fathers,’ from respectable, honourable, and ancient, though untitled families. Their fortune on both sides is splended. They are destined for each other by the voice of every member of their respective houses; and what is to divide them? The upstart pretensions of a young woman without family, connections, or fortune” (Jane Austen 445).

In the context of marriage, a ‘settlement’ is a legal document that ensures that some or all of the property that the wife brings to the marriage ultimately belongs to her and will go to her children but she does not have personal control over it during her marriage, it would basically belong entirely to her husband, and a settlement to her husband, and a settlement can also specify a guaranteed money or income that the children of the marriage are to inherit. In *Pride and Prejudice*, “Five thousand pounds was settled by marriage on Mrs. Bennet and the children.” In *Northanger Abbey* Henry Tilney cannot be entirely disinherited by his father, General Tilney, because some of his inheritance is guaranteed by the

marriage settlement of his late mother. Also in *‘Sense and Sensibility,’* the money that came with Mr. Henry Dashwood’s late first wife, is settled on their son, and it cannot be used to help his second wife or his daughters by second wife.

“By a former marriage, Mr. Henry Dashwood had one son, by his present lady, three daughters. The son, a steady, respectable young man, was amply provided for by the fortune of his mother, which had been large, and half of which devolved on him on his coming of age. By his own marriage, likewise, which happened soon afterwards, he added to his wealth. To him, therefore, the succession to the Norland estate was not so really important as to his sisters; for their fortune, independent on what might arise to them from their father’s inheriting that property, could be but small. Their mother had nothing, and their father only seven thousand pounds in his own disposal; for the remaining moiety of his first wife’s fortune was also secured to her child, and he had only a life interest in it... Mr. Dashwood had wished for it more for the sake of his wife and daughters than for himself or his son; but to his son, and his son’s son, a child of four years old, it was secured, in such a

way, as to leave to himself no power of providing for those who were most dear to him, and who most needed a provision, by any charge on the estate, or by any sale of its valuable woods. The whole was tied up for the benefit of this child" (Jane Austen 1-2).

A settlement is generally part of an over all financial agreement between the wife or wife's family and the husband or husband's family. So to ensure Lydia's marriage in *Pride and Prejudice* Mr. Bennet is required to guarantee to Lydia and Wickham by settlement, her equal share of the five thousand pounds secured among his children after the demise of Mr. Bennet and his wife, and to enter into an engagement of allowing her during his life time, one hundred pounds per year. In addition to this settlement, Darcy, undertook to pay Wickham's debts and purchase an officer's commission in the regular army.

In those days marriage was the only career open to a woman and to remain single was branded as a failure. Marriage was also necessary for financial dependence and social security. Therefore Mrs. Bennet's threat to Elizabeth, "But I tell you what, Miss Lizzy-if you take it into your head to go on refusing every offer of marriage in this way, you will never

get a husband at all and I am sure I do not know who is to maintain you when your father is dead. I shall not be able to keep you-and so I warn you" (Jane Austen 300) has some realism. This is the only background against which Elizabeth and Jane are not hopeless to be married to anyone with a good fortune, unlike Charlotte Lucas. Charlotte had married Mr. Collins for her secured future and also for a social security. He tells Elizabeth, "But when you have had time to think it all over I hope you will be satisfied with what I have done. I am not romantic, you know; I never was. I ask only a comfortable home; and considering Mr. Collins's character, connections, and situation in life, I am convinced that my chance of happiness with him is as fair as most people can boast on entering the marriage state" (Jane Austen 307).

At that time the economic dependence of a woman was on her father before marriage and after marriage on her husband. In Jane Austen's time, for even educated women like Jane Fairfax or Emma, the only option open other than marriage was that of becoming a governess. The social structure where women lacked education and economic dependence, their preoccupation with marriage and

husband- hunting was natural and the readers can see this in all the novels Austen including *Emma*.

The state of marriage was not only essential to a tolerable existence for most women (as Charlotte Lucas well knew); it was, for the English girl of Jane Austen's day, "The one time in her life when her destiny lay not in her family's hands, or in her husband's, but to a significant degree in her own.

"Ironically, Jane Austen's novels show that the period of courtship was the least frivolous period of a woman's life, the one moment in which her entire future-social, emotional, and economic-was decided" (Brown 11-12).

Sometimes the financial problems of the estates or the families also forced a woman to be married to a man whom she did not like. Such was the problem of the Mansfield estate, the financial problem which make the marriage between Maria Bertram and the stupid Mr. Rushworth. "It was an alliance which he (Sir Thomas) could not have relinquished without pain... Sir Thomas, happy to escape the embarrassing evils of a rapture, the wonder, the reflections, the reproach that must attend it, happy to secure a marriage which would bring him such

an addition of respectability and influence, and very happy to think anything of his daughter's disposition that was most favourable for the purpose" (Jane Austen 590).

That is the only reason why Mrs. Bennet, in *Pride and Prejudice*, was anxious and hopes to marry her daughters in high rank. Because if Mr. Bennet dies before the daughters are married, they will find themselves without a home and accustomed income and these are the same circumstance as those of the Dashwoods at the opening of *Sense and Sensibility*, where Mr. Henry Dashwood's, widow and his three daughters become dependent on the liberality of a person of their own relation with a small cottage to rent.

"At the close of the eighteenth century, the gentry were beginning to experience the financial decline that would gather force through the century. The increase in population particularly in urban population, threatened the traditions of the relatively small gentry. In *Mansfield Park* we witness the gentry's resistance to urban values...."

The gradual breakdown of a social structure of fixed classes is realized in

the bare plot of the novel, which includes the rise to prosperity of the poor, lower-middle-class Price children. The challenge to traditional rights and duties of the gentry is felt in several spheres: Maria Bertram is numb to any sense of duty in her role as a mistress of an old estate. (Marriage is no longer viewed as a social act, but as a commercial one.) Mr. Rushworth does not feel any more inclined to oversee his estate than does Henry Crawford, who rarely returns to Everingham. The effect of Crawford's absence is hinted when he describes how, on his return, he found several families to be badly off. The economic organization of village agriculture was changing generally because of its inability to remain self-sufficient. Sir Thomas travels to Antigua to secure the colonial holdings that apparently are vital to his financial stability. All of these changes in the economic and social life of the nation are registered in the personal life of the characters... Marriage is the highest self-fulfillment in Jane Austen, yet the debasement of this most primal hope is revealed in the three marriages described in the opening of the novel. From its economic to the spiritual condition, the world of *Mansfield Park* is a world in transition and decline" (Brown 85-86).

At that time there is consciousness of rank among the people of higher society, even the closest human relationship can be upset by this. The people have economic anxiety and that is why John Dashwood makes his inquiries about Colonel Brandon, to Elinor,

"As soon as they were out of the house, his inquiries began. "Who is Colonel Brandon? Is he a man of fortune?"

"Yes; he has a very good property in Dorsetshire."

"I am glad of it. He seems a most gentlemanlike man, and I think, Elinor, I may congratulate you on the prospect of a very respectable establishment in life."

"Me, brother-what do you mean?"

"He likes you. I observed him narrowly, and am convinced of it. What is the amount of his fortune?"

"I believe about two thousand a year."

"Two thousand a year"; and then working himself up to a pitch of enthusiastic generosity he added: "Elinor, I wish with all my heart it were twice as much for your sake" (Jane Austen 133).

Elinor, easily understanding the single track of her brother's money mindedness does not reply.

"Elinor kept her concern and her censure to herself, was very thankful that Marianne was not present to share the provocation" (Jane Austen 133).

It is also true in the case of Emma that much of her unpleasantness is due to her consciousness of class or rank. In her class, family is the base and property is the outward symbol of status, and marriage is the chief aim. However, she dismisses, marriage as a chief aim for herself:

"...Were I to fall in love, indeed, it would be a different thing! But I never have been in love, it is not my way, or my nature; and I do not think I ever shall. And, without love, I am sure, I should be a fool to change such a situation as mine. Fortune I do not want; employment I do not want; consequent I do not want; I believe few married women are half as much mistress of their husband's house as I am of Hartfield; and never, never could I expect to be so truly beloved and important; so always first and always right in any man's eyes as I am in my fathers" (Jane Austen 84).

Emma is the only heroine, of all the Jane Austen's heroines who does not have any economic uncertainty. But she represents the class consciousness of the people of higher rank. She wants to lead Highbury in place of cooperating with the people of Highbury. She feels that Highbury needs her but she does not need Highbury. That is why her chief concern was to remain single.

The other heroines except Emma, have uncertainty of future. Thus their chief aim is marriage which means economic and social security Charlotte Lucas recognizes Mr. Collins foolishness and his being improper match for herself. Still she decides to marry him. Living under the pressure of economic anxiety she has abolished her every desire except the desire for security:

"The stupidity with which he was favoured by nature, must guard his courtship from any charm that could make a woman wish for its continuance; and Miss Lucas, who accepted him solely from the pure and disinterested desire of an establishment, cared not how soon that establishment were gained" (Jane Austen 110).

The socio economic scenario in the novels of Jane Austen is thus centered around the lives of country gentlemen, who do not engage in any worthwhile occupation, except that of social intercourse and growing about families like their own.

The economic basis of social behaviour on the lives of Marxist philosophy is brought only by Jane Austen in her novels. According to her, refinement in behaviour comes from good living and good living in turn comes from a good income.

The problem of providing a living to sons who were not heirs but had good university education, is taken up for consideration.

Since Jane Austen's England saw the beginning of the industrial revolution, the problems of the new and emerging social classes of the gulf between the rich and the poor, were besetting society, but there is hardly any reflection of it in Jane Austen's novel. It is only the problems of the landed gentry-the problem of inheritance of instance that she is concerned with.

The position of women, again is shown in relation to inheritance and in consequence marriage is also seen in relation to the property rights and

status of the parties concerned. If the woman was a dependant (usually on her father) her marriage prospects dwindled in comparison to a woman possessed of land and money.

The consciousness of rank and social position is well brought out only by Jane Austen in her novels. But everywhere it is money that matters, so strong is the financial basis of social relationships, positive and prospective relationships, chiefly through marriage.

Thus Jane Austen's novels present a fine picture of the state of the English society, particularly the connection between the economic and the social structures. With few professions open to men and more to women, it was property and living from it that determined the social status of people. Since property was bequeathed to the heir apparent, that is the eldest son, the younger sons were deprived of either their profession or their living.

Women were dependent either on their fathers or on their husbands. Marriage therefore, was a very important way of acquiring or distributing property. As such, the commercial or economic aspect of marriage was more important than love. The novels of Jane Austen show

why and how marriage or selection of life partners played such an important part in social relationship. The fact that Jane Austen concentrates on marriage and courtship underscores the crucial role played by marriage in the society of her times.

Conclusion

The novels of Jane Austen can be regarded as a classic study of how social patterns emerge in a gradually changing socio economic scenario, how a basically agriculture based or rural society undergoes change because of small changes within the family caused by either marriage or occupation or changes of habitation. The novels show both an upward and downward mobility, some families improving their economic status and thereby their social position and some others going down financially, and consequently, socially. However, their loss of fortune or becoming poor does not much affect their hierarchical status in the community. Individuals as well as groups are seen moving from one set of cultural values to another. The effort of hitherto economically backward communities and individuals to rise to the level of gentility that is become 'genteel' people, because of improvement in their condition marks many of the

novels of Jane Austen. Such a change cannot be regarded as an upheaval, but it did was certainly cause much readjustment in social relations. Class divisions are not blurred, as most so called genteel families and fixed roots, that could not be shaken by an incident or two, in which some members had married out of the class or entered the class through marriage or because of economic hardship caused by the slow erosion of the agricultural base as a result of the Industrial Revolution on that had begun to make its presence felt, though Jane Austen seems blissfully unaware that such a Revolution had begun. In the novels of Jane Austen the mobility of the newly rich is contrasted with the stability of the established classes in the rural sector, specially the landlord class, which are perhaps making its-last ditch stand against the inroads of commercialism and industrialism. To go back to *Pride and Prejudice*, the novel can be seen as the representation of a great change that was taking place in society, the movement of a formerly depressed class into a position of power and a formerly powerful class into a position of compromise.

Thus, the novels of Jane Austen can be regarded as studies in social life, as

also the changes that were taking place in society because of the interaction and the coming together of various classes or families with disparate cultural backgrounds and traditions. This interaction brought

out social change, though there were strong economic reasons for the change in the social set up and in social life. Jane Austen depicts all this vividly through her characters alive.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Dr. Reeta Dwivedi is working as an Assistant Professor in MIER College of Education, Jammu, J&K. Formerly, she has worked for 8 years as faculty in English at Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar University, Agra. She has more than 13 years of experience of teaching UG & PG classes. She earned Ph.D in English from Dr. B. R. Ambedkar University, Agra, UP. She has been awarded with Pushpa Bul Chandani Award for Securing highest marks in PG Diploma in Translation Theory and Practice, Kendriya Hindi Sansthan, Agra. She has participated and presented research papers in various National and International Seminars and Conferences. She has published 2 books and 7 articles.
