

Emotional Identity: An Advantage or a Setback In context to Jane Austen

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Abstract

Jane Austen's personal choices in life paves the way for her discussion of the microcosm of women's culture in the early nineteenth-century England. She gave women independent voices, while remaining within the constraints of the dominant patriarchal culture. At the same time, Austen's novels depict the lives of women in all their quaint apparels and social amusements which actually reflected the social realities of her times. In doing this Jane Austen, I feel, emphasizes her perception of women who were unique in both reinforcing their emotional identities amidst the society then and in resisting dominant masculine culture that surrounded them. The women in her novels demonstrate their own ambivalence of representing patriarchal culture of domesticity for women as well as embracing the distinct women's culture that enabled the independent voice of women. In my article I would discuss the role of women protagonist in Austen's novels keeping in view their emotional identity proves a setback or an advantage for them in the course of the novels, revealing "realism", the core aspect of Jane Austen's fiction.

Keywords: Culture, Patriarchy, social reality, emotional identity, domesticity, realism

Article

Jane Austen sought to revise the traditions of the novel as a means to authenticate stereotyped definitions of women, envisage themselves anew and thereby provide models for change. It is with Jane Austen that the actual feminisation of English novels begin. Her quite unassuming nature, persistent hard work and perfection enabled her to raise the form of the novel to a new level. She formulated her own ideas and views and felt that tales should have a moral. She abhorred romanticised characters living in idealized condition and made them into practical and down-to-earth beings. She felt that the mind must govern the heart. Her heroines like Emma Woodhouse and Catherine Morland exhibit a gradual progression from state of naivety to rational maturity. While Jane Austen's fiction is thus essentially domestic, revolving around love and marriage, which she considered as a means of self-actualisation, this article will focus on the feministic undercurrents in her novels. Her women are the bottom rung of patriarchal hierarchy with a male master at the top, hawk-like looking of any transgression of authority.

The Online Oxford Dictionary formulates the following characterization of Emotion

- A strong feeling, such as joy, anger, sadness
- Instinctive or intuitive feeling as distinguished from reasoning or knowledge

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There are many other emotions such as 'fear', 'love', 'shame', 'astonishment' and 'aversion', but researchers and social anthropologists in general argue that majorly there are only four emotions- fear, anger, sadness and enjoyment. It is not surprising that emotion is also defined as being 'instinctive' and 'intuitive' as it is often a response to a situation where the quickness of reaction is the most important factor. Additionally, the emotional mind is hallmarked by being 'childlike'. It is categorical, judgemental and unconditional with a bias towards the person itself, unable to create a distance from the emotion that powers the state of being. This setback of inability to be objective leads the person to take his/her beliefs to be the whole truth.

Definition of Identity for English Language Learners

- The set of qualities and beliefs that make one person or group different from others
- The distinguishing character or personality of an individual. To possess an 'Identity' is to have reliable qualities, to hold tightly to them through the temptations to swerve and change

Two individuals of the same character will fare differently in different polities(societies), not because their characters will change through their experiences(though different aspects would become dominant or recessive)but simply because a good fit of character and society can conduce to well-being and happiness, while a bad fit produces misery and rejection, which proves an identity to be a setback. Since characters are identified as public persons if writ large, can represent for everyman. They can portray the myth, the conflicts, reversals and discoveries seen in a person's life in a particular society.

The struggle between logic and emotion is something we can all probably relate to in life. Jane Austen examines this very issue in her first published novel *Sense and Sensibility*. It offers relevant insight into human nature today, more than two hundred years later since the novel was written. The title itself announces the main antithesis, yet it can hardly suggest how diligently Jane Austen distinguishes between the mode of sense and the mode of feeling in the course of the novel. In its broadest outlines, the plot sets up the series of comparable situations in which we are to watch the sense of Elinor Dashwood and the Sensibility of Marianne, her younger sister. The novel's first face opposes the restrains courtship of Elinor by a despondent Edward Ferrars to Willoughby's ebullient relationship with Marianne, and more important, contrasts Elinor's relative composure during Edward's long absences with Marianne's distraction at being separated from Willoughby. Later, when both attachments seem impossible because of Edward's engagement to Lucy Steele and Willoughby's sudden marriage, Elinor's stoicism is reckoned against Marianne's wild despair. By the end, the novel contends

that the individual can morally engage himself in the social organism, of which he is a necessary part, only when he achieves an appropriate balance between sense and feeling to establish one's emotional identity. Although we are told initially in the novel for Elinor that "her feelings are strong"(p.6), yet she is primarily allied with sense through the two-thirds of the book in trying to guide Marianne towards reason. The entire novel argues that the duty to which Elinor is bound, marks the highest achievement of the individual in compelling her to relate herself both sensibly and emotionally to others. Later Marianne takes over the faculty of reason in her words "My illness has made me think I considered the pastnothing but a series of imprudence towards myself", the feelings are evident in her words "I saw that my own feelings had prepared my sufferings, and that my want of fortitude under them had almost led me to the grave".

In *Pride and Prejudice* Jane Austen creates Elizabeth Bennet as a reflection of active feminine in response to the power of patriarchal ideologies predominant then. Since Elizabeth is sure of her opinions, she is confident in her conversations in her novels. Thus Kaplan asserts "To convey awareness of sexual inequality and subtle and overt expression of its unfairness, the heroine speaks with a female voice"(p.189). The protest of Austen's heroines against the secondary place of women shows that she creates them with the self-conscious identity. Elizabeth rejects two marriage proposals to show that she is a woman with sense and self and has her voice. Elizabeth's independent and questioning mind is presented in contrast to Jane's trusting and objective conduct. Further, Austen exemplifies properly the social pressure over women, which disregards feminine identity with the help of Charlotte's marriage with Mr. Collins. Lydia is partially presented as a counter-heroine of the novel who symbolises the results of the lack of education. She simply thinks about satisfying her needs and does not care about the propriety of her behaviour. Her elopement with Wickham evidently shows how she disrespects her own identity as a woman. Elizabeth chooses to act autonomously against patriarchy. On the contrary Lydia's independence is completely for personal satisfaction. Alone among the Bennets she opposes Lydia's trip to Brighton and tries to persuade her father, who thinks Elizabeth selfishly hoping to preserve her own credit with her suitors. Elizabeth possess altogether the finer capacities of intellect and she always behaves with a keener awareness of herself to other people. Once Darcy's letter has cleared her prejudice she does not hesitate to judge herself firmly again, she gives a clear indication of her mental strength when she faces Lady Catherine with unruffled dignity revealing that she is a spirited and independent young girl who cannot be brow beaten. Even after Elizabeth has revised her opinion of Darcy, she does not go to the other extreme of eulogizing him. As a moral contrast to Elizabeth, the younger sister Lydia is caricatured as a silly, shallow and unstable

personality, devoid of judgement and of any sense of shame and responsibility at her deeds. She is also self-willed but it proves to be a setback for her immature conduct.

Emma lacks maturity and education which proves to be a setback for her emotional identity. Her major shortcoming is her wilfulness. Her behaviour is childlike and the mantle of counselling falls upon Mr. Knightly. Twenty-one year old Emma enjoys best blessings of existence-beauty, material resources, comfortable home and happy disposition. Austen points out the inherent disadvantages of such an advantageous position in Emma's overbearing and imperious character. In keeping with Emma's bloated ego in her identity, the novel is named after her. The author seems to be tentatively experimenting with various permutations and combinations of traits in her quest for an ideal woman. The naive but strong heroine sheds her delusions one by one to gain clarity and knowledge. Both her snobbery and her wish to keep herself in emotionally inviolate condition Emma has to seize on Harriet as a companion. By varied trials and tribulations in the course of the novel, elegant Emma becomes a complete woman with the dawn of rationality in her character.

In *Mansfield Park*, banishment of Maria and acknowledgement of Fanny Price as its mistress is an affirmation of her personal identity. Jane Austen affirms that an individual can transcend the constraints of sex, class and education by means of one's moral identity. Fanny asserts her moral uprightness and courage by rejecting Henry Crawford, thereby once daring to incur Sir Thomas Bertram's displeasure also. Sir Thomas contemplates towards the end of the novel, "Principle, active principle had been wanting", and that his daughters had never been properly taught to govern their emotions, inclinations and tempers. Unlike Elizabeth Bennet, Emma or Catherine Morland Fanny Price does not undergo any real change in her behaviour in the novel. Rather her consciousness seems gradually to open out, since she more obviously takes on the function of the moral norm by which other characters are to be evaluated. If Fanny's emotional sensitivity causes her to suffer acutely on practically on every occasion, this sensitivity also fosters almost unrelievedly accurate set of judgements made by her.

In *Northanger Abbey*, Catherine Morland is an active young woman caricatured by Jane Austen not only to satirize gothic popular fiction but also to evoke duplicitous social mores. Catherine's character is very strong and independent. Her innocence and directness is thrown into relief by Isabella's guile and equivocations. Henry Tilney is particularly charmed by the forthrightness of modest and diffident Catherine who does not care for polite affected, lady-like manners. Her independent identity involves in the skirmishes with the enemy in the form of excessive imagination.

In *Persuasion*, Jane Austen explores the complex relationship between reason and feeling and tries to put a healthy balance to it. It is worth noticing that novel's narrative is dominated by heroine Anne Elliot's consciousness in which she wrestles constantly with her feelings. She asserts her individuality and identity in order to be true to herself and to have the best influence on the society around her. Throughout the novel Anne develops as an individual and by the time she finally marries Wentworth, the marriage is not needed to complete her because she has already made her emotional transformation long ago. Her emotional identity gives women the validity and worth of female emotions. Anne is a realist who accepts her situation of loving without hope with equanimity. She never wallows in self pity, displays no bitterness or ill-feeling either towards Louisa who seems to be attracted to Wentworth or towards Lady Russell who advised her wrongly. She endures a lot without growing hard, jealous or malicious in spite of the unfair attitude of her relatives.

Fanny Price, Elizabeth Bennet and Emma are the central figures in the novels where they are heroines and situations are viewed through their eyes but they are not always right hence there is much irony. Fanny is too self-righteous to see things in proper perspective, Elizabeth is too full of pride and prejudice to judge the true merit of Darcy and Emma is too much a victim of her own wilful imagination to recognize things for what they are. But Anne having suffered the loss of her love eight years before the novel opens is sadder and hence more mature and wiser than the other impetuous heroines. She has learnt her lessons from life and hence is able to judge correctly not only Wentworth's real worth but also Mr. Elliot's duplicity and Benwick's exaggerated show of grief. To sum up, emotional identity of an individual can at times prove to be an advantage and can be a setback also.

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