



The History of Class Mobilization in Georgian England as Told by the Works of Jane Austen and its Relation to Indian Academics

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ABSTRACT

This study dismantles the works of British novelist, Jane Austen to analyze the intricacies of Georgian England's society focusing on class, gender, customs economy and morality. By interpreting her works in like with various ideologies, the merit of Austen's works in providing social commentary is judged and examined. A secondary theme of the study is the vitality of literary sources in historical analysis and the scope they present to broaden historical understanding.

The first line of British novelist Jane Austen's most popular novel reads, "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife". Satire as it may be, another truth that is universally acknowledged by academicians everywhere is that an author's merit lies in the skill and flair with which the author accomplishes the objective of the narrative and how relevant that objective is to the world that will be consuming the manuscript upon its completion. Jane Austen's works have been subject to this form of academic scrutiny an endless number of times in the past 200 years following the publication of her first novel 'Sense and Sensibility' (1811). This begs the question – what is it about Jane Austen and her novels that inspire such academic labour? Who is Jane Austen in the broad context of world history? And what light can her works shed on the social history of her time?

Keywords: class, landed gentry system, primogeniture, education, literary sources, society

INTRODUCTION

Jane Austen lived her life in what is known as Georgian England. The Georgian Period of British History is pointed from 1714 to 1830 covering the reigns of George I, George II, George III and George IV spanning the time of more than a century. The Georgian Period was grand both in length and due to the significance of the events that took place during it. It saw the power of the monarchy liquidate as British domestic policy was largely controlled by the British Parliament and cabinet government. Aside from the monarchy's diminishing power, 1714 to 1830 witnessed an increase in population in Britain (and the world) alongside a greater circulation of the written medium and a rise in literacy rates. Consequently, the latter part of the Age of Enlightenment led by venerated geniuses like Montesquieu, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, David Hume, Immanuel Kant and Voltaire among others also took place during this time. The overwhelming length of this time period renders the task of covering every single event of notice that took place during this span within a sentence (or even two) inconceivable. Nevertheless, it remains important to note certain events of significance. The Seven Years' War, British colonial expansion into South-Asia, The American Revolution, The French Revolution and The Napoleonic Wars are key events of the time

that influenced the individuals, governments and events of their time (an impact that is strikingly visible to this day in all manner of human activity and thought). The latter two events listed above took place during a sub-category of the Georgian Period known as the Regency Era and were both witnessed by the prime subject of this paper, Jane Austen, as she grew up and came of age.

Austen's works were written and are largely set in the latter part of the Georgian Period famously known as the Regency Era. While the regency of George IV wasn't officially declared until 1811, the Regency Era encompasses the years between 1795 and 1830 during which Britain's throne was ruled by regent George, Prince of Wales (he was king from 1820-1830) following his father's steep decline into "madness". George III was ailed by mental illnesses not understood by his time. The Regency Era saw the spread of ideas of freedom, liberty and equality throughout Europe and the Americas. These ideas found their origin in the Age of Enlightenment that preceded them and weren't just a fancy of the thoroughly educated nobility as art and culture in the past had been, in fact, it was quite the opposite. Freedom, liberty, equality and justice were more than mere ideas rather they had crystallized into demands of the general public who didn't want a change in governance but rather an end to 'the' government that they perceived to be the cause behind the greater problems in society. The government in question is the monarchy. Revolutions in America and France threatened the very existence of the upper classes and a complete restructuring of class hierarchy in Europe was imminent. Even though what was anticipated in Europe did not take place as expected for a very long time. That is not to say no friction took place in social hierarchies.

In order to understand the changes in class hierarchy during the given time, it is first and foremost necessary to define what is meant by the term 'class structure' when mentioned in this paper, what the class structure of late-Georgian England looked like, how it was changing and why it was changing. The class structure of late-Georgian England was very different from the easily discernable three-fold structure of Victorian-era Britain. Class structure had been heavily influenced by agrarian relations throughout the majority of the 18th century but it was not quite what it used to be by the Regency Era. A social class in this context refers to a large social group that share common socio-economic characteristics and similar lifestyles. The upper classes generally shared features like hereditary ownership of land by primogeniture, main source of income being agricultural enterprises and rent derived from the land owned as well as a "respectable" family background (meaning a family constituted of the 'titled nobility', e.g.

baronet, esquire, knight etc.). Newly-minted 'gentlemen' did not receive the same stature as those from 'old families' who had inherited wealth over the course of multiple generations. British society could be loosely divided into the following categories:

Aristocracy, Nobility, Landed Gentry, Peerage

Doctors, Bankers, Clergymen

Lawyers, Teachers, Artists, Tradesmen

Shopkeepers, Craftsmen, Publicans

Agricultural Laborers and Working Mechanics

Paupers, Vagrants, 'Gypsies'

The hierarchy towards the bottom was often indefinite but the existence of one was an unimpeachable fact of life. Distinctions of rank based on a natural order that was divinely ordained were especially strict at the top. Wealth would not become an important factor in the formation of this hierarchy until the dawn of full-fledged capitalism (not that Georgian England was not a capitalist society) during the prime years of Industrialization. Wealthy merchants, artists and tradesperson were explicitly excluded from the upper classes. In fact, according to statistics the upper classes only formed 1.5% of Britain's population at the time and possessed around 16% of the national income, a statistic that incidentally resembles modern-day USA. Wealth, power and status were all intimately connected and the source of one's wealth was extremely important in determining where one would be placed on the hierarchy, in some cases, more so than the amount of wealth itself. That is not to say wealth wasn't valuable. An important factor that manifested where one would be placed in the hierarchy was land-ownership. Not only did land ownership account for wealth but it also led to powerful status within society. Until late 1800s only propertied men were given the privilege to vote in Britain which set them apart from the working classes.

This hierarchy obviously changed. The primary reasons behind the change are three-fold:

The beginning of Industrialization in Britain which led to new sources of wealth and status for a small section of society that exceeded those of the landed gentry.

The commercialization of agriculture alongside the expansion of trading opportunities following Britain's colonial ventures.

The Napoleonic Wars in Europe led to greater prestige being given to military officials and the creation of new ranks within the upper classes.

The reasons listed above are not exclusive to changes within the upper classes although the paper will be largely focusing on the upper and upper-middle classes since these are the ones Austen wrote most extensively about. These changes eventually led to the formation of three major social classes within the British class structure namely, the aristocracy, the bourgeoisie (rising middle class), the proletariat (the working class).

Born roughly eight months following 'the shot heard around the world', Jane Austen came into the world right as revolution was on the cusp of enveloping the western world. Being the daughter of a vicar, she was raised in an upper-middle class family possessing connections and having frequent interactions with the upper classes. Austen grew up in an 'enlightened' world that was questioning the very principles upon which society had been constructed. While change in Britain was not as violent as that in France or as transformative as that in the newly formed United States of America, one cannot say Britain was in any way immune to the same. In reaction to the radical change that surrounded Britain, laws in the empire were stricter, social hierarchies became more restrictive and the upper classes found it harder to retreat behind the cover of large powdered wigs, both literal and metaphorical. Britain was nearing an era of imperialist glory with the advent of Industrialization but the need to maintain the same would prove to be a burden.

Jane Austen's works provide a glimpse into an overtly hardened but inertly fragile Britain during the early years of industrial change. This is done as she explores a multitude of subjects including class, gender, marriage, religion and morality through her witty narration and an ensemble of some of the most iconic characters that belong to the British literary canon. Not only does Austen share with her readers the 'universally acknowledged' truths of her time but she also boldly critiques them. Additionally, her precarious position in society as a spinster of limited economic means belonging to the lesser gentry, anonymously publishing her novels in a world skeptical of female ability (a world that had recently been shown the mirror by the revolutionary work of Mary Wollstonecraft) makes her perspective all the more valuable. Austen was an honest and intelligent writer portraying a faulty society as it was, often satirizing it and through that resisting it, inviting the reader to imagine an ideal one.

This paper will be examining six principal works of Jane Austen namely- *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), *Mansfield Park* (1814), *Emma* (1816), *Northanger Abbey* (1817) and *Persuasion* (1817) – the latter two of the same were published posthumously. These novels will be critically analyzed to gain a better understanding of the ways of late-Georgian England with a chief emphasis on 'class structures' as previously defined. Complimentary to focusing on class, the paper will also be centered around the struggles faced by women at the time since the main characters

of Austen's novels are headstrong heroines attempting to defeat or make peace with the challenges pushed their way. How these challenges manifested in the form of social barriers that were influenced by a woman's social class and (her family's) economic means will also be a topic of much discussion. The insights gained through this process will aid in further cementing the importance of fiction in reconstructing history and the potential it presents for providing information regarding the beliefs, values, customs, events, and daily lives of people of the time especially in cases where written historical records of the time seem biased, dated or limiting.

THEMES IN LITERATURE

"If you please, no reference to examples in books" says Anne Elliot in *Persuasion* as she states the inability of literature to sincerely explain human behaviour after Captain Harville talks of the repeated mention of 'woman's fickleness' in history, literature, proverbs and even songs. Anne isn't pleased by his assertions and provides her reasons for why she refuses to rely on the sources mentioned by him when seeking genuine insight. She says "Men have had every advantage of us (women) in telling their own story. Education has been in their hands. I will not allow books to prove anything.". Anne isn't wrong in her argument. Almost all mainstream literature of her time was authored by men, for men and centered around men (in line with the patriarchal set-up of society). Research based on a homogeneous set of sources is misleading and in arguing so through her main character, Jane Austen was also essentially creating a new and distinct source of insight in the form of her last novel '*Persuasion*'. This is the manner in which her works will be utilized in this study- a piece of art that was a product of the culture of its time revealing something about the nature of the society within which the culture exists. In this sense the novels fulfill an important role in historical reconstruction and historiography that is similar to that of ancient architecture since it helps provide historical context to the events and society of its time.

Austen's novels have been interpreted in many different ways over the past 200 years ranging from a conservative romance longing for simpler traditional times, a shrewd criticism of the ridiculous frivolities of upper-class Georgians, a comedy of manners that aligns with liberal ideals, defining works of the Literary Realism movement, a commentary on the perils of expected womanhood during the Regency Era and even a post-Freudian interpretation that sees Austen as a "cynical" misogynist. Cynical as she may be, Austen is not a misogynist since marriage is given great symbolic importance in her novels. Nevertheless, a lot of these interpretations are reliable depending on how one reads the novels. More than one of them may all be true at the same time since all works present nuanced storylines and seldom is Austen trying to promote one specific political agenda. When discussing the themes and interpretations of the novels, certain questions must be answered. What could have been the driving sources of influence for Jane Austen as she penned her greatest works? How do the novels reflect the society of Regency England? Is Austen a critic of the status quo or a preserver?

While the great political events and the dynamic intellectual discourse of the time was sure to have made a mark on her, it is practically impossible to discuss the works of a female author of Austen's station without discussing the impact of perhaps the most talked about woman of her time, Mary Wollstonecraft. At the very beginning of '*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*', Wollstonecraft states, "Contending for the rights of women, my main argument is built upon this simple principle, that if she be not prepared by education to become the companion of man, she will stop the progress of knowledge and virtue; for truth must be common to all, or it will be inefficacious with respect to its influence on general practice. And how can women be expected to co-operate unless she knows why she ought to be virtuous? Unless freedom strengthens her reason till, she comprehends her duty, and see in what manner relates to her real good".

In the work Wollstonecraft addresses the importance of a formal and practical education for women that exceeds the popular superficial one which focused on singing, dancing and painting among other accomplishments. Not only is the necessity of proper education for women reiterated multiple times in all of Austen's works but it was also realized in her own life. The education provided to Jane Austen by her father and brothers was quite outstanding for the time especially combined with the time she spent at boarding school with her sister. Even as finances dwindled, her father ensured that Austen's education would see no impediments. She learned alongside the boys her father taught using the same study material and was granted unrestricted access to both her father's library and that of close family friend, Warren Hastings. The importance of female education is recognized frequently in her novels.

Mary Wollstonecraft's ideas are in attendance when Elizabeth Bennett discusses the scope of female accomplishments with Mr. Darcy and his party at Netherfield, when Anne Elliot addresses the gate keeping of education by men, Elinor implores Marianne to give precedence to reason over sensibility and even as Mr. Knightley speaks of the titular character of *Emma*, "I have done with expecting any course of steady reading from Emma. She will never submit to anything requiring industry and patience, and a subjection of any fancy to the understanding". While not all of these instances are directly empowering women to be educated, they do recognize the importance of the same. When discussing influence, it is essential to acknowledge that if not directly inspired, Jane Austen would have been more likely to agree with Wollstonecraft over other thinkers of the time contrasting Wollstonecraft's opinions. A thoroughly educated individual such as Austen was sure to have been aware of the works of both Rousseau and Wollstonecraft and while Rousseau viewed the brand of education received by Austen as an obstacle to her success as a woman, Mary Wollstonecraft on the other hand was an enthusiastic activist of the same.

James Fordyce, a popular writer of Austen's time whose views on women's education largely aligned with those of Rousseau was all but mocked in '*Pride and Prejudice*' when his book '*Sermons to Young Women*' is read by the novel's most idiotic character before he is discouraged by his listeners to continue.

Aside from influential thinkers and a tumultuous political situation, Austen's religious upbringing (resulting from her father's profession of a clergymen) seems to have inspired themes of morality that are independent of material values [Evans, 1987] in her novels and character development arcs that run parallel to an individual's journey for salvation as expressed by Protestant values.

Mary Evans writes the following in her 1987 work 'Jane Austen and The State', "Unlike later novelists Jane Austen does not set out blueprints for society which translates the individual into the passive instrument of social ideals; on the contrary she argues that individuals, and communities of individuals make society what it is"

In line with Evans' view one can say that Austen does not credit society as the most important determinant directly influencing human actions rather people's action reflect in society and effect the shape and formation of the same. One can argue that the relationship between individual and society is a complementary one and that isn't incorrect but in emphasizing the agency of individuals over societal circumstances Austen is attempting to reject the dominant values of her time that revolve around materialism and again quoting Evans 'freedom translated as unregulated entrepreneurial activity'. This can also be perceived as Austen criticizing the increasing commercialization of agriculture that led to the lesser gentry (to which Jane Austen belonged) being side-lined. Towards the end of *Persuasion*, Anne Elliot is more concerned with the opinion of Ms. Smith (her friend on the edge of destitution) instead of that of her snobbish upper-class family. Through this Austen stresses on the value of good morality over social circumstances and consequently class regulations. Society in Austen's context refers to 'the presence of others with whom it is a duty or pleasure to interact'.

Her characters contend with the laws and conventions of this 'society'. Society in her work is more than just an idea. It is a physical body that is created as individuals interact with one another. The presence of society dictates standards of behavior and only individuals of eligibility share society with other individuals of eligibility. Individuals who don't meet eligibility, for example, aren't a part of the landed gentry, are encouraged to find society elsewhere. An individual's class status determines what kind of society they have access to. Jane Austen wrote about individuals belonging to what is known as 'high society' in her novels. Nevertheless, her works are not alienated from the realities of life in Regency England. Austen did not write vanity pieces for the upper classes instead what shines through in her novels is the power of satire and to what extent it reveals a society's insecurities, hypocrisy, custom and sway over the individuals who form the society. Austen holds individuals accountable for the state of society and reflects society through the actions of characters in her novels.

Two main political parties contested for power in Regency England namely the Tories and the Whigs. The former was the conservative party which held the belief that inheritance based on

birth was the fundamental foundation of society while the latter was the liberal party which supported constitutional monarchy, Protestant restructuring and many members were even sympathetic to the American Revolution across the ocean. When attempting to classify Austen as either a critic or preserver of the status quo, it isn't as straightforward as choosing one.

The Tories can be interpreted as preservers while the Whigs as critics. Austen can't be lumped in with either. Austen's sympathies lie with the subject of women's education, care for the vulnerable and giving precedence to independent thinking over social pressures. She was skeptical of artificial social structures and her characters resolved to find something worthwhile that transcends narrow societal boundaries. This is evidenced when Elizabeth Bennett refuses not one but two proposals from eligible gentlemen due to the absence of affection in the proposed match. This reflects Austen's own state of mind as she wrote to her niece, 'Anything is to be preferred or endured rather than marrying without Affection', an idea Austen continued to uphold even as spinsterhood threatened economic hardship. Austen both acknowledges and ridicules the economic necessity of marriage for women. She lays down the social ideals of her society and while in a sense her heroines do give into these ideals as the novels end with them marrying, Austen does not recommend conformity to her readers. Her novels can be read as a social suspense centered around women's lives. What will the main characters choose? Economic depravity or a marriage without affectionate integrity? The entrapment of poverty or the entrapment of custom? Is there a secret third option? Can women break free?

The final and fundamental theme of the novels is class. Class is a cage that imprisons the characters' freedom, it is also the compass that provides their journey direction, it is a privilege that provides them protection but is also their fatal flaw. The Communist Manifesto published 31 years after the death of Jane Austen states "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles". Class and the roles laid out in accordance with the class one belongs to are a major source of conflict in Austen's novels. Class functions as a plot device that creates tension and its presence is fitting in the novel since the society of Regency England was defined by its class structure. Class struggles are at play as Mr. Darcy struggles to propose to Elizabeth because she belongs to a class 'beneath him' in *Pride and Prejudice* and as Mr. Knightley scolds Emma for being unkind to Miss Bates (a woman 'inferior' to Emma due to low rank within the class hierarchy) thus abusing the privilege afforded to Emma by her class.

DIALOGUE BETWEEN HISTORY AND LITERATURE

Scholar Terry Eagleton states in 'The English Novel: An Introduction', 'All great art is socially progressive in the sense that....it realizes the vital 'world-historical' forces of an epoch which makes for change and growth'. This quote is significant when discussing the vitality of Jane Austen studies. While the categorization of Austen's works as 'romantic-comedies' might make the academic attention given to them seem superfluous, it would be imprudent to ignore another genre mastered by Austen and that is of social realism. Austen's social realism is as vital as that of Thackeray, Dickens, Hardy and Trollope. These authors have shaped the view of the 19th century to same degree as any formal history of the time (and for good reason). Literature is not the truth but rather it holds a mirror to the truth. The reflection may be inverted or vague but the reflection is still of value since it is the result of the truth's interaction with the environment it exists in and the ideology the mirror may represent. Literary sources have the following important in historical study:

They are primary accounts of major historical events since they are written by individuals who experienced the event first-hand. 'North and South' (1855) by Elizabeth Gaskell is a prime example of the same as it sheds light on the experience of the Industrial Revolution from the perspective of the working classes.

Literature provides contextual information about historical events. For example, the study of Jatakas is necessary when studying the Vedic History of India since it provides important information regarding the daily lives of people that the formal histories of the time miss out on.

Literature also allows the historian to gain multiple perspectives regarding the same historical event or time.

Literary sources are perhaps most valuable in providing cultural insights about a specific time period as popular works manage to capture the cultural zeitgeist of the time. For example, not only is 'Dracula' (1892) by Bram Stoker one of the greatest horror novels of all time but it all managed to capture the dangerously superstitious mood of 19th century Europe as well as the anxieties swarming Western Europe as a result of increased migration of Eastern Europeans to countries like Britain and France.

Literary sources document change as it happens and when historical records become lost to time, literature due to its popular place within culture becomes the most easily available and reliable source of information.

Literature also aids in Historiography as it exposes the historian to various perspectives and schools of thought defining a particular time period.

The importance of literature in reconstructing history especially social history is perhaps most perfectly amplified by the study of the Indian epic 'Mahabharata' to dissect the social stratification of the time. Mahabharata was written over a course of many years by multiple authors with the didactic sections being added later on. Beginning in the form of poems sung by 'charioteer-bards' as they accompanied kings into battle, Mahabharata was initially intended for the entertainment of the general public. This general public did not have access to Sanskrit education due to caste-based discrepancies, a topic addressed multiple times throughout the text.

The text lays down norms of social behavior, comments on a wide variety of social situations and allows the reader to catch a glimpse of the major social actors of the time. Mahabharata in this sense provides unmatched historical exposition for a time that has little to no formal histories. Novels like those of Jane Austen serve a similar purpose. Georgian England is not lacking in historical accounts, but Austen's novels shed light on subjects often overlooked or entirely missing from official historical recollections. The novels give a glimpse into the daily lives of individuals, the mundane parts of life, women's struggles with societal expectations and moreover it opens the room for critical examination which texts written to be believed at face value seldom do.

CRITICISMS

In spite of every recognition, Jane Austen's novels do have their drawbacks. As a writer commenting on the social realities of her time, she never addresses slavery and the abolition of the same which was sure to have been quite a topic of contention in Georgian England. Instead, she seems to be using slavery (specifically in Mansfield Park) as a metaphor for the larger social problems of the time perhaps implying that the Atlantic Slave Trade wasn't important enough to be addressed directly. Austen can't be expected to comment on every grave social issue of her time but these silences are telling. As Austen attempts to reflect the truth of society in her novels, all that she is forbidden to say also reveals something about her society. Her silence on slavery and the working class communicates the insignificance of the subjects to her intended reader- the

literate upper classes. Mary Evans discusses the same and states "The working class was not a part of their (upper classes) world, and should be kept separate, even in literature".

Austen was not oblivious to the major problems and events of her time. She had prolific education as already discussed. Moreover, her brother married the widow of a noble guillotined during the French Revolution, her father had ties to Warren Hastings in India, her sister was married to an officer stationed in West Indies and two of her brothers were sailors actively involved in the war between Britain and France. Austen was well informed and well aware of the sign of her times. Austen wrote about topics she best understood and those that were most personal to her. She was a single woman in society with no means to financially help her family in the changing scene of the agrarian economy and was required to publish her novels anonymously to protect her from shame. Jane's less than positive view of the systems of society holding back her and many others like her is evident in her novels. She critiques the inheritance system, obstructions posed by class distinctions, lack of women's education and opportunity for women with great vigor and resentment. Jane Austen may not be a woman progressively ahead of her time since she was limited by the conventions of her time but that is where the strength of her works lie. Her novels are a worthwhile source of studying history precisely because they are a product of the time they were written in or as Eagleton might state, they are vital because they recognize the 'world- historical' forces of an epoch which as it happens, is of much value.

IDEOLOGY AND APPROACH

More than 100 years before Austen published her first novel, in 1706, Mary Astell asked, "If all men are born free, how is it that all women are born slaves?"

In the same century, world-famous champion of liberty and free will, Rousseau wrote about dependence of women on men as an unchallenged law of nature excluding almost half of the world population from the free-will he propagated. He also remarked: "A woman of literary education is the plague of her family, her servants and everybody."

In response to Rousseau, in 1792, Mary Wollstonecraft wrote,

“Rousseau declares that a woman should never, for a moment, feel herself independent, that she should be governed by fear to exercise her natural cunning, and made a coquettish slave in order to render her a more alluring object of desire, a sweeter companion to man, whenever he chooses to relax himself.”

More than 200 years later, Marxist scholar Suzanne MacNevin wrote in 2007,

“Women are historically viewed as mere objects for reproduction of the species and their gender role in society has reflected that role. That role in society, depending on the circumstance, really is that of an economically impoverished slave. That state of bondage is more metaphorical because women are not always bound by shackles but simply by societal restrictions.”

Examining all these statements, it is easy to determine which school of thought Jane Austen aligned herself with. The following dialogue from Austen’s last novel is evidence enough. Sophia Croft who is perhaps the most empowered female character in all of Austen’s novels says, “I hate to hear you talk about all women as if they were fine ladies instead of rational creatures. None of us want to be in calm waters all our lives”. Sophia Croft has crossed the Atlantic four times, been once to the East Indies and back again; additionally visiting places like Cork, Lisbon and Gibraltar who while discussing her accomplishments expresses that she does not consider them anything extraordinary since “many women have done more”. The existence and treatment of Sophia’s character in Austen’s novel is enough to convince the reader that Austen positions herself on the pendulum of women’s rights that is furthest way from where Rousseau is.

This background is necessary to understand since the approach this paper will be using to analyze Austen’s body of work is Suzanne MacNevin’s Materialist Feminism that views the economic and social restrictions women are subjected to in a similar light as the Marxist view on the proletariat. The term ‘class mobilization’ in the title refers to upward class mobility that Austen’s characters both aspire to (due to societal norms) and are critical of. Marxist concepts of ‘base’ and ‘superstructure’ will be used to examine Austen’s novels. Base and superstructure are both central to Marxist literary criticism. According to Marxist literary criticism, ‘base’ refers to the economic structure of society and ‘superstructure’ consists of the kind of state, laws and culture that legitimize the power of the social class that owns the means of production [Lindström, 2010]. In

Austen’s case, the economic structure is a capitalist one, the government is elected by propertied men and the laws they make form the superstructure and the land-owning gentry forms the social class that owns the means of production. Even though these concepts were developed years after Austen’s death, she wrote within the context of this base and superstructure. The major objectives of the paper’s research are:

To emphasize the importance of culture as a by-product of society and hence a reference point to study it and aid in the development of social history.

To highlight the relevance of Jane Austen’s works to modern historical discourse regarding class and wealth concentration.

To study the relationship between Austen’s social commentary and Marxist concepts of ‘base’, ‘superstructure’ and ‘ideology’.

To remark upon the importance of literary fiction in Indian academic study by using Jane Austen as a jumping-off point.

To examine how literature can provide context to chronological historical accounts.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The insights derived from her works with regard to a historical analysis of Georgian England is as follows:

Landed Gentry System

Landed gentry is a term used in Georgian England to refer to a class of rich families who derived their income from the land (or estates) they owned. Individuals of the landed

gentry were either titled or untitled but possessed large fortunes that determined their status within society. The wealth possessed by ‘gentlemen’ belonging to the landed gentry is repeatedly discussed in Austen’s novels. Mr. Bennett in *Pride and Prejudice* is cited as having an estate of two thousand pounds a year which is considered enough to run a small estate but would group the Bennetts as a part of the ‘lesser gentry’ whose incomes ranged from £1,000 to £3,000. The desirability of prospective husbands is also judged on the basis of their income and position within the landed gentry system. Mr. Darcy from *Pride and Prejudice* has no title as such but his yearly income of £10,000 and ties to an ‘old and respected’ family elevate his status in society.

Inheritance System

The inheritance system of the Regency Era based on the principle of primogeniture is a subject of much contempt in all of Austen’s novels. It is deemed unfair and unreasonable by the author multiple times. According to inheritance law, on the death of the owner of an estate, his estate would be inherited by his son or the closest living male relative (if the man has no sons). This would leave his widow and daughters in an economically precarious situation where the daughters would be at the mercy of either securing an economically advantageous marriage or the new owner of the estate. The threat of destitution as a result of their father’s death looms heavy over the Bennett sisters in *Pride and Prejudice* and it is a threat that actualizes in *Sense and Sensibility* when the Dashwood women are left in want of home and an adequate income after the death of Mr. Dashwood. Mr. Dashwood’s estate is transferred to his son from his first marriage which leaves the Dashwood sisters and their mother with a mere 500 pounds a year to run their household. In her works Austen highlights the state of vulnerability the inheritance law often abandons women in.

Marriage as a means of economic security

In a letter to her niece in the spring of 1817, Jane Austen writes, "Single women have a dreadful propensity for being poor, which is one very strong argument in favor of matrimony". This quote summarizes Austen's view of marriage. Following the Reformation in England all ties between Britain and the Catholic Church had been severed. This meant that nunneries were no longer an option for spinsters. Additionally, laws in Britain prevented women from being employed in any sense that made them financially independent. The professions open to women like that of a governess or maid would lead to the woman losing relations with all her friends and family and being forced to participate in society from the fringes. Marriage was the only means through which a woman could secure her future. It was so a means of upward class mobility. Marriage is the main concern of almost all of Austen's novels. A loveless marriage is described by Austen as a necessary evil to save women from society's cruelty.

This is best summarized in *Mansfield Park* when the narrator says, "Being now in her twenty-first year, Maria Bertram was beginning to think matrimony a duty; and as a marriage with Mr. Rushworth would give her the enjoyment of a larger income than her father's, as well as ensure her the house in town, which was now a prime object, it became, by the same rule of moral obligation, her evident duty to marry Mr. Rushworth if she could". Women simply could not put their personal happiness over the very real threat of poverty as evidenced by Charlotte Lucas marrying the insufferable Mr. Collins in *Pride and Prejudice* despite her reservations because her age of seven and twenty had cast a pall over the possibility of a happier future for her. Waiting longer would have rendered her the fearful title of a spinster which symbolized the metaphorical end to a woman's social life in Regency England.

The presence of class as an undeniable fact of life

In all of her novels class effects almost every decision the characters make often acting as an obstacle to the achievement of their heart's desires. Class distinctions infiltrate the characters of her second novel with feelings of pride and prejudice. This is evident when Mr. Darcy shares his true feelings with Elizabeth Bennett for the first time 'despite his better judgement' which eventually leads to Mr. Darcy asking Elizabeth if he is to rejoice in the inferiority of her connections or congratulate himself on forming relations with a family whose condition in life was decidedly beneath him. Mr. Darcy upholds all the major values of a class-based society as he makes these exclamations and gives the reader a sense that not even a personal decision such as who one wants to marry is unaffected by class ideology. Class differences are also the reason why Anne Elliot is persuaded to break off her engagement with Captain Wentworth in *Persuasion*. Anne came from an affluent upper-class family and at age of 19 possessed unlimited potential to secure for herself a prosperous future. Association with someone like Wentworth who was a man of no influential connections and limited means would have put her 'upper class relations' to shame.

Women's education and the lack of opportunity

As already established, through her novels Jane Austen is perhaps most vocal about the state of women's education. Her and Mary Wollstonecraft were of a shared opinion that the general education for women at the time which resolved to provide them with impractical 'accomplishments' that would ensure them securing well-suited marriages and nothing resembling a sound ability to reason and understand was insufficient. The shallowness of this kind education is suggested in *Pride and Prejudice* when Mr. Darcy comments on only being acquainted with half a dozen 'truly' accomplished women. He states that aside from having knowledge of music, singing, drawing, dancing, painting and the modern languages 'she must yet add something more substantial, in the improvement of her mind by extensive reading'.

The latter qualification is something that closely resembles Wollstonecraft's own view of a truly accomplished woman but Elizabeth Bennett is less than pleased with Mr. Darcy's description not necessarily because she disagrees but because what he fails to acknowledge is the unavailability of such refinements for most women. As scientific knowledge of the distinction between the two sexes expanded, social restrictions on the gender binary of Regency England intensified leaving women with little to no opportunities for self-actualization on their own terms. A sentiment expressed by Anne Elliot in *Persuasion* as she explains the fate of women to be plagued by constant feelings since they are confined to the borders of their home and are hardly given a chance to explore and experience as men do [Chapter 11, *Persuasion*].

Narrow definitions of femininity and the concept of ideal womanhood

Writers of the Georgian Period like Gisborne, Samuel Richardson and Fordyce define "ideal women" as meek, quiet and non-argumentative. According to them the ornamental education provided to them is necessary to keep women in a state of 'placid cheerfulness'. This is an idea that Jane Austen comments on multiple times throughout her novel by writing main female characters who are not only bold, out-spoken and argumentative but also by showcasing how women who are not bold are seldom in a state of placid cheerfulness. Anne Elliot when she is quiet and reserved loses the chance to marry the love of her life while Elizabeth Bennett's non-conformity to standard ideals of femininity is rewarded with an affectionate marriage, the kind that she wanted. In fact, Elizabeth Bennett's sister, Jane Bennett almost loses Mr. Bingley's attentions due to the modesty of her feelings. Austen points out the faulty ideals put forth by men who understand nothing of the female experience.

The snobbery of the upper classes

Austen does not hold back her pen in criticizing the artificial values of the upper classes. The Bingley sisters' arrogance and hypocrisy is much discussed in *Pride and Prejudice* as they downgrade others for having derived their fortune from trade while the fortune of Mr. Bingley himself was also built upon trade. They belong to the class that Mr. Darcy finds social relations with acceptable but upon his meeting Elizabeth Bennett's aunt and uncle, The Gardiners, he finds himself preferring their company to that of many in the upper classes. This contrast between the non-working gentry and the working-class Mr. Gardiner whose occupation as an attorney is his source of income is quite telling. The standards of refinement promoted by representatives of

the upper classes like Ms. Bingley, Lady Catherine or Emma in Austen's novels also function as the superstructure that ensures the existence of a capitalist economy that is beneficial to those who control the means of production while excluding everyone who does not match their 'standards'.

Dynamic class structure

The Regency Era was a time of much social change accelerated by industrial change. The upper classes were losing the land and means of production they held for so long to the 'bourgeoisie' who had worked themselves up and would only rise more with the peak of Industrialization. This time saw 'traditional' values professed by the landed gentry take a back seat to ruthless profit maximization in a capitalist society. Austen is skeptical of the money-minded direction of society in part because she belonged to the 'lesser gentry' that was deeply affected by the commercialization of agriculture.

Capitalism as an unstable social system

The marriage scene in Austen's novels is much like that of free market capitalization where the illusion of choice is omnipresent and everything else seems to be disregarded in the face of economic profit. Women who are successful in fulfilling their societal role are saved many hardships of the system but women who don't, fall prey to poverty and social stigma. The Price family residing in a squalor in Portsmouth in 'Mansfield Park', Ms. Smith struggling in a state of poverty, Colonel Brandon's sister-in-law marginalized to the edges of society in 'Sense and Sensibility' and Ms. Bates in Emma living out the rest of her days in her small flat (a 'comfort she may still sink further from') in 'Emma'; are all examples of what happens to an individual who fails to meet the expectations of a capitalist society.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, one can say that it would be unwise to ignore the insights literature has to offer for the purpose of historical research. Austen's commentary on class, gender, customs and morality of Georgian England are vital in providing context to the greater events of the time and is a reference point to study the changes British society undertook during the 19th century. The research presented in this paper also showcases the multidisciplinary scope of History and how deeply etched historical knowledge is to every fabric of culture. Not only is history an academic instrument that allows the scholar to study the past but it is also the invisible string that puts the modern world in perspective with a 200-year-old novel. The current state of society is simply the product of history.

Jane Austen's experiences of living in a society on the brink of complete transformation inform her writing. She lived in a world that had witnessed James Watts' invention of the first steam engine, one that was molding in the face of great intellectual innovations and one that have been spectator to much loss of human life to wars and revolution alongside a dramatic increase in population. In complete rebellion to Rousseau's assertion that women are not attracted to art, knowledge or genius, Austen proved to be a literary genius who not only discussed popular culture in her works but herself became a part of it. Regarded as one of the greatest novelists of all time, it is difficult to deny her relevance even to this day. Austen did not experience any renown as a writer in her lifetime but the fame she received years after her untimely death, exceeds anything she could have anticipated. By reflecting the truth of her world in her novels not only did she write history but also became a valuable chapter in historical reconstruction.

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