The role of comedy and irony in Jane Austen’s ‘pride and prejudice’

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Abstract
Jane Austen’s charm and genius was so lately rediscovered. She met with scanty encouragement in her own generation. Her greatest novel ‘Pride and Prejudice’ was finished in 1797. This novel deals with satiric elements such as humor and comedy which is indispensable role in Austen’s novels since it is the best way of mocking the social conventions of the era. She ultimately satirizes how the daily conventions of her generation devaluate the female identity with her unique ironic language and keen observations of life.

Keywords
Comedy, Irony, Jane Austen

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1. Introduction
Jane Austen plays a prominent role in English novel’s history. In her we find a novelist whose excellence puts Shakespeare in the same position in the drama. Probably the reason for this distinction is that Jane Austen had the genius to choose the right sphere for her talent. She was a great reader and had written early stories. Her world and her experiences were limited and she never invented a story or character that was beyond her limited world. She broke both Richardson’s sentimental tradition and Gothic writers’ tradition of terror novels. She considered novel as an art form requiring a close and rigorous discipline. She was so modest in her accomplishment that only four of her novels were published anonymously during her lifetime.

The secret of the power of Jane Austen lies in her complete mastery of her material. Her features as a novelist include her loyal observation, detachment, sense of mood and irony and tolerance to human weakness. She’s calm and equitable, her mood is delicate and delicate, and her work is delicate, mature and sound. Except on a few occasions, she eliminates long descriptions; her dialog is skilled and lively, her narrative is accurate and fluent.

The aspects of domestic existence are of particular concern for Jane Austen. She observes how people pay attention to rural and domestic tasks and how the love, marriage and friendship interests’ men and women. Her strength lies in her focus on this home world and in her detailed and intimate depiction. Therefore, her novels are called domestic novels. She has simple plots, themes are not sensational and complications are minimal. Her excellence in creating situations and effective dialog is the strongest point. It is the human drama that unfolds in her works and Jane Austen holds an eminently prominent place among the novelists as long as human nature, readers of all its diverse interests. The fact that irony constitutes one of Austen’s most important charms is unmistakable. This is the soul of her novels, in other words. The main objective of the work is therefore to demonstrate how the author’s ironic view has been presented by weaving the ideal and reality.

2. The pride and prejudice: the role of comedy and irony
Jane Austen finds ways to subordinate her part as a narrator; irony is not just an attitude, it is a way of presenting, organizing, analyzing and judging. Her ironic skills are at their best in Pride and Prejudice. The irony and the comedy of the first part of Pride and Prejudice stem from the distinction between Mr. Darcy means what he thinks Elizabeth means, between what Elizabeth intends to answer and how
they appear to Darcy. Elizabeth does everything about misunderstanding, although the speeches of both are most skillfully ambiguous. The novel abounds in dramatic irony of this type. There is always a strong contradiction between knowledge and truth and between the meaning of the characters and what the reader understands.

Since its publication, the readers have been delighted by the story of the witty Elizabeth Bennet and her relationship with the aristocrat Fitzwilliam Darcy. A humorous depiction of England’s social environment in the late 18th and early 19th centuries and concerned mainly with English gentry courtesy rituals. The novel addresses economic, political, feminist, sociologic and philosophic themes, inspiring numerous critical comments on the meaning of the work, much more than a history of love.

Jane in her novels commonly expresses the comical style. She reflects the misperceptions of the sufferings incurred by female identities. Mostly, the female voices of the interesting characters in her novels depict her own voice on regarding the society’s function. Her plot construction is always from the women’s point of view; their feelings, their thoughts and their interests. This reflects the paradoxes of feminine self-esteem in 18th century with her ironic language. Jane not only voices her own thoughts but also the dangers and tensions that existed in her era.

Jane Austen’s novels are romantic comedies. They are love stories with harmonious endings filled with unexpected twists and turns. This can be compared with Shakespearean comedies because it has the similar endings with marriage as symbol of reconciliation and happiness. Pride and Prejudice is such a novel with humorous confusions and unconfessed love which turns out interesting when confessed. Edna Steeves makes her remarks that comedy of Pride and Prejudice lies in its fabric and since the story has a moral direction; comedy is a medium of moral judgments.

The concern of this novel is personal rather than fashionable conduct that provides a reason for a new descriptive term ‘novel of social satire’. In the first chapter of Pride and Prejudice, it is the verbal battle between Mrs. Bennet who acts as a match-maker for her five daughters and Mr. Bennet her indifferent husband. This character is ridiculous and reveals the fortune hunting parents of marriageable women of Jane’s times. Mr. Bingley’s arrival in the neighborhood makes her happy and she plans to get her eldest daughter Jane married to him and find wealthy husbands for her other daughters as well. Mrs. Bennet persuades her husband and takes all her five daughters to meet Mr. Bingley. Mr. Bennet is an odd mixture of sarcastic humor, reserve and caprice that the experience of twenty three years had really been insufficient to make his wife understand his character.

Apart from Mrs. Bennet; Lydia and Mr. Collins are significant characters in this novel concerning their roles as stereotypes of the era. Lydia Bennet was much similar like her mother because her only aim was to get married, because for her marriage and relationship between men and women were mere fun. She doesn’t have any sisterly feeling and the first thing she inquires when they were back after so many weeks were all about flirting and men. Mr. Collins, the only male cousin of the Bennet sisters always talks with clichés. Initially he proposes marriage to Elizabeth Bennet the female protagonist of the plot. But once she denies he hands in marriage with her best friend Charlotte Lucas. The exact proposal of his marriage to Elizabeth is ridiculous and obvious that she denies it understanding the strong portrayal of Jane’s.

The novel depicts various female characters as Lydia and Mrs. Bennet are ambivalent, shown as the distorted products of a mistaken education of women; contrasted to Elizabeth and Jane in sense and moral attitudes who act to subversions of a social order contrary to women. Female laughter when expressed too much it creates indelicacy. Yet, the power of laughter employs three different dimensions of laughter in this novel. The role of laughter in Elizabeth and Darcy’s relationship depicts the change in their characters as the novel proceeds. Initially, Elizabeth thinks that laughter is a way of communicating with others. Later she learns that one cannot simply laugh at others to gain their friendship or their attraction. However, at the end of the novel she learns to laugh without biases and even Mr. Darcy gains a sense of humor. Unlike Elizabeth, Lydia devaluate the power of laughter because she never thinks twice or discriminate through laughter. This also indicates their perception on sexuality as Lydia used it as a way to flirt and seduce men; as leading to her elopement with Mr. Wickham.

Irony infused in this novel is when Elizabeth prejudices the characters of Mr. Darcy and Mr. Wickham as rude and polite respectively. But as the plot moves on we could identify the true villain and fox to be Mr. Wickham and Mr. Darcy is gentle and generous. At the end of the novel we could see the confessions of love by the protagonists in their own way which adds beauty to the plot.

Usually, irony has double voice which Jane uses to relate the narration and focalization; showing and telling, respectively. Just like how she depicts these in this novel, revealing the conflicting views on women and provokes a struggle for them to gain self-identity. This is reflected in her narrative mode and her focus on the characters how she creates impression on the readers. Elizabeth is considered their father’s favorite daughter and Lydia is their mother’s because they shared the similar ideas about marriage. Elizabeth’s character is portrayed to create involvement and interest in readers. The voice of Elizabeth is moreover Jane herself.

Jane used the narrative techniques delicately with chosen vocabulary in order to establish the ironic view. She reveals the economic dependency of women in characters like Mrs. Bennet and Lydia who preferred marriage as a solution to rich life. To break this out, Jane creates Elizabeth’s character as she abruptly denies the proposal of Mr. Collins even on their verge of poverty. This denial makes her a brave girl and admirable protagonist indeed.

Jane portrays two types of couples, ‘Elizabeth and Mr.
Darcy’ and ‘Jane and Mr. Bingley’ the merry couples. Jane ironically implies the ultimate goal of marriage which is to lead life with improvised social status and economic consideration supported by love and romance. So these marriages are a way of expressing their desire and femininity as they had privilege to choose them. Likewise, the marriages of ‘Charlotte and Mr. Collins’ and ‘Lydia and Mr. Wickham’ are due to situations upfront to financial status. Charlotte makes this clear when she tells about this to her friend Elizabeth. Elizabeth doesn’t accept this way of approach on marriage but Charlotte chose to this life. Lydia actually elopes with Mr. Wickham and it is Mr. Darcy who forces him to marry her accepting to finance them regularly. Mr. Wickham instead of marrying her happily he manipulates to receive the fortune from Mr. Darcy and does so.

Lady Catherine De Bourgh the aunt of Mr. Darcy reflects the typical upper middle class of that era who had influence and control over the society. Her treatment of sarcasm to Elizabeth and Jane shows her hatred and impatience on common people. In this characterization Jane purely criticizes the aristocracy. She also mocked at the legal problems women of her era faced such as inheritance of wealth. Just like since Mr. Bennet didn’t have a son, when he dies the property will pass on to his nearest blood male relative Mr. Collins. This is why Mrs. Bennet wanted Elizabeth to accept the marriage proposal of him.

In chapter Seven, before Mr. Collins appears in the novel, Jane Austen describes the situation as: “Mr. Bennet’s property consisted almost entirely in an estate of two thousands 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 will supply the deficiency of his.” In other words, since women could not own any property by law, only sons of a family were to provide their mother and unmarried sisters with allowance, bed and bread after the father’s death. This gives an obvious opinion that laws did not give any value to women but considered them as a property of men; husbands or brothers. Mrs. Bennet reacts against the laws hopelessly by describing them as the cruelty of setting an estate away from a family of five daughters. As a result, Austen focuses on the absurdity of laws by employing problems related to inheritance that forces women to get married to insure their future.

3. Conclusion

Jane Austen thus satirizes the upper-class concerns that degrade female identity. Her perceptions about society’s views demonstrate an understanding of the process through which the social life is maintained. In her novels, though marriage, love, romance and comedy is the themes in common, she also questions the nature of the social hierarchy and the extent of power. She emphasizes that feminine power and their voices must be taken into consideration in order to construct healthy societies. Being a part of such hierarchy, she was only able to voice through her characters in novel not on her own which is actually the real irony of Jane Austen’s writings.

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