

THE CONSTRUCTION OF A THINKING WOMAN IN *PERSUASION*

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DOI: <http://doi.org/10.47211/tg.2021.v08i04.001>**ABSTRACT**

'Thinking woman' as an accepted reality came into the society with the rise of Feminism back in 1848. Accepting and practising the act of giving a woman her rightful identity as an individual who can speak, think, and feel for herself became a persisting challenge even in the present time. Renaissance saw changes that were never thought of before. When it came to giving a separate, individual identity to a woman, literature and reality came into loggerheads. Classic pioneering women authors like Jane Austen, Charlotte Bronte, Emily Bronte, Marry Shelley, Louisa May Alcott, Virginia Woolf, and many more represented a side of women that the classic male writers were unsure of representing. With these women writers portraying an unkempt and raw beauty of women, came the wave of need for identity for women. Here, with special focus on Jane Austen's novel Persuasion, we see the growth of woman who is not merely a responsibility of the man, but rather a thinking and feeling individual. Anne Elliot, unlike Elizabeth Bennet, represents a unique style of how meekness is not a weakness rather it contains the strength of powerful observation and rational actions.

Key words: Woman's identity, individuality, Strength, Society, Intellect, Emotions.

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INTRODUCTION

Jane Austen (1775-1817) was a woman of great talent who made her own way in a world of male dominance by using her power of subtly and perfectly expressing the free-thinking mind of a woman in the garb of the predominant structure of marriage and love. Austen, who was herself brought up in an intelligent but restricted environment, had the power to portray her women characters in the light of balanced temperament, intelligence and charisma to make them come out as more powerful and stronger than the counterpart male characters. A woman who had the strong will of both her mind and heart, who herself wished for a life she could only live through her writings, Austen gave her women a significant role of bringing out the perfect combination of a woman who can think through both her mind and heart, and had the strong sense of standing for herself in times of adversity.

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Dishing out a total of six novels, all revolving around the theme of love and marriage, set in a society where women had the sole purpose to find herself an eligible rich bachelor and make her destiny only by situating herself in the household of a renowned man of the society, Austen gives a slight twist to her novels by adding the spice of the modern concept of a 'thinking woman'. In other words, Austen gives her women the same situation that is predominant in her society, that they must get married to a handsome rich man in order to survive and find purpose for their lives. She also gives her women the mind and heart of a strong, self-thinking individual, having the strength to stand for her wishes and have the patience to wait till fate gives them the exact thing they wished for. In all her novels, Jane Austen highlights how in the existing society where women have the only purpose of getting married and be settled, there can be a woman who though wishes for true love and a happy, caring life and be married to the man of her choice, but in accord of her own terms and have the willpower to first find respect as an individual and then look for comfort in a marriage.

The use of this modern concept of the free-minded woman drew the attention of many readers and critics pan country and time. Despite her approach in writing, nobody really thought her to be a feminist, but rather an apologist for the conservative values of her era. Some even claim that Austen uses irony to register her opposition to the values of society and its disregard for women's talent. The first critic to focus on Austen's feminism, LeRoy Smith "disavows the claim that Austen is a defender of conservative social mores and the claim that Austen is a victim whose "open submission" to male dominance conceals her "hidden resistance" to it.¹ Austen, he says, "uses comedy as a means compatible with her hopes rather than as a cover for dismay or as a sign of her comfort with the status quo."² She is interested in both sexes acquiring self-knowledge and a sympathetic mutual understanding."³ Taking these observations and comments of the critic LeRoy Smith as the foreground of the discussion of Austen constructing a 'thinking' woman in *Persuasion* gives a strong appeal that indeed the protagonist of the novel in discussion, Anne Elliot, is the true example of a woman who in spite of her submissive, quiet and self-sacrificing nature holds the power of silent observation and use of a clear head that helps her stand as an independent free thinking individual irrespective of the sex she belongs to.

The plot of *Persuasion* focuses on the protagonist Anne Elliot, bringing out her timid, quiet, observant nature that makes her the odd one out who, since the death of her dear mother, has always felt alone and lonely with nobody to really hear what she has to say. She also had to let go of the man she loved and wanted to marry because he did not fit in to the standards of an 'eligible bachelor', who did not have great fortune or an established position in the society that made him worthy of Mr. Elliot's daughter. The grief left a scar on her that only made her more closed and distant from her own family. Having quite literally no one to listen or understand her true self, Anne was left with only herself, her music, and her mind and heart, her only guide to help her act accordingly and be strong for her own self.

Austen strings out a chain of incidents in the story whereby we get to see how a seemingly quiet, restrained woman with only the appeal of an unhealthy, weak body musters the hope and strength to nurse, look after and make a strong positive observation of the things happening around her. Whether it be the incident of nursing Mary and Charles Musgrove's child or taking quick, swift and precise actions after the fatal accident of Louisa Musgrove, Anne portrays the stout heart and strong hold over her nerves in the face of tragic adversity and also the proper, clear thoughts that help her save and take proper care of the injured patients. Unlike other heroines of Austen like Elizabeth from *Pride and Prejudice*, or Emma from *Emma*, Anne stands out in her fragility and frailty of having,

¹ Smith, 7

² Smith, 27

³ Smith, 27

initially in her early years according to the story, a nature that could be persuaded and swayed from her own choice which resulted in her calling off her engagement with Captain Wentworth, to becoming a truly matured individual. This development from being someone who could be moved from her own thinking, someone who could not have her own thoughts as the final verdict of her choice, to a mature woman who, though still quiet and submissive in nature, now had the inner strength to not bend her choices and decisions in order to please others and also knew the correct moment to speak out and be verbal about her thoughts is what made Anne Elliot the strong individual Anne. The growth in Anne is something that makes her stand out from all other Austen heroines. For example, Elizabeth of *Pride and Prejudice* always already knew what she wanted and exactly how she wanted it and made it known to the rest of the world by being vocal and loud about her desires. Anne, on the other hand, kept to herself without voicing her inner desires.

The reason why Anne Elliot paints the perfect portrait of a thinking woman of the late 18th century is because of her growth and maturation into an individual, 27 years old from the easily persuaded 19 years old girl. The late 18th and early 19th Century women were considered to be someone who not only had the sole purpose of marrying and becoming a lady of a renowned household, but to also be a proper and good wife or lady of the house. The manual of being the perfect wife or lady ranged from accepting one's own body to female education, domestic economy or even behaviour and body language in social gatherings. The corset not only played a huge role in the proper attire of a woman but also, ideologically, asphyxiated her reality. In other words, back in that time the corset was not just a part of the women's clothing but metaphorically acted as the barrier that separated the woman who appeared in front of others from the woman who she truly was. Emotionally speaking, a good wife was always expected to be happy and gay since her main purpose of existence was fulfilled by being married. Since a woman did not have to go out or bear the brunt of being the food provider of the family, that role being always already taken by the man of the house, the woman had no worry or 'enough' brain to indulge in intellectual thinking. Therefore, it was always expected of a good woman to be happy and motivated with no thoughts pertaining to any distress she might feel as an individual. Even if the corset did not act as the barrier of the woman's true identity and made it impossible for her to breathe freely, a woman must always be happy and have the glow of beauty on her face. Here lies the power of *Persuasion* opposing these sentiments and guidelines of being a good woman by making Anne Elliot quite a contrast to these characteristics of a woman. Austen makes her Anne Elliot opposite to what John Bennett has to say in his *Letters to a Young Lady, On a Variety of Useful and Interesting Subjects: Calculated to Improve the Heart, to form the Manners, and Enlighten the Understanding* and makes her a feeling, sentimental, emotional, sad individual who grieves her losses and mistakes. This quality of Anne to feel and be who she is in spite of being pointed out for her melancholy, sadness and lonely forlorn appearance, she still has the stoutness to solve problems and handle extreme situations where even the men of the story seem to be flabbergasted and numb to make a quick decision. At the end of the story when she gets the piercing sign and letter of love and reconciliation from Captain Wentworth, she knows that her life might finally be filled with the joy and love she always kept alive within her but even then, she waits patiently for things to unfold on its own and not rush things and ruin them.

CONCLUSION

In order to draw the final conclusion of how Anne Elliot is truly the representative of the thinking woman that Jane Austen constructs in her novels, we must pay attention to how her character transforms completely. Anne Elliot in the beginning of the novel and Anne Elliot at the end of the novel show a complete reversal of beliefs and strength that make her a stark character, who went through the journey of maturation and growth, overcame her shyness to not speak at all to learning to speak where required. In spite of all the ups and downs that she faces, she keeps her hope and love within her, never letting them fade. As in the beginning of the paper I quoted LeRoy Smith who said that Austen's novels explore the concept of mutual understanding of the couple and the individual's acquiring self-knowledge, this stands true because of the mature love that she portrays in *Persuasion*. This mature love would not have been possible had only the male character, Captain Wentworth, had the maturity to understand and act according to the situation. This love story is possible because both the individual showed signs of growth. Therefore, had Austen not made her heroine Anne Elliot break free from the shackles of the restrained, non-thinking woman she appears to be, the story would not have touched its height. All in all, "*Persuasion* broadens the culturally acceptable range of womanhood even as it seems to reinforce the limited number of attributes that are allowed to define it."

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