THE NOVEL OF THE ROMANTIC PERIOD: JANE AUSTEN AND WALTER SCOTT

Jane Austen and Walter Scott were two most accomplished fiction writers of the Romantic Age. Their works retained various shades of Romanticism. How did they engage their creative faculty in this context could be an interesting study. The following is only an abstract on their modes of fiction writing in this respect:

Jane Austen:

Jane Austen wrote domestic novels. Her novels are generally about a young woman’s finding a husband. She built her novels upon very ordinary facts and circumstances of life. Her novels are little social comedies with a display of artistic execution. Love is an important theme of her novels. For example, her ‘Pride and Prejudice’ is about such a relationship between Darcy and Elizabeth. The centre of the attraction of the novel is held by the changes the characters undergo to become a quite pleasing pair of lovers. Darcy’s pride and ego, the outcome of his insularity, have a happy turn, and this brings out his innate goodness and gentility, just as Elizabeth’s prejudice against him passes away and develops into her warm admiration for his quality. Elizabeth is a brilliant creation by the novelist for being a heroine as witty as she is charming. The novel may be viewed as a neat comic fiction of romantic kind. As regards to the story, up to a point the chasm between Darcy and Elizabeth seems to widen more and more; then the movement of the novel returns and following Darcy’s rehabilitation in Elizabeth’s eyes eventually the marriage between the two takes place. In the novel humour and humanity, satire and irony play to the fullest. In the first view, the story may look as that of a world of rich idlers, but there is more than this behind the veneer. It is as an ironist that Jane Austen gives the novel its sense of subtle drama (look, how Lady Catherine’s interference in the end, far from preventing, merely hastens Darcy’s marriage to Elizabeth). All of Austen’s novels deal with the women-centred themes that achieve the goal of marriage through the experience of love. But more than this, there is juxtaposition of the fancied hope and the hard reality.

Jane Austen is looked upon as the innovator of the Dramatic Novel. She is found to have used this form with a consummate success. In her novels, there is the intensification of action, though within a narrow or confined circle of her society. The action moves with utmost fidelity to this society. This intensification of action, in which there are dramatic twists and turns, constitutes an essential attribute of the dramatic novel. The action proceeds amidst changing tension between different characters. Her ‘Pride and Prejudice’ is a classic example of the dramatic novel in English.

However, the sentiment and propriety of passion- that are elements of romanticism are consistently countered in the novels of Austen. There are instead some moral lessons to be found in the novels. These lessons are infused with an ideological insistence on the merits of good conduct, good manners, sound reason, and marriage as an admirable social institution. Austen in her novels never scorns love, but she balances its often disconcerting and disruptive nature with a firm assertion of its complementary benefits of self-knowledge and self-discipline.

Walter Scott:

The romantic note of the English novel was noted in a new way in the historical novels of Sir Walter Scott. Scott enlivened the past and enriched the world of novels with the grandeur and the glory of the past. He aimed at revitalizing the past with all its pomp and splendour, love and hatred, virtues and vices, honour and shame. His novels are romantic in the sense that they treat the remote aspects of history. In Scott’s novels, facts, incidents, situations and characters are treated against some historical background with artistic comprehension and imagination. They are indeed fusions of fact and fiction, of the romance of the past and the requirement of art. As a matter of fact, like all historical novels, his are also both romantic and realistic. On the background there is the real situation of the past and on the foreground stands the romantic story of men and women with lust, love and longing. Scott employed historical background, characters and incidents to build up a plot of sensation and suspense, love and hatred, heroism and villainy. As a historical novelist, indeed Scott enjoys a unique position for he is considered the pioneer in the line. He in his novels is found to enliven the past with the art of a fiction writer and the fidelity of a historian. Of course, his novels do not always contain exactly historical facts, but so far as the spirit of the age is concerned, he has exhibited his genius to the fullest extent in his graphic presentation. From the womb of the dim past, he seems to bring out all its gorgeous lights, spectacular charms and varied sensations.

‘Kenilworth’ is Scott’s typical historical novel with a romantic plot of love and intrigue, crime and punishment. The plot is quite thrilling; however, its real worth is in the social picture it has. The novel describes vividly and powerfully much of the Elizabethan age- that golden epoch in English history. The Elizabethan court and people, political ideals and social conditions –all get a superb treatment in the novel. Scott’s romantic imagination has transported all historical affairs to a truly fictional world. The characters of the novel, even when they are historical, are patterned after romantic types. The Earl of Leicester in Scott’s painting ceases to be a merely historical character and becomes an ideal figure of ambition, and violent temper of some romantic age. Amy’s delineation is perfectly in keeping with the nature of a proud , thoughtless heroine. Queen Elizabeth, as presented by Scott, has become a romantic woman of power, efficiency and wisdom.