

Analyzing Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* as Historical Fiction: An Inter- disciplinary Approach to Understanding Social Differentiation in 19th Century Regency Era

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ABSTRACT

Historical novels have greatly enriched the understanding of the time period in which they were set. Some historical novels have also conveyed the political, social, cultural, and economic situation of an earlier period. Historical novels are, therefore, contemporary in nature or can be set in a later period. Historical novels are extremely important in developing an inter-disciplinary approach in analyzing the milieu of a certain time period in history. The 19th Century Regency Era is a period in which many important works were composed. In this paper, an attempt will be made to analyze the historical realities of the Regency Era with emphasis on the depiction of social differentiation in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*

I. INTRODUCTION

The Regency Era in England was a period of great literary achievements. Many novelists and poets wrote composed their finest works during this period, and this Era was marked by a high level of refinement not only in terms of literature but also in the field of art, architecture, and fashion. In the 19th Century, many writers adopted historical themes to compose their works. Many of these works assumed iconic proportions in the years to come and came to be called 'classics' (Yadav & Sengupta, 2017).

Many of these classics were composed during the early 19th Century, a period synonymous with the Regency Era. The periodization of the Regency Era has been a matter of controversy, and while some scholars are of the opinion that the period encapsulates the years from 1811-120, other are of the belief that the period between 1797 to 1837 must be considered as the Regency Era. This primarily entails the reign of the kings during the end of the Georgian Era, with the later part of the reign of King George III and his two sons George IV and William IV being considered as part of the Regency period. Etymologically, the term "Regency" refers to the time when King George III became incapacitated due to his mental condition, and was deemed unfit to rule, and his son and successor, King George IV was declared as the Regent to the throne of England.

The period of the Regency was, in many ways, considered to be a period of decline, because an incapacitated King was something the British had not been used to. Politically, the decline was evident in the rule of the Prince Regent over England and its colonies. It was also a period of instability as George IV was not really considered to be a monarch but only a Regent. The monarchy could, therefore, not project its might the way it was supposed to. Socially, this period was marked by numerous upheavals and unrests, including the Luddite movement and the large-scale riots in Glasgow in 1811. In terms of international eminence, Britain seemed weak in the face of Napoleon Bonaparte's meteoric rise to power in France and his exploits which later engulfed almost the entire European subcontinent.

It was during this period, and under such diverse circumstances, that important literary works were composed by famous novelists. All these novels, therefore, can be considered an important tool to reconstruct the history of the Regency Era in England. Two of the most renowned novelists of this period were Jane Austen and Sir Walter Scott. Their works have provided useful insights into the historical settings of the Regency Era, including the marked social differentiation that existed during this period.

Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* can be taken as a case study for evaluating the social and cultural landscape of the Regency Era. The social differentiation prevalent during the early 19th is perfectly depicted in Austen's novel with the main protagonists belonging to two completely different layers of society. Therefore, in order to historicize the social differentiation of the time, it is imperative to look at the various characters and their stations in society as depicted in *Pride and Prejudice*.

Historical Novels of the Regency Era and Their Setting: Transition from Enlightenment to Romanticism

The important works of the Regency Era were composed during 1811 and 1820. Most of these works fall in the category of romantic fiction, however, they had a distinct historical setting, and conveyed the correct

picture of the time. Jane Austen is considered to be one of the best-known authors of this period, and her works are reflective of the time period in which they were set. The works of other writers such as Sir Walter Scott, E.T.A. Hoffman, Maria Edgeworth, and Susan Ferrier also belong to this period, and many of them reflect the finer nuances of the Regency Era in terms of the socio-political and cultural landscape.

Apart from the novelists who wrote during this period, there were many well-known poets who are also known to have composed some of their most renowned works during the Regency period in England. Poets like Lord Byron, William Wordsworth, John Keats, and William Blake composed extensively during the Regency period, and some of their best-known works were products of the time.

As far as the dominant trend is concerned, Romanticism was at its peak during the Regency Era. Romanticism was an artistic and intellectual movement which had developed in Western Europe during the later half of the 18th Century. This movement had a great impact on literary works. Romanticism was in many ways the successor of Enlightenment, however, the manner and style of writing during both the periods was very different. A salient feature of Romanticism was that most of the works composed under the umbrella of this movement projected a detestation against the norms of aristocratic life and social privileges.

The works composed during this period reflected on human feelings and emotions and stressed on human experience as the most important component of nature. The Regency Era works clearly reflect a strong emphasis on human feelings of love, sorrow, anxiety, horror, pain, embarrassment, and other natural human experiences. The works of Jane Austen are a classic example of human sentiments being portrayed through a plethora of characters.

These works also acquainted the readers with the realities of the time. An example of this is the role of women in society and the significance of the institution of marriage. During the Regency Era, the best possible scenario for a woman to have a stable life in society was to marry a wealthy man. Parents were most desirous of getting their daughters betrothed to men of high rank. The social gathering that were organized, especially the balls, were a means to acquaint young men and women so that they could find the best possible match. Love matches were rare and marriage alliances were almost always based on social class and other factors. However, Romanticists, like Jane Austen, have laid emphasis on women trying to find love within a limited space. Romanticism was, therefore, in many ways idealistic in nature, but it also made the reader come to terms with the harsh realities of the time.

The Regency Era works also touch upon another important factor, i.e. inheritance. The estates of big and small holders could not be inherited by their daughters and, therefore, most couples were desirous of having a son, failing which the estates would have to be given away to a distant cousin. In Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, none of the five daughters of Mr. Bennet can inherit the estate. The estate is written in the name of Mr. William Collins, a pompous clergyman.

The Regency Era novels, particularly *Pride and Prejudice*, are therefore, an undiluted expression of the realities that shaped the early 19th Century. These works have greatly enhanced our understanding of class hierarchies, familial bonds, the notions of inheritance, the institution of marriage, and other related factors which played an important role in the social order of those times. These novels can, therefore, be considered as important historical tools for reconstructing the history of early 19th Century England.

Historicizing Social Differentiation during the Regency Era: A Case Study of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*

One of the historical realities of the Regency Era was the abject social differentiation that existed in the society, with a clear demarcation between those who owned large estates, those who owned tiny tracts of land, and those who owned nothing at all. From the point of social differentiation, therefore, the Regency Era in England was a period of gross inequalities. The Industrial Revolution of the 18th Century had impoverished some of the landed magnates but most still held on to their hereditary estates.

Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, a famed novel written during this period, provides critical information about the social classes in the Regency Era, as well as the nature of social differentiation during this period. It is important to note that Jane Austen belonged to a middle-class family, and her novels reflect her understanding of the social and class differences that were prevalent in society. Her novels dealt with varied subjects such as social hierarchies, women, marriage, and the society at large (Tamrin, 2018). The novel *Pride and Prejudice* is one of the most important works of Jane Austen which can be analysed in order to study the social disparities of the time.

The main protagonists of the novel, Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy, come from two opposite realms of society. While the former belonged to a middle-class family. Her father owned a small farm. The estate of the Bennet's was to be inherited by a distant male relative as the patriarch of the family did not have any male heirs, only five daughters. Her mother was perpetually worried about getting her daughter's married wealthy men in order to assure their good fortune.

Mr. Darcy's friend, Mr. Bingley's, presence in the town is celebrated with much anticipation, particularly by Mrs. Bennet who looks at it as a great opportunity for one of her daughter's. She is keen that her eldest daughter, Jane, gets married to Mr. Bingley, a landed magnate from the north of England. An analysis of one of the passages from the book bears clear testimony to the excitement of Mrs. Bennet on the arrival of Mr. Bingley in Hertfordshire. She exults in the possibility of one of her daughters marrying a "man of large fortune."

Oh! Single, my dear, to be sure! A single man of large fortune; four or five thousand a year. What a fine thing for our girls!

'How so? How can it affect them?'

'My dear Mr. Bennet,' replied his wife, 'how can you be so tiresome! You must know that I am thinking of his marrying one of them'(Austen, 3).'

Mr. Bingley's inherited wealth is also prominently described in the book. The fact that he came from an aristocratic background is clearly spelled out in the book, along with the description of his father's desire to purchase an estate in the countryside. Mr. Bingley is, therefore, projected as a man of great wealth, a person of a high rank in English society. A stark contrast to the Bennet's who can barely make both ends meet with their small holdings and the pressure of paying the dowries of five daughters.

Mr. Bingley inherited property to the amount of nearly a hundred thousand pounds from his father, who had intended to purchase an estate, but did not live to do it(Austen, 19).

Mr. Darcy, the chief male protagonist, who is the closest friend of Mr. Bingley is also the owner of a large estate. Many characters in the book consider him to harbour pride as well as ill-will against those not belonging to the same social stature as he or his friend. In the initial pages of the book, the author describes Mr. Darcy as someone who has made a bad impression on all present in the ballroom, and comes across as a proud and unaffable person, while his friend, Mr. Bingley, also belonging to the same social class, comes across as a pleasant person. While Mr. Darcy does not dance with any lady in the room except the two women who accompanied him and Mr. Bingley. Despite his good looks and towering personality, Mr. Darcy does not win over the hearts of the people as he is considered to be proud. His large estate in Derbyshire is cited as one of the reasons by the author as being the reason for his overbearing nature and his unfriendly countenance.

The son of William Lucas, a close associate of the Bennet's provides an interesting commentary on the wealth of Mr. Darcy and why his pride should be justified.

"If I were as rich as Mr. Darcy,' cried a young Lucas, who came with his sisters, 'I should not care how proud I was. I would keep a pack of foxhounds, and drink a bottle of wine a day(Austen, 24)."

It is interesting to note that both Mr. Darcy and Mr. Bingley are men of much wealth and status, however, while the latter is considered to be a positive character, the former is considered to be a detestable character at least in the early pages of the book. Mr. Darcy becomes known to the reader as a person with a heart only in the later pages of the book when he develops strong and intense feelings for Elizabeth, a girl who does not belong to his social class.

Status was, therefore, of utmost important, and people of a certain status were more respected than others in society. The novel provides a clear statement on social differentiation. Clothes also came to represent status in early 19th Century England, and Jane Austen's book has perfectly captured the manner in which clothes were considered as symbols of high or low stations within the social hierarchy. In an instance when Elizabeth, the chief female protagonist, goes to meet her elder sister who is unwell, her clothes and the her "lack of manners" are called into question. Miss Bingley, the sister of Mr. Bingley, begins to say things about Elizabeth's dress and her inability to carry herself well.

"Yes, and her petticoat; I hope you saw her petticoat, six inches deep in mud, I am absolutely certain; and the gown which had been let down to hide it not doing its office (Austen, 43)."

From an analysis of the conversation among the Bingleys and Mr Darcy, it becomes clear that clothes and mannerisms were closely associated with status in society, and Miss Elizabeth is criticized for being what the high society considered to be "improper." Mr. Darcy also impresses upon his friend, Mr. Bingley, to not marry Jane, Elizabeth's elder sister, because he considers it to be an improper match. Mr. Bingley is not pleased with the idea at first but he values his friend's opinion and follows his advice. Class and status were, therefore, the chief determining factors as far as marriage alliances were concerned in the early 19th Century, and the novel presents a comprehensive analysis of these factors.

II. CONCLUSION

Historical fiction provides significant insights into the historical realities of the period in which the works are set. The social, political, and cultural realities of the time come to light through an analysis of these works. Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* is a work which can be analysed through the prism of the social realities it depicts. The work projects social differentiation as was prevalent during the Regency Era. It is, therefore, an important work which can be used to assess the various social disparities of the time.

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