

THE ENGLISH NOVEL: INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACHES

Dr. Aruni Mahapatra

Department of Humanities and Social Sciences

Indian Institute of Technology Roorkee

Lecture 12

Pride and Prejudice- I: Scholarly Approaches

Hello learners!

Welcome again to this NPTEL course on “The English novel: Interdisciplinary Approaches.” Today, we will begin the third module of this course, which as you know is focused on Jane Austen's novel *Pride and Prejudice*. I will begin with a brief biographical as well as a social context to Jane Austen's world. In particular, I will be focusing on the relationship between economics and the publishing of popular fiction. This is the context in which Jane Austen made a very important and lasting intervention with the publication of her novels, of which *Pride and Prejudice* is among the most well-known.

In order to understand specifically the relationship between economic forces and the popularity of fiction and specifically women's fiction in late 18th century England, I want to begin with a theoretical perspective on the relationship between economics and art. This perspective I borrow from the work of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. Pierre Bourdieu published many works of which one of the most influential is *The Rules of Art, Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*. This work was published in the year 1992 and it emerged as an attempt to provide a convincing and intelligent but also holistic and representative answer to what is perhaps among the oldest questions in literary theory. This is the question about, or this question may be phrased thus, what exactly is the relationship between literature, that is the motivation that some individuals have to compose fictional or non-fictional verbal art, that is original compositions created out of words and the corresponding motivation or impulse that some others have to read these words?

In economic terms, these impulses can be described as why do publishers print some works of art, that is stories, novels or non-fictional prose narratives or poetry or comic books or other kinds of creative art. Why do some people print it? Why do some people create these works? And finally, why do some people pay money to buy these works of art that are printed and then spend time reading these works? These are very old questions and it's not

been very easy to answer this question because most answers tend to assume a certain mechanistic relationship between economic forces and what people do in their leisurely time. So, for instance, one of the oldest answers to this question is when people don't have to worry about essential needs of survival, for instance, they can choose to spend their free time reading books or reading stories or indulging in fiction. However, this is not a very convincing answer because as everyone knows, many people whose lives are constrained and who are often crushed by demands on their time also find some time to spend on fiction. Similarly, it's not always escapist or purely entertainment-based forms of art that attract people's time and money. Often people go out of their way to spend time on obscure or difficult to understand and highly intellectual works of art as well.

So, these are some complexities of this question, which is how exactly can we relate the buying and selling, the writing and reading of literary art to the economic forces of demand and supply. And, so, to address this growing intellectual gap, Pierre Bourdieu wrote this book, *The Rules of Art, Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field* in the year 1992. Now, how did Bourdieu answer this question? Bourdieu answers this question by dividing the literary field of a given nation at a given time into two very general and broad categories. The first category is a large-scale production. In this field, Bourdieu puts not just writers, but writers, editors, publishers, printers, booksellers, bookshop owners, distributors as well. All of these large-scale producers, that is all of these agents in this particular literary field, have certain common features, have certain common aims and goals. They cater to very wide audiences, they are devoted to markets and profits, and they achieve this goal of maximizing profit by publishing and distributing in the main or mostly works of popular art, literature that is aimed at a wide and general audience and in most cases, this kind of literature happens to be genre fiction, genres such as popular romance, detective fiction, horror fiction, and so on. In Bourdieu's scheme of things, the way to understand this field of large-scale literary production is to say or is to know that in this field, the aim of the agents is to accumulate economic capital by ensuring that a large volume of material is produced.

What is this material?

This material usually consists of a large number of books. So, the print run of these editions is usually very large, in multiple thousands, if not more, if not hundreds of thousands. They are able to produce this large volume of books because based on certain surveys, they are able to predict that these many buyers exist, that if a publisher prints, to take one very general example, a million copies of a Harry Potter novel, then there will be at least a

million consumers or buyers waiting to buy these copies. So, the theoretical language in which Bourdieu describes this literary field is to say that these producers accumulate or aim to accumulate economic capital through the circulation of material capital.

Now, in addition to this subfield, Bourdieu also creates another subfield, which is the field of restricted literary production. In this field, the agents, that is writers, but also editors and booksellers and so on, they have slightly different aims. Their aim is not so much the accumulation of economic capital through the circulation of material capital, but rather their aim is to accumulate symbolic capital and they do this by the circulation and the generation of cultural capital. So, to understand this, Bourdieu gives the example of writers whose works were not popular, whose works didn't enjoy the kind of readership that popular or genre fiction did. Some examples of writers in this category, so called unpopular writers, were writers in groups such as Aestheticists, Decadents, Symbolists, and so on. These are all literary groups that were active in late 19th and early 20th century Europe and Bourdieu's context is the literary culture of 19th and 20th century France. So, these writers were not very popular.

But that did not mean they did not enjoy financial success or stability or readership in the book buying and book selling market. So, how did these writers and their publishers ensure that this kind of literary art would also be sustainable and would find an audience? Bourdieu's answer is that instead of a large volume of books or sale, which can be called material capital, these agents in the field of restricted literary production focused on the production of cultural capital. Cultural capital is not about the number of books printed, rather it refers to the erudition, knowledge and education and other cultural features, other cultural attributes of the writing and the stories that these writers told and their sensibility in general. Now, by the accumulation and the production of cultural capital, these writers and their editors ensured that when people bought these books, they would be buying, in a sense, they would be spending not economic capital, but rather symbolic capital. That is, they would be buying into the prestige and the respect that emerges from the pursuit of an uncompromising artistic vision. This prestige and this respect would be heightened because everyone- the buyers, the readers, as well as the writers and the editors, they would all be aware that they are pursuing these uncompromising artistic visions in defiance of prevailing market trends or tastes. Now, it's important to note that this defiance and this perception of an artistic vision that is in defiance of a market trend is as real as it is a matter of perception and that is the connection between Bourdieu's understanding of the relationship between cultural and economic capital and a traditional Marxian

understanding of the relationship between 'Base' and 'Superstructure.' So, this understanding of the relationship between literature and money will be very important as we try and understand the context of Jane Austen.

Jane Austen is a writer who is incredibly famous in a country like India with its very, very deep colonial legacy and especially with the teaching and the study of English. Jane Austen is very close to being a household name. In the economic sphere as well, if one looks very briefly at the context of publishing and book buying and selling, one will find that there are many editions, popular as well as critical editions of Jane Austen's novels which are sold in great numbers in the Indian book buying market. One way to understand these numbers is to use the concept of symbolic and cultural capital.

A lot of people truly enjoy reading Jane Austen novels and that enjoyment, if one understands Pierre Bourdieu's work, comes as much from the stories and the plots of Jane Austen novels, which are very contemporary and speak to contemporary concerns about financial hardship, the difficulty of choosing a life partner, whether it's a man or a woman, and so on. In addition to these very relatable and contemporaneous plots, what attracts readers to Jane Austen novels is the great cultural and symbolic capital that the name Jane Austen produces and the aura as well as the brand that Jane Austen is associated with. What consists of this aura? Jane Austen is an English novelist and Jane Austen's concerns are very, very English. Jane Austen emerged from the literary culture and the changes in the book buying and the book selling industry of 18th century England. And that is what we will understand in the next few minutes. Before moving further, I want to briefly recall Ian Watt's thesis, which I discussed in earlier lectures.

In his book, *The Rise of the Novel*, Ian Watt describes how the prose fiction published by three writers, as Defoe, Richardson and Fielding, can be understood as inaugurating a new style of writing in the history of English literature, and this form, Ian Watt calls, can be justifiably called the novel, which also literally means a new thing. Now, what's a key thesis was that these three writers, Defoe, Richardson and Fielding, were able to produce the innovations, the newness of their writing because they were riding on the wave of changes that had occurred in the English reading public.

What were these changes?

Essentially, the biggest change in the book buying and book selling public was that while earlier in the early 18th century and in the centuries before that, patrons decided what was written or writers could not write depends on a market. The concept of literary market did

not exist. Writers wrote for patrons, powerful people, whether it was governments or religious institutions like church or powerful business owners who sponsored writers, who gave writers the conditions in which to exist, that is both money but also places to live, accommodation, living expenses and so on.

In the middle of the 18th century and at some point, in the early 18th century, this began to change. Writers began to depend less and less on patrons, i.e. powerful individuals, whether it was nobility or religious institutions, for their own sustenance, and writers were able to depend on a democratic and very open-ended market. This market consisted of middle class to upper middle-class, people with time and more importantly some surplus income. With the benefit of this surplus money and time, these readers were able to buy books.

They were able to choose how to spend their free time and this opened up a great opportunity for writers. Defoe, Richardson and Fielding were among the earliest writers to utilise this opportunity and that is why their popularity is most remarkable and most well-known and also most talked about and studied. They are therefore seen as the pioneers and the innovators of the novel in England. However, in the second half of the 18th century, the beneficiaries of this new market, of this new and alternative and more democratic source of patronage for writers were not Richardson, Defoe and Fielding. They, of course, continued to write and continued to ride on the success of this market. But something more remarkable happened and a lot of female writers, women who traditionally did not have the opportunity or the respectability to have their works published and read, suddenly began to use this opportunity and publish a lot of fiction. This fiction by women writers became very popular this popularity produced a sort of double standard in the literary intelligentsia of 18th century England. This double standard consisted of a combination of condescension and admiration. So, while almost every reader, everyone with free time to read and everyone with disposable income to buy a book, spent some time reading novels. They also tried to justify this appreciation and enjoyment of novels by playing it down, by making it sound like it was a guilty pleasure and not a very intellectual pleasure.

So, there was a contradiction between the popularity of novels and the lack of prestige or respect that the novel enjoyed as a literary form, as a way for individuals to pass their time. This contradiction can also be seen as a tension between commercial viability and intellectual avowal. Now, because the novel was a very popular literary form, there was a lot of unease. A lot of people who read these novels felt guilty about spending their time reading novels and they struggled to find an intellectual or moral justification for their

choice, for choosing to spend their time reading novels. Because it was a new form, it lacked this intellectual frame in which it could be justified. Therefore, in the absence of this intellectual justification, many readers of novels frequently put down their own or frequently pretended not to enjoy reading novels, but to somehow justify this choice of theirs in very frivolous terms. They often tried to pretend that they were actually not reading novels when in fact they were.

This was the context in which Jane Austen began her literary career. Jane Austen was born in the year 1775. This year, exactly in the third quarter of the 18th century, this was a time when the changes I have just described were at their peak. That is, we are at the peak of this popularity of fiction that is written by women. In addition to this popularity, there is also a growing condescension and contempt for fiction by women. This condescension also took the form of a general suspicion and critique of the genre known as the novel. The novel as a genre was seen as something too popular, something too corruptible and corrupting. This was seen as a corrupting form because there were no edifying or educational properties that readers could attach to the novel.

And yet, despite the lack of this edifying properties, it seemed to be enjoying a great deal of commercial success. So, it was this contradiction which Jane Austen was born into and it was this contradiction through which Jane Austen decided to forge a literary career. So, just to understand a little bit of Austen's struggle in negotiating these contradictions, I want to present some information. By July 7th, 1809, that is when Jane Austen was 34 years old, she was still unpublished. That is, she had written a lot but she had not yet been published.

At that point, she had three complete manuscripts that she had produced and one of these was under contract to a publisher. This manuscript was titled *Susan* and was in all likelihood the first complete manuscript of a novel that Jane Austen produced. We know from biographical records and archives that *Susan*, the manuscript, which Austen first composed, was sold to the London publisher B. Crosby and Company at some point in the year 1803 for the amount of 10 pounds. This meant that the publisher owned the copyright to the manuscript of *Susan*. But it was not yet published.

So, this was a kind of a not ideal situation in which the manuscript completed was possessed by a publisher and not published. This is an interesting information which will help us understand the career as well as the legacy that Jane Austen has left and I will be using the instance of *Northanger Abbey* which *Susan* was later published as *Northanger Abbey*. But it was not the first novel that was published and it was published very late in

Austen's career. *Susan* or *Northanger Abbey* was a novel that Austen might have chosen to publish before her other novels, but instead she chose to publish *Susan* as *Northanger Abbey* much later.

Why might this be the case? Why did Austen make this choice? As it happens, the first novel that Austen published was *Sense and Sensibility*, followed by *Pride and Prejudice*. So, in the order in which Austen's work appears in public, *Pride and Prejudice*, the novel which we will discuss in greater detail, was the second. However, in the order of its composition, *Pride Prejudice* was the third, and the first was the manuscript *Susan*, which was later published as *Northanger Abbey*. In order to better understand the key forces and the key contradictions that shape Jane Austen's art as an individual, as a human being, and as a writer who is struggling with her context, I will focus on one scene early in *Northanger Abbey*, which we will discuss in greater detail in the subsequent lecture.

Thank you.