The English Novel: Interdisciplinary Approaches

Dr. Aruni Mahapatra
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
Indian Institute of Technology, Roorkee

Lecture - 18

***Pride and Prejudice*: Scholarly Approaches**

Hello learners and welcome to the seventh lecture in our discussion of Jane Austen's novel *Pride and Prejudice*. In the previous lecture, I briefly introduced a key moment in the novel and I gave a short analysis of that moment. Today, I will reflect in greater detail on the implications of that moment and how we can interpret the rest of the novel better by clearly understanding and appreciating this moment. The moment that I'm referring to, obviously, is the choice that one character makes and the choice that another character fails to understand. Before I go into more detail and I briefly recall that moment for you all, I want to make some general comments on the novel and why it continues to be as popular as it is.

Now, everyone knows that *Pride and Prejudice* is a greatly popular novel. There are countless film and TV adaptations. There are countless popular and genre adaptations. There are multiple series of novels that have been published based on the characters and the settings of this novel. What makes this novel so popular? It is worth reflecting on that briefly. On the surface of things, the novel has a very conventional romantic plot. It seems to be a novel that idealizes romantic love culminating in marriage. However, if one looks very closely at how the novel derives its power, how the novel keeps readers engaged and how the novel produces moments of great enjoyment, appreciation and also education for its readers.

One will notice that it is not a novel about romantic love or marriage per se. Instead, it is a novel about the difficulty of knowing. That is to say, it is a novel that describes and dramatizes how difficult it is for us to be certain that what we perceive and what we understand is in fact the truth. Not only is it difficult to know whether what we perceive is the truth, it is also difficult to know whether what we can certify as truth, in fact, is good for us. In other words, it is difficult to transition from a theoretical, logical or intellectual idea of truth to a moral and ethical idea of truth. We may understand something to be true, but does that have meaning for us in the course of our lives? These are, on the surface of things, philosophical questions. However, the beauty and the power of the novel is such that these philosophical and intellectual questions are made humane. They are captured in the choices and actions that human beings like us undertake. So, one

last thing about the novel before moving on. It is a novel not only about the difficulty of knowing, but also about the dangers of acting in the face of what will inevitably be limited or imperfect knowledge. That is difficult and dangerous, but that is life. Therefore, it is a novel about the precarious nature of life itself. Life needs to be lived. We cannot afford to delay certain decisions forever. And yet we are required to take these decisions. We are required to make certain choices without perfect information. That is to say, despite having imperfect knowledge, life demands and life requires from us that we make choices as if the knowledge we had was perfect. This is what the novel is really about, even though on the surface of things it may appear to be about romantic love or marriage.

So what kind of choices and what kind of imperfect knowledge does the novel dramatize? Today I will explain a little bit about these choices and these intellectual stakes of the novel by reflecting on a character whose name is Charlotte Lucas. I had mentioned that Charlotte Lucas makes a choice. She does something which Elizabeth Bennett, who is the novel's protagonist, fails to understand and expresses. Elizabeth expresses a great deal of shock and almost a kind of despair at the decision that Charlotte takes. In what follows, I will reflect on how Jane Austen's biographical background, that is her own life, provided an important context from which Charlotte Lucas's choice was described. I will then reflect on the narrative implications of this choice that Charlotte Lucas makes. And finally, I will briefly reflect on some scholarly approaches to the novel that can be understood and practiced through a better understanding of this choice.

So let's understand briefly what is this choice that Charlotte Lucas makes. Now, I read out a quote from the novel which introduced Sir William Lucas, that is Charlotte's father. The Lucases are the neighbours of the Bennets and Sir William Lucas is an interesting character. We get a small biography of this character. The narrator explains to us how this man, Mr. Lucas, had gained some degree of financial stability through trade and business and later on decided to stop engaging in that activity and instead to take up the title of a knight, that is, once he was awarded knighthood, to take up the title of ‘Sir’ William Lucas and to give up working and to merely enjoy the respect and recognition that the title conferred upon him. This brief biographical information about this character lets us know that the Lucases were financially well to do, but they were not exactly swimming in cash. In other words, they had enough to survive, but the unwed single women in the Lucas family given the general lack of opportunity of women to inherit and own property, their fate, therefore, was in a very precarious situation. While Sir William

Lucas himself did not have to worry about money or property or his well-being, his daughter Charlotte had a lot to worry about. That's because he had not accumulated enough wealth and she did not stand to gain much by way of capital. She depended on marrying into wealth and marrying someone who could inherit a property and therefore ensure her well-being.

In this context, a character named Mr. Collins appears on the scene. Mr. Collins is a clergyman who is said to inherit a large swathe of property in the neighborhood. Now, this man is defined, that is to say, Mr. Collins is defined by two key pieces of information. On one hand, the fact that he will inherit property, and on the other, the fact that he is of a highly dislikable and disagreeable nature. There are repeated mentions. In fact, it is not subtle at all. Readers who might have missed one hint are given repeated hints. And so much so that there are not hints as loud announcements about how bad a person and how horrible a companion this man will likely make to anyone who might be unlucky enough to find in him a life partner. At one point, Elizabeth Bennet describes Mr. Collins as, “conceited, pompous, narrow-minded and a silly man”. So, the narrator leaves no stone unturned in showing to us exactly how dislikable is Mr. Collins. However, the irony or the joke of the situation is that this man whom nobody likes has something which makes him a very powerful candidate in this kind of an economy or in this kind of a marriage market. Because he stands to inherit a home and property, he is still in a sense attractive. And it is this knowledge that he stands to own property and this power that property gives him which makes him fancy himself as attractive to the women. And it is perhaps with this sense of power and this sense of agency, self-delusional though it may be, Mr. Collins proposes to Elizabeth.

Now, this is a remarkable moment in the novel because Elizabeth exerts a great deal of individuality and perhaps the first and the strongest expression of rational objective thinking and makes a difficult choice. She decides to refuse Mr. Collins's proposal of marriage. The manner in which readers access this information is through a direct report. The narrator describes to us exactly what happened in this scene as if the narrator were present and we accept the narrator's view. Until this point, we have not had any occasion or reason to doubt the narrator's reporting of events. Therefore, we take the narrator's view as reality. Here is what the narrator tells us. "Almost as soon as I entered the house", he tells Lizzie, I singled you out as the companion of my future life." So, this statement is very obviously untrue and mainly because it is an attempt to present as highly ennobling

and edifying what is actually a very simple and causal decision. It's a very practical decision.

Mr. Collins thinks that Elizabeth will agree to his proposal simply because he has the power that property confers upon him. The thing to note is that readers are described this information in a direct report. As soon as Elizabeth receives this proposal, she is in a great dilemma and faces a great deal of pressure to accept this proposal. However, despite this pressure, Elizabeth manages to hold off and finally takes this decision to refuse this proposal. Immediately after that, however, we piece together the sequence of events to understand that having been refused by Elizabeth, Mr. Collins has gone on and proposed to Charlotte. In this case, however, Charlotte has accepted his proposal.

Now, the key difference between these two proposals, one that is refused and the second which is accepted, is that the second one is accessed by us, that is, readers, indirectly. We learn that someone has witnessed this and someone has reported this as a story to someone else. Elizabeth hears someone tell her that Mr. Collins has proposed to Charlotte and she has accepted this offer. And then, following this receipt of this information, Elizabeth reacts in a highly shocked manner. She says, "Engaged to Mr. Collins! My dear Charlotte--impossible!" This word 'impossible is important to note because later on in the novel when we reach the ending of the novel, we learn that Mr. Darcy has proposed to Elizabeth and she accepts. When Elizabeth reports this information to Jane, she uses the same word 'impossible' in the context of Darcy and Elizabeth.

Now, when we reach that point, we will have occasion to reflect more deeply on the meaning of possibility and how the novel creates the meaning of the word plot and narrative through this word impossible. But for now, I just want to flag that this word occurs twice and in both occasions, the word is doing very different kinds of intellectual and emotional labor. In this case, when Elizabeth mentions that Charlotte's marriage to Mr. Collins must be impossible, she is expressing a degree of shock. Elizabeth is shocked and uses the word impossible because she thinks it would be a great punishment for Charlotte to spend the rest of her life with this man named Mr. Collins. For Elizabeth, this would be a punishment because of how dislikeable a person Mr. Collins is, but also because how there is a sense that she has that Charlotte, as an individual, could have held out, could have taken a chance, and could have preserved for herself the possibility of greater happiness. That this is a poor decision by Charlotte and this is not a good choice that Charlotte has made because she has the possibility of greater happiness. However, immediately after Elizabeth expresses this shocked reaction, Charlotte rationalizes her

choice. Charlotte explains to Elizabeth why this is in fact a very good choice for her. And in Charlotte's explanation, this is a good choice because Charlotte's situation in life is very different from that of Elizabeth. And what is this difference in their respective situations according to Charlotte? The difference is that Charlotte does not consider herself as beautiful or as intelligent as Elizabeth, hence, has less to gain from taking the risk of romance. This is Charlotte's explanation, and this is a view that Elizabeth does not accept. Now before we comment on the merits or demerits of using such logic, let us try and understand some biographical contexts for Charlotte's choice or rather for Jane Austen's choice in creating a scenario in which Charlotte would be compelled to make a choice of this kind.

George Austin, Jane Austen's father, was in many ways a real-life version of Mr. Collins. That is because he was also a clergyman who had the possibility early in his career of doing either of two things, that is going into trade, beginning a business or going into church and reading and writing, and through the graces of other contacts or through their social network of getting the award of land. Now, it so happened that George Austin was lucky enough to be rewarded for his studies and his labor and managed to inherit some land, which was how the Austins had a great degree of comfort in their material existence. It so happened that George Austin was able to secure not one but two parishes and was resourceful enough to use that land to also raise livestock and also to take on boarders. So, in addition to the property and rent that they got as a clergyman, George was also able to supplement his income through rent and some earnings from livestock. In this sense, Mr. Collins is a latter-day George Austin. It's important to note, however, that Mr. Collins represents the worst possible version of what George Austen could be.

Now, why did Austen make this kind of a character out of the real-life model that she had in her own father's figure? Biographers of Austen have unearthed a great deal of detail for us today. And one thing that we note is that George Austen was very, very unlike Mr. Collins. George Austen was educated, charming, very good looking and generally a very, very agreeable person. The dislikable aspect of Mr. Collins seems to have emerged from a person named Harris Bigg-Wither. Now this person, Harris Bigg-Wither, again Jane Austen's biographers tell us, was someone who did to Jane Austen what Mr. Collins does to Elizabeth in the fictional world of *Pride and Prejudice*. That is to say, Harris Bigg-Wither made a proposal of marriage to the young Jane. And like Elizabeth refused Mr. Collins's proposal, Jane refused this Harris Bigg-Wither's proposal of marriage. And from letters and memoirs of members in the Austin household, we learn that Harris Bigg-

Wither also was much dislikable and seems to have been an absolute nightmare for anyone even imagining a prospective life of matrimony with him. So, we find that there were real-life biographical contexts for both these characters and for the choice that Charlotte is ultimately forced to make. Now, there are some very important narrative implications also for Charlotte's choice and the decision that Charlotte makes that property, in fact guaranteed property, was much better than the risk of happiness, especially if the chance of happiness came with the risk of being penniless. Charlotte and Mr. Collins make one matrimonial pair.

Later on in the novel, we find that Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy make another matrimonial pair. In this pair as well, there is one thing that's common to Charlotte's decision to accept Mr. Collins's proposal. In both of these pairs, the male partner has a great deal of property, in fact a great deal of property compared to the woman. And at one point, Elizabeth reflects, and this point occurs very late in her relationship with Mr. Darcy. She reflects that to be the mistress of Pemberley might be something. Now, this statement is made very late in the novel, when after several months of knowing each other, Elizabeth's prejudice against Mr. Darcy, that is her prejudice against the undeserving pride that this man holds about himself, has undergone some degree of change and is almost on the point of being transformed into the foundation of affection. Nonetheless, the fact that Elizabeth is able to consider herself as being the mistress of Pemberley, and to look with a great deal of good feeling at the prospect of being the mistress of a great deal of property, is in no small part owing to the change in her perception of what Charlotte Lucas has done too.

So, even though Elizabeth's words for Charlotte are very different from the words she uses for Mr. Darcy. In both cases, that is, her reaction to both of these characters has something of prejudice. She feels pity for Charlotte, but ultimately she feels a kind of prejudice towards the incompetence or the fundamental lack of prudence in this choice that Charlotte has made. And the fact that she herself finds herself in a situation where she can consider becoming the mistress of property and this prospect is not a horrible thing to her, signifies that Elizabeth was beginning to change and accept that not everything that appears in the beginning is as it will remain in the future. Another thing that Charlotte's choice helps Elizabeth learn is that people sometimes make choices that are not the best reflection of their learning or of their judgment. Nonetheless, people make choices based on the limited resources available to them in the circumstances in which they find themselves. These choices are not always perfect, but they are what

defines the lives of people and they are what enables these human beings to continue to live their lives as best they can.

The lesson about the relationship between choice and human beings is that people make choices, imperfect, incorrect choices which might doom them to lives of unhappiness, choices which might close the option for happiness, for lasting happiness. Nonetheless, these are the choices that people make in order to continue living their lives in the best way that they can live. The important thing to note is that people make the choices that then enable them to live their lives. Choices do not define the individuals and individuals are not locked or confined to the choices they once made. And this is proved in the way

Elizabeth changes her perception of Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth changes her perception of Charlotte even after she learns that Charlotte has made this somewhat unthinkable and impossible choice. Now, in this context, it is useful to introduce some scholarly approaches to Jane Austen's novels. And in fact, I will introduce the work of a scholar who might be considered dated today, but is in many ways influential to shaping the study of Jane Austen as an object of scholarship. The name of the scholar is D.W. Harding. In 1940, Harding wrote a book on Jane Austen's *Regulated Hatred*.

According to Harding, regulated hatred is a way to understand how Jane Austen was caught between two opposing forces and how her fictional work is a creative response and a psychological means of coping with what seem to be impossible and irreconcilable forces. So what are these two opposing forces? On one hand, Jane Austen loved her family and friends. She "had a deep need of their affection and a genuine respect for the ordered, decent civilization that they upheld." On the other hand, as a thinker, as an objective, rational and clear-eyed describer of worlds, Jane Austen couldn't but help notice that some aspects of her social universe was highly problematic, hypocritical, not to speak unfair and unjust to a huge swathe of individuals. That is to say, in Harding's words, Jane Austen was also "sensitive to the crudeness and complacencies of the people around her, and she knew that her real existence depended on resisting many of the values they implied." So you can see how psychologically and socially this is a somewhat irreconcilable situation. And in this situation, Jane Austen's novels present themselves as a wonderful coping mechanism.

Coping mechanism is a modern word. It's a very modern phrase. In the 1940s, it did not exist. But we can use that phrase to understand how Harding interpreted Austen's novels. In Harding's words, Jane Austen's novels

> “gave her a way out of this dilemma. This, rather than the ambition of entertaining a posterity of urbane gentlemen, was her motive force in writing.... Part of her aim was to find the means for unobtrusive spiritual survival without open conflict with the friendly people around her whose standards and simpler things she could accept and whose affection she greatly needed."

One can see in the light of this paragraph how Charlotte's choice and Elizabeth's inability to understand that choice at first and Elizabeth's eventual reconciliation and acceptance that this was a meaningful and a good choice for someone, even though it may appear to be a punishment to Elizabeth. We can better understand how this description, both Charlotte's choice and Elizabeth's inability to understand that choice, works in helping Jane Austen both describe the world in which she found herself accurately and to describe how some things were seriously wrong with that world. So if we compare Elizabeth's acceptance of Darcy's proposal with Charlotte's acceptance of Mr. Collins's proposal, we can see both Austen's deep love and regard for the world in which she lived, on whose affection she depended as well as her inevitable need to critique and the compulsion that she felt to point out that some things were wrong in this world. Mr. Darcy's proposal to Elizabeth, of course, there is nothing to argue with that proposal. It seems an easy enough choice and it seems a perfect decision that Elizabeth would accept that proposal.

However, if one were to understand the world of 18th century England and the choices that women in 18th century England were forced to make solely on the basis of this event, it would mean that our understanding was highly limited. Therefore, Charlotte's choice in accepting the proposal from a man who is clearly very, very dislikable, but whose proposal gives her the only real possibility for sustained comfort and well-being, is the necessary counterpart to Darcy's proposal to Elizabeth. Elizabeth might say that how can Charlotte accept this proposal? And Elizabeth might look with some condescension at people who subordinate romance to financial and pragmatic calculations. But in fact, it is only through a combination of both these two proposals. It is through a combined view of Elizabeth's choice in accepting Darcy's proposal and Charlotte's much more difficult, much harder to accept, but equally and in some ways more important choice of accepting this proposal from Mr. Collins, that we can fully understand both Jane Austen's world and the power of the formal choices she composed in order to accurately describe that world.