UNIT 5 : JANE AUSTEN: *PRIDE AND PREJUDICE* II

UNIT STRUCTURE

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5.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to :

- discuss the important themes of the novel *Pride and Prejudice*
- identify the characters in the novel *Pride and Prejudice* and discuss their significance
- explain the various aspects of the narrative style used by the novelist Jane Austen
- discuss the reception of the novel in a wider context

5.2 INTRODUCTION

This unit is to be studied in connection with the previous unit namely unit 4 as it comprises the second part of the discussion on Jane Austen's novel *Pride and Prejudice.* This novel by Austen is best known as a 'novel of manners.' The detailed description of the ordinary lives of the characters as well as the intricate expressions of love, morality, courtship, marriage, etc. makes this novel a representative voice of the society, manners and customs of which Austen herself was a part. Among all her works, this novel achieved popularity in terms of readership and several editions credited

to it. By the time you finish reading the unit, you will be able to discuss this novel in terms of its various aspects like themes, characterisation and narrative technique implicit in the novel. Besides all these, you will also learn about the reception of Austen and her novel *Pride and Prejudice.*

5.3 READING THE NOVEL

In the following subsection, attempts have been made to help you study the various important aspects of the novel *Pride and Prejudice.*

5.3.1 Major Themes

The various themes that are embedded in the novel are detailed below:

Marriage :

Marriage is the most dominant theme ever to be found in any Austen novel. In *Pride and Prejudice*, this is the ultimate aim of the characters. The upper middle class, having nothing to engage with, remain engulfed in their concerns of marriage. Marriages in this novel are of two kinds, good and bad, showing the various facets of each. In this novel, many marriages take place. One of the examples of a bad marriage is the marriage of Mr. and Mrs. Bennet. Readers are aware of the ***incompatibility*** of their marriage in the first chapter itself. The marriages of Elizabeth with Darcy and Jane with Mr. Bingley are only considered by Austen as examples of good marriage. Austen strongly dislikes marriages based on money or physical appearance. This is evident from the failed marriages of Lydia and Wickham. These two characters end up in mutual tolerance in their marriage and depend upon Elizabeth for supporting them financially. However, it is to be noted that marriage was a social concern of the age and related to it was money.



***Incompatibility*:** unsuitably matched.

Class-divide :

Class-divide is a very prominent issue in this novel. You have already read that money was the determining factor of a person's social status. The time when the novel was written saw numerous changes in this aspect. Parts of these changes were brought about

by the industrial revolution. In this novel division of class has been handled by Austen so as to throw light on her main concern, that is, marriage. The social setting in this novel is as such that the characters are regulated by the materialistic forces. The issues like courtship and marriage also involve factors like property, social class, etc. and Austen is one of the best mouthpieces of her age to attract the attention of the readers towards this aspect. Marriage, coupled with wealth, is the aim of all the middle class characters. In the novel, we find characters like Lady Catherine de Bourgh who is the owner of Rosings and patron of Collins to merely portray the upper class vulgarity.

Status of Woman :

Another significant issue that this novel focuses is the status of woman. During Austen's time, women were engaged in various social meetings or gatherings only to attract suitors for marriage. Women in this novel are also seen in such a light. Mrs. Bennet may be cited as the typical man-hunter kind of women whose only aim is to get her daughters married. However, the society looks upon them as silly people lacking in intelligence. Economically speaking, women were deprived of any kind of property rights. This, in a way, shaped the status of women as hunters of wealthy and rich men in order to make their lives secure. Thus, women were the most pathetic victims of the economic system that prevailed during that century. Women did not have the chance to test their fate in industries, business or even education. Hence, they were forced to do household chores and often remain within the four walls of their house. However, women belonging to the upper class kept themselves busy with dancing, singing, recitation, parties, etc. as in case of the Bennet sisters and Miss Bingley. Interestingly, the two significant women characters– Jane and Elizabeth are shown as two contrasting ones. Jane suffers silently without much complaint whereas Elizabeth, who is ***witty*** and ***satirical***, is extrovert in nature. She, unlike Jane, paves her own way with her sheer intelligence. Jane represents the ***stereotype*** of all the women of her age. Austen has portrayed



Witty**:** combination of cleverness and amusing tone.

Satirical**:** exposing human folly to ridicule.

Stereotype**:** a conventional conception of one's image.

Adheres: to follow.

Elizabeth as an unconventional figure in order to voice her concern on the status of women in the age she lived.

Morality :

Morality is another important concern of Austen. Terry Eagleton has described Austen's morality in these following words: "As a classical moralist, Austen believes that the ethical life is primarily about action, not about feelings, intuitions, inner states or intentions. Austen, quite rightly, adheres to a more traditional conception of morality as primarily a matter of what we do, not what we feel" (Eagleton 106). Hence, in the novel it is seen that Austen has a soft corner for a character like Elizabeth who moves beyond her private self to accommodate the realities of other characters around her. Through the mouthpiece of Mr. Bennet, Austen condemns a selfish character like Lydia as mean and silly. The theme of love holds importance in Austen as much as it bears influence upon marriage. Austen is not very supportive of sexual love or physical attraction. The materialistic society of her time influenced the perception of love to quite an extent. Austen kept the novel relatively free from deep emotional baggage and rather favoured a mood of intellect where attitudes and ideas were given scope for exchange and development.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: What is Austen's views on love and marriage?

Q 2: What was the status of women during Austen's time?

5.3.2 Major Characters

Austen's art of characterisation is brilliant with minute and delicate analysis of human nature. Austen's realism in a way is revealed through the characters she portrays. You have been informed that the works of Austen represents the manners and culture of the eighteenth century London society. Her characterisation reflects the greatness of the novelist for it depicts the numerous traits of human

nature. She presents her readers with a portraiture of characters who appear to be people of flesh and blood. Her characters are normal human beings with different natures. However, her power as a writer lies in her realistic description of human traits. As we all know, no single individual is alike, so does Austen creates various characters but with subtle discrimination from one another. All her characters are given distinct characteristics thus imbibing in them a sense of individuality. The characters seem to live their own lives in the novel. Austen's humour touches not only the situations but also the characters of the novel. Indeed, the comic element that some of the characters like Mrs. Bennet represents is an example of Austen's fine humour. The duality of real versus appearance is a feature of her characterisation. Austen is well aware of the reality herself but she gives her characters an inward looking attitude, thereby lessening the gap between what the reality is and what they see. It has to be noted that exaggeration and drama are not features of her characterisation. It is very evident that characters are based on real life human beings. The eighteenth century society was also characterised by different strata of social class. In terms of characterisation Austen makes it clear that her characters are also represented according to their status. For example, Lady Catherine is the aristocrat who is shown to be boasting over her rank. Likewise, Mr. Collins to whom she is a ***patron*** is portrayed as a submissive individual before her though the readers are clearly aware of his snobbishness.



Patron**:** a person who gives financial support to another person.

Pride and Prejudice comprises many characters- minor and major, who are given distinct role to play in the development of the story or plot. The major characters are that of Elizabeth, Jane, Darcy, Mr. Bingley and Mr. Fitzwilliam.

Darcy :

Darcy is the central figure who plays a crucial role in the novel as a whole. The title of the novel in a way represents his pride and haughty nature. Austen has portrayed him as an educated and refined man who: "was discovered to be proud, to be above his

company, and above being pleased" (8). His manners were found disgusting by others which led to his unpopularity in the novel. However, he wins the heart of the readers when he gradually becomes free of their prejudice. His intelligence and his ability to look beyond his self ultimately make him one of the best heroes of Austen.

Mr. Bingley :

Mr. Bingley represents the "gentlemanlike character who was good looking…and had a pleasant countenance, and easy, unaffected manner" (7). He is in every way a contrast to his friend, Mr. Darcy. He loves to be socially active, by attending and giving parties. He is shown to be a skilled dancer and the centre of attraction at the balls. Austen presented him as the most lovable bachelor who falls for Jane Bennet and finally marries her. He is introduced as a "young man of large fortune" (3) who is sought after by people like Mrs. Bennet in order to get one among her five daughters married to him.

Elizebeth Bennet :

Elizebeth Bennet is the heroine of the novel who has an intelligent and charming personality. She is the wittiest of all the Bennet sisters and appears to be the favourite of her father. She loves challenges. She has one elder sister and three younger ones. Portrayed as an intelligent woman, Elizabeth excels her sisters for her distinguished personality. However, in the beginning of the novel, she is portrayed as a prejudiced character only to find faults of others, particularly Mr. Darcy. She falls in love with Darcy after much ***deliberation***. But her positivity and flexible nature comes to the forefront when she accepts Mr. Darcy's proposal. Elizabeth Bennet has undoubtedly been characterised as a different kind of woman in comparison to the other women characters.



Deliberation: careful consideration.

The important character next to Elizabeth is her elder sister, Jane Bennet who is the most beautiful among all the Bennet sisters. She is shown to be a lovely lady who wins the Mr. Bingley's affection with her manners as well as dance. She is loved by everyone for her quiet and charming nature. A mutual feeling of affection with Mr. Bingley leads to

their marriage. However, she is compassionate and likes to think about others' good. But in this process she is left with very little individuality. She is less intelligent than Elizabeth Bennet yet referred to as the prettiest character. At best, Jane Bennet leaves the impression of being the lover of Mr. Bingley and the self-sufficient and meek kind of village girl. The two of them are more focused than the other sisters who are comparably portrayed as less beautiful and less intelligent; they are called "silly and ignorant girls". (4)

Some of the minor characters who helped to shape the plot of the novel are Mr. Bennet- the Head of the Bennet family, his wife Mrs. Bennet, Mr Colins, Mr Wickham, Miss Caroline Bingley to name a few. Mr. Bennet and his wife have five daughters of marriageable age and their prime concern is to get wealthy husbands for their daughters. A quote from the novel will help us to understand their characters better: "Mr. Bennet was so odd a mixture of quick parts, ***sarcastic*** humour, reserve, and ***caprice*** that the experience of three and twenty years had been insufficient to make his wife understand his character" (4). He is a country gentleman who loves to read and remains in his library for most of the time in the novel. On the other hand, Mrs. Bennet is one of Austen's best comic and ironic characters. She has been described as "a woman of mean understanding, little information, and uncertain temper" (4).



***Sarcastic*:** the use of irony to convey contempt.

***Caprice*:** sudden change of mood.

Mr. Collins, a cousin to the Bennets, is seen in the novel courting Elizabeth Bennet, one of the Bennet sisters. Unfortunately he is disliked by them for his superficial nature which he has acquired from his patroness, Lady Catherine de Bourgh. Being the nearest cousin to the Bennets, he is also the heir to their property. As far as marriage is concerned, Collins was rejected by Elizabeth and ends up marrying her friend, Charlotte Lucas. Austen has created this character with sheer touch of humour. On the one hand, Mr. Wickham has been portrayed as an intelligent and charming personality yet a deceitful and unstable person. He worked as an officer in the military. Elizabeth finds him very attractive but soon dislikes him after she

discovers his real nature. In the novel, he loves to gamble and elopes with Elizabeth's sister, Lydia without any intention of marrying her. Finally he abandons her and as a result is not very popular with the readers of the novel. Miss Caroline Bingley is Mr. Bingley's sister who finds Darcy very attractive and wants to marry him. Though she is fond of Jane, she dislikes Elizabeth. Her character serves as a contrast to both Elizabeth and Jane due to her snobbish nature as well as self-centric approach.

On the whole, Austen shows brilliance in her characterisation of the various characters that have packed the novel into one of the best works that she has ever written.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 3: Austen describes the character of Elizabeth as "delightful a creature ever appeared in print". Discuss.

Q 4: Give a character sketch of Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy.

5.3.3 Narrative Style

Austen's ***dialogic*** narrative has enhanced the readership of the novel. In fact, if we look at the narrative technique, it becomes clear that Austen has employed the direct method of narration, the most frequently used method of narrating an account or a story. Thus, Austen took the freedom to take part in the events of the story as an omniscient narrator. In *Pride and Prejudice*, by adopting this method, Austen gives a detailed account of the characters' past and also the incidents that make up the novel. This is done in such a way that it leads her readers to believe the narrator's participation in the incidents. However, with the insight that the narrator forwards the narrative, the readers become aware of the omniscient narrator's interest in the affairs and life of the characters. The dialogic aspect of her narrative has moulded it into an interesting one giving it the characteristic of ***polyphony***, that is, several voices are overlapped into the narrative of this novel. Her characters are made more effective by this method



***Dialogic*:** a literary composition in the form of a conversation between two people.

***Polyphonic*:** having many voices.

of exchanging dialogues. Indeed, dialogues have provided Austen with sufficient scope for creating a complex atmosphere in the novel. Austen comments, analyses and explains her readers about the characters or sometimes the situation several times in the novel by intruding as an omniscient narrator. Through such a technique, Austen successfully creates situations known to her readers but unknown to the characters of her novel. As for example, the readers are aware of Darcy's feelings towards Elizabeth from the beginning. But Elizabeth herself is unable to decide upon his feelings for her until much later in the novel. This is because of Austen's method of narration which related her readers with the inner progression of the characters. After reading this novel, it becomes clear that there are many points of view in the narrative and Austen's role as an omniscient narrator itself proposes such an understanding. You have been acquainted with Austen's use of irony. Here, you must consider the use of irony in her narrative style. Dramatic irony plays an important role in this novel.

Irony and Humour :

Irony and humour are the two prominent aspects of her style which are to be taken into consideration. Austen's use of irony is juxtaposed in her narrative style as well as her themes. Irony is overlapped with humour in Austen. The characters too are expressions of her delicate irony. There are no overt laughter provoking situations in the novel, but an undulating comic presence is felt in the way Austen presents her characters. You can consider the Bennet family as a comic portrayal where the readers are aware of the actual intention of the novelist. Besides exaggerating the issues within the family, Austen critiques the economic system of her times as well as the involvement of the women of her age in unintelligent pursuits. As a humorist, Austen fills the novel with numerous misunderstandings that exist between the characters which find solution only at the end as the characters move beyond their social reality to give space to other realities.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 5: What are the two most important aspects of Austen's style?

Q 6: Comment on Austen's use of irony and humour.

Q 7: Comment on the narrative style of Jane Austen.

5.4 CRITICAL RECEPTION

During her lifetime, Austen led a simple life and was not very popular. Therefore, it was hard for her to find a publisher. However, she sold the manuscript to Egerton after necessary revisions. Published in 1813, *Pride and Prejudice* brought her success as well as critical acclaim. It was well received by her family as well as the widely reading public. In fact, the increased demand for her earlier novel (that is, *Sense and Sensibility*) rests very much upon the success and reception of this novel.

With regard to critical reception, Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* did not become popular immediately. Her contemporaries gave a mixed review; Austen herself wrote in one of her letters to Cassandra that the "work is rather too light". On the other hand, her love for this particular novel abounds in another letter addressed to her sister, Cassandra Austen, dated 29 January, 1813, where she mentioned this novel as "my own darling Child". It is quite obvious that this novel is one of the favorites of all her works. Apart from being read, this novel was adapted widely on screen. Writers like Katherine Mansfield and Virginia Woolf praises Austen for her brilliant representation of human follies, virtues and emotions.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 8: Briefly discuss the reception of Austen's *Pride and Prejudice.*



5.5 LET US SUM UP

By now, you must have gained an idea regarding the novel *Pride and Prejudice* and its proper historical contexts. After having read through the unit you will certainly be able to analyse the important characters in the novel and also explain the important themes. Besides these, the background reading of the novel in the previous unit provided you with a detailed idea on the practice of fiction during the late 18th and early 19th century. This unit will further help you to think critically about the important aspects of the novel. The discussion regarding the critical reception of the novel shall familiarise you to Jane Austen as well as her work, and thereby help you in appreciating the novel as a whole.



5.6 FURTHER READING

1) Austen, Jane. (2002). *Pride and Prejudice.* Donald Gray. (ed.) New York : Norton.

2) Copeland, Edward & Juliet McMaster. (eds). (2011). *The Cambridge Companion to Jane Austen.* New York: Cambridge University Press.

3) Courtney, W. L. (1913). "The English Girl in Fiction". *The North American Review.* Vol. 198, No. 696 pp. 664-674.

4) Eagleton, Terry. (2005). *The English Novel: An Introduction.* Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

5) Meynell, Alice. (1905). "The English Women-Humorists"*. The North American Review*. Vol. 181, No. 589 pp. 857-872.

6) Poole, Adriane. (ed). (2009). *The Cambridge Companion to English Novelists.* New York: Cambridge University Press.

5.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q No 1: The theme of love holds importance in Austen as much it bears influence upon marriage. Austen is not very supportive of sexual love or physical attraction. The materialistic society of her time influenced the perception of love to quite an extent. Austen strongly dislikes marriages based on money or physical appearance.

Ans to Q No 2: During Austen's time, women were deprived of any kind of property rights. This, in a way, shaped the status of women as hunters of wealthy and rich men in order to make their lives secure.

Ans to Q No 3: Elizabeth Bennet is the heroine of the novel who has an intelligent and charming personality. She is the wittiest of all the Bennet sisters and appears to be the favourite of her father. She loves challenges. She has one elder sister and three younger ones. Portrayed as an intelligent woman, Elizabeth excels her sisters for her distinguished personality. However, in the beginning of the novel, she is portrayed as a prejudiced character only to find faults of others, particularly Mr. Darcy. She falls in love with Darcy after much deliberation. But her positivity and flexible nature comes to the forefront when she accepts Mr. Darcy's proposal. Elizabeth Bennet has undoubtedly been characterised as a different kind of woman in comparison to the other women characters.

Ans to Q No 4: Darcy is the central figure who plays a crucial role in the novel as a whole. The title of the novel in a way represents his pride and haughty nature. Austen has portrayed him as an educated and refined man who "was discovered to be proud, to be above his company, and above being pleased". His manners were found disgusting by others which led to his unpopularity in the novel. However, he wins the heart of the readers when he gradually becomes free of their prejudice. His intelligence and his ability to look beyond his self ultimately make him one of the best heroes of Austen.

Ans to Q No 5: Irony and humour are the two prominent aspects of her style.

Ans to Q No 6: Austen's use of irony is juxtaposed in her narrative style as well as her themes. Irony is overlapped with humour in Austen. As a humorist, Austen fills the novel with numerous misunderstandings that exist between the characters which find solution only at the end as the characters move beyond their social reality to give space to other realities.

Ans to Q No 7: Austen has employed the direct method of narration, the most frequently used method of narrating an account or a story. In *Pride and Prejudice,* by adopting this method, Austen gives a detailed account of the characters' past and also the incidents that make up the novel. Dialogues have provided Austen with sufficient scope for creating a complex atmosphere in the novel. Austen comments, analyses and explains her readers about the characters or sometimes the situation several times in the novel by intruding as the omniscient narrator.

Ans to Q No 8: Refer to Section 5.4



5.8 MODEL QUESTIONS

Q 1: What are the major themes that the novel *Pride and Prejudice* encompass? Do the themes reflect Austen's concern for morality?

Q 2: 'In terms of the accurate representation of the manners and customs of her society in her works, Austen has been called a realist'. Discuss.

Q 3: Explain Austen's narrative style used in the novel *Pride and Prejudice* with particular reference to her use of dialogues.

Q 4: Write a note on Austen's use of irony and humour in her novel *Pride and Prejudice.*

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