



Pride and Prejudice, The 19th Century Bourgeois Realist Novel, And Its Relation To History

To truly understand the 19th century bourgeois realist novel, one must look into its relation to history, and history-writing. It is important to see how much the content of history changes with the mode of history-writing (historiography). As opposed to an objective understanding of History, which is essentially a Modern Western creation, a construction of the Enlightenment, there can at any point be perceived, a multiplicity of histories, which change according to their telling. How then, does the mode of historiography change with the shift in the dominant class of the society in 18th-19th century Europe? How do the continental politics of French Revolution, overthrow of the aristocracy, the reign of Terror, and the Napoleonic turmoil figure into the telling of 19th c. English Bourgeois realist novels, especially those told by women? How do the anxieties of a turmoil so close to home affect the cultural fabric of a rapidly changing English life, in an England where colonial mercantilism has irreversibly unsettled the position of the old aristocracy?

The rise of the bourgeoisie occurred alongside a certain anxiety around the need to document, record and historicise all aspects of this rise. The rise of the bourgeoisie in England occurred mainly in the 17-18th century, with the encouragement to, and rise in mercantilism. A new class emerged, which was prospering on a wealth largely brought in from business abroad and beyond England. The anxieties surrounding such perforation of English social fabric by outside elements can be seen within 18th century works like *Gulliver's Travels* and *Way of The World*, which continued to be worried about the effects of such 'other', outside influences (from non-European locations, future colonies) upon essential English character. The rise of dominance of the bourgeoisie became sufficiently apparent in the political developments of the English Civil War and the Glorious Revolution. The aristocracy had dominated



the social system for long enough, and obviously, more than sufficient history-writing and documentation had happened by and about them.

The novel was a form whose development was simultaneous with that of the bourgeoisie. Hence, the novel became a mode of historicization of the bourgeoisie. There arose an urge to document all aspects of bourgeoisie life, thus, an impulse to historicise the present. This meant that, in the 18th-19th century, there was a need to historicise the present – study and document it with the rigour of history. In the bourgeoisie realist novel, therefore, we see an impulse to document the everyday way of bourgeoisie life. Bourgeoisie realism, within novels (and also theatre, but later), becomes a way of historicizing and reflecting bourgeoisie reality, values and lifestyle. The painstaking detailing within 19th century realist novels thus, becomes a way of historicizing the present. Sufficient emphasis was contemporarily placed upon veracity, believability, and adherence to reality, as perceived by the everyday bourgeoisie society.

The 19th century bourgeoisie novel, thus, must be looked at from the point of historical richness and documentative capacity. This, becomes a very interesting matter to deal with when one looks at novels written by women during 19th century, and most popular works were indeed written by middle-class women. It is often assumed that women's works lack a sense of history or politics – an essentially view flawed. Firstly, to look at History just as one monolithic, objective, linear, public history itself, is a patriarchal construct. With the creation of a public sphere in the 18th century, which was essentially political and associated with the masculine, came the bourgeoisie aggravation of confinement of women within an 'apolitical' private sphere. The separation of these two spheres was extremely gendered, and largely succeeded in creating the image of an 'angel of the house' who stayed away from the political, public sphere. The woman's novel, written for and by a woman, was thus both assumed to be and pressurised to be 'apolitical'. While Austen's novels were largely seen as apolitical and safe to be read by young women, Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* was perceived as overtly passionate and political. It evoked many sentiments and even direct vocabulary from the Chartist movement – an early, violent



workers' movement in England, aside from speaking rather indirectly of the criminalisation of poverty by the bourgeoisie order. Despite all of this being very rudimentary within the early parts of the novel (to be completely discarded later), *Jane Eyre* was disapproved of by several conservative bourgeoisie critics who said that it would inspire chartism and rebellion within the home, or the bourgeoisie family, one of its most important institutions.

As we know, apolitical as a position, is itself very political – the lack of access of a certain gender to politics is itself a certain form of political oppression. Thus, women's novels often engage with histories in a very different way. Through the documentation of everyday domestic histories, and the silences within the same, the text of the female-authored 19th century novel engages with, especially, class and gender history. Thus, within Austen's text, we see the novel opening with a maxim that is a certain important historico-economic artefact, in terms of contemporary marriage transactions. The anxiety within the novel comes largely from the difficulty of getting women married, which has been completely concentrated upon the character of Mrs. Bingley, but remains present within other characters as well.

The text of the novel shows a certain overabundance of females, in terms of characterisation too. The sparsity of men, and hence possible grooms, becomes evident through the literal starvation of the space of the text of eligible bachelors. The novel was being written at a time when a lot of the young men within the country were being conscripted into the army and sent abroad for the Napoleonic Wars. The literal absence of young and eligible males within villages and towns to be married to the women there, is evoked through Austen's careful reconstruction of these everyday historical details within the space of her bourgeoisie realist novel.

At the same time, there is considerable anxiety surrounding army camps around towns, since men barely got garrisoned close to their hometowns or villages. An army garrison thus meant men from other parts of the country and the landscape, men who had perhaps been beyond the borders of England, and could



possibly bear foreign or continental contamination. Juxtaposed with the seeing of army men as partly eligible bachelors, due to their steady source of income and the respect accorded to them within bourgeoisie nationalist rhetoric and aristocratic romantic notions of war, this gave rise to strange mixed anxieties around the figure of the army man. Also, one had to buy promotions through the ranks of the army then, (Darcy mentions paying Wickham's), so class politics, aside from class mobility it allowed, played an obvious factor within it. Thus, the figure of Wickham is constantly associated with not just class mobility, but also literal physical mobility and the anxieties surrounding his elusivity and lack of situatedness. He represents a certain shape-shifting propensity within the novel, where he easily transforms himself into whatever is preferred by the particular woman he is speaking to – with Elizabeth, he takes care to use anti-aristocratic, anti-hierarchical, rationalist rhetoric, whereas to Lydia, he presents a hyper-masculine, magnetic self who promises her the mobility and excitement she longs for.

The class conflicts within Austen's text can perhaps best be understood through the tension underlying the relations between Darcy and Bingley – another example of novelistic polyphony, where within the same text, multiple truths emerge through the formal dialogism, as enunciated by Bakhtin. This is however a lengthy subject, and requires a separate discussion altogether, which shall be included within the next document!