Revisiting Classics: Relevance of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*

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Abstract

Although many readers and critics of the present era might consider Jane Austen's fictional writings to be outdated and clichéd, her work nevertheless retains an undying appeal. During the last decade of the twentieth century the English-speaking world has experienced an Austen renaissance as it has been treated to a number of film and television adaptations of her work. The reasons for viewers and readers enjoying and identifying with Austen's fiction are numerous. This paper contends that the 'mutual cognitive environment' which Jane Austen so skilfully and dexterously creates in her masterpiece *Pride and Prejudice,* accounts for its present day relevance and appeal. This claim will be elucidated and established through an analysis of the novel within the framework of the concept of a 'mutual cognitive environment' as explicated by Sperber and Wilson in their discussion of Relevance Theory (2002:249). The contention is prompted by the assumption that a comprehensive account of how this 'mutual cognitive environment' is created by Austen and the process of its interpretation by readers should generate accounts of how this text gives rise to particular effects. Further, the paper maintains that for the present-day reader of *Pride and Prejudice* this environment is created due to the interaction of contextual assumptions which include knowledge of hierarchical social status, predicament of women in a male-dominated society, and human traits.

Society has a pervasive influence on the encoding of both verbal and nonverbal signals during the process of creation, as well as the decoding of those signals during the process of interpretation. It influences personal and social beliefs, perceptions, values, word meanings and message interpretations, thus directly impacting on communication. The fact that the novel under discussion has continued to be popular and has appealed to generations after generations of

readers for more than two centuries poses a challenge to any theory which aims to analyse the literary text and discover the reason for its sustained popularity. Relevance Theory, which will be used to explain the popularity of the novel under discussion, is founded on the notion of *optimal relevance* (Sperber and Wilson, 2002:256). This may be explained as the readers' processing ability in terms of their processing effort and its possible effects on them during the interpretation process. The theory postulates two principles about the role of relevance in cognition and communication, which facilitate a better understanding of how decisions are made during processing of utterances against dynamic interrelations amongst contexts and a shared background knowledge or mutual cognitive environment (Sperber and Wilson, 1995:39). The main focus is on the inferential processes implicated in deriving effects, the central claim of Relevance Theory being that these inferential processes are constrained by two principles. The two principles upon which the theory is based are:

a) The Cognitive Principle of Relevance which states that, "Human cognition tends to be geared to the maximization of relevance." (Sperber and Wilson, 2002: 251)

b) The Communicative Principle of Relevance which states that, "Every act of ostensive inferential communication communicates a presumption of its own optimal relevance." (Sperber and Wilson, 2002:256)

The paper underscores the fact that insofar as the purpose of literary criticism is to develop interpretations or readings of a text and readings are generated by evidence from literary texts and contextual assumptions, Relevance Theory can enhance literary criticism by exploring how readings are arrived at and considering how much evidence there is to support a particular text's never-ending value. Relevance Theory is a comprehensive account of human communication and cognition developed by Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson (2002), which has been successfully applied in the literary domain by several scholars. According to Sperber and Wilson (2002:251) 'relevance', can be described as the property of inputs (such as an item of information, a perceived phenomenon, and an utterance) which automatically determines the direction of cognitive and communicative processes. It is defined in terms of positive cognitive effects, which include true contextual assumptions that reinforce or modify existing assumptions and stimulate the processing effort required to achieve these effects. The relevance of an input will increase as long as the positive effects achieved increase or the processing effort expended decreases,

and vice versa. Further, Relevance Theory is supported by two general principles, the first of which is Cognitive *Principle of Relevance* (Sperber and Wilson, 2002: 251), which states that human cognition automatically tends to maximise relevance. Further it states that apart from the tendency to maximise relevance, humans are endowed with the ability to meta-represent other people's thoughts and intentions, which allows people to make fairly accurate predictions about particular interpretations likely to be relevant to others and use these predictions for various purposes, both benevolent and deceptive. The second principle, the *Communicative Principle of Relevance* (Sperber and Wilson, 2002:256), states that each act of communication conveys the presumption that the speaker has chosen the most relevant utterance in consideration of her/his abilities and preferences and that the hearer automatically expects the utterance to be sufficiently relevant to be worth putting in some effort to process it. Hearers start processing utterances by decoding their linguistically encoded meaning and then, following a path of least effort, they enrich the recovered meaning at the explicit level and complement it with the derived implicit meanings (implicatures); they stop when they reach interpretations that satisfy their expectations of relevance.

These principles of communication and cognition and the notion of optimal relevance are considered by Relevance Theorists (Sperber and Wilson) to be the key to relevance-theoretic pragmatics and pragmatic stylistics. As stated earlier in this study, these principles also operate in the domain of literary discourse if one views the latter as a form of communication taking place between an author and a reader. Further, the author may be termed as a discourse initiator and the reader as a discourse recipient. Communication, Sperber and Wilson argue, raises and exploits definite expectations of relevance. They also state that Inferential Communication is not just a matter of intending to affect the thoughts of an audience; it is a matter of getting the audience to recognize that one has this intention. Thus it is an integral and crucial part of the entire process as Sperber and Wilson consider communication as an *asymmetrical* process wherein the discourse initiator has the complete responsibility of handling the communication in such a way that there is no misunderstanding between him/her and the discourse recipient. The discourse initiator within a mutual cognitive environment has insight into the discourse recipient's possible interpretive processes and uses this knowledge to create the input in such a way that the discourse recipient obtains contextual information in order to interpret it. In defining the term 'cognitive environment' Sperber and Wilson make the following proposition:

> 'A fact [or, more generally, assumption] is manifest to an individual at a given time if and only if he is capable at that time of representing it mentally and accepting its representation as true or probably true.' [Hence] an individual's total cognitive environment is a function of his physical environment and his cognitive abilities. It consists of not only all the facts [or assumptions] that he is aware of, but also, all the facts [or assumptions] that he is capable of becoming aware of; in his physical environment...Memorized information is a component of cognitive abilities' (Sperber and Wilson 1995:39).

Thus one can state that a cognitive environment for any individual is a group of assumptions that are valid to him/her on the basis of the fact that they are understandable and distinguishable. On this basis a *mutual cognitive environment* is further defined as, "any shared cognitive environment in which it is manifest which people share it. In a mutual cognitive environment…every manifest assumption is *mutually manifest"* (Sperber and Wilson 1995: 41- 42). Collating these ideas in the context of a classic English literary text leads us to the fascinating issue of how language and society (which includes attitudes to people's status in society, to women in a patriarchal society, and human traits etc) constantly interpenetrate as well as modify each other; what we can find out about a particular society by studying its language and vice versa, and how this can be explained with the help of Relevance Theory.

In the following section, we use Relevance theoretic analysis based upon the theory of Sperber and Wilson to illustrate how Austen uses language and recurrent images in her novel to construct and vividly portray characters and their lives. However, this analysis does not illustrate the complex relations and constant interaction existing between our cognition and its manifestation. Rather, it attempts to give a somewhat schematic idea of the potential sources from which information can be supplied during the process of communication which takes place between the author and readers and map the location of discourse-internal information and its meaning within the broader picture of the plot of a literary text such as *Pride and Prejudice.* By analyzing the mutual cognitive environment created by Austen within the framework of the three categories (viz., predicament of women in a male-dominated society, human traits and hierarchical social status) identified earlier, this study underscores how and why Austen's novel still appeals to most readers:

1) Predicament of women in a patriarchal society:

Marriage and matrimony and preoccupation of women with getting married are

central concerns in Austen's fiction. She vividly represents a point which many social historians have made: that marriage, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, was an economic necessity for women. Far from being a matter of romantic or personal choice, the constraint on women to marry was very considerable, Austen's novels thus illustrate some of the reasons that most women of that time decided to get married. Mary Evans argues in *Jane Austen and the State* (1987) that Austen's work reveals marriage to be enforced upon women by the type of society they lived in:

> Jane Austen…vividly represents the point which many social historians have made: that marriage, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, was an economic necessity for women. Far from being a matter of romantic or personal choice, the constraint on women to marry was very considerable. (Evans, 1987:46)

From Austen's novels we can infer that women were subjected to patriarchal institutions such as marriage and further rendered weak by being relegated to the role of a wife and mother. Undoubtedly, as compared to Austen's time, in contemporary society blatant propaganda encouraging women to lead a life of domesticity no longer exists. Today, women in most parts of the world are not educated to lead exclusively domestic lives but mostly have access to the same type and level of education as their male counterparts. In addition, women have increasingly become part of the world's workforce and have started sharing household duties with their husbands or partners. Despite this type of progress, traces of a legacy, and of such a practice which would have women believe that it is their duty and calling to take care of the home and the family, can be found. Despite the fact that women today are no longer explicitly encouraged to develop their domestic talents in order to attract a husband (as they were in Austen's day), there are still some individuals who would have them believe that overseeing the housework is their responsibility. Further, the conventions of courtship have not changed as much as one would like to believe. Modern women have inherited a legacy of waiting to be asked. Some of them may have managed to shed this legacy completely, and initiated relationships, but most still wait for the man to make the first move, as recent popular feminist writing, such as that of Germaine Greer, has illustrated:

> As recently as August 1995 Imogen Edwards-Jones agonized in *The Times* over the fact that a woman still cannot ask a man out for a date. (Greer, 1999:316)

Scholars have drawn parallels between eighteenth-century conduct books (which prescribed women's role in society) and a book written in 1995, *The Rules: Time-Tested Secrets for Capturing the Heart of Mr. Right* which clearly stipulates the role men and women play in society, as seen, interestingly enough, by its women writers. These writers believe that it is "the male prerogative to say hello first, make the first phone call, arrange the date, pay for it, bring presents, and propose" (quoted in Kollmann, 2003.Web). Further, Nancy Armstrong maintains that 'conduct books' continue to exist in the modern era. Though they might have a different appearance they still manage to dictate women's identity:

> And although today we find authors neither designing curricula to educate young women at home, nor writing fiction to demonstrate the properties of feminine conduct, the conduct book is still alive and well. Besides all the books and advice columns telling women how to catch and keep a man, and besides numerous magazines imaging the beautiful home, there are also home economics courses that most women must take before graduating from high school. (Armstrong, 1987:62)

Armstrong's observation about how 'conduct books' and advice columns continue to influence women's lives and choices in the present day substantiates our argument that Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* is still significant and relevant for her readers. This is a consequence of the mutual cognitive environment she creates very skillfully in the novel regarding women's situation in a patriarchal society. The manner in which she creates this mutual cognitive environment will be highlighted and explicated by analyzing the following examples from the novel:

1.1) "It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife." (PAP, 1960:1)

1.2) "I do assure you, sir, that I have no pretensions whatever to that kind of elegance which consists in tormenting a respectable man. I would rather be paid the compliment of being believed sincere. I thank you again and again for the honour you have done me in your proposals, but to accept them is absolutely impossible. My feelings in every respect forbid it...Do not consider me now as an elegant female intending to plague you, but as a rational creature speaking the truth from her heart." (PAP, 1960:121)

The first sentence of *Pride and Prejudice* as example 1.1) stands as one of the most famous first lines in literature. Even as it clearly introduces the arrival of Mr. Bingley at Netherfield the event that sets the novel in motion, this sentence ironically also offers a

miniature sketch of the entire plot, which concerns itself with the pursuit of "single men in possession of a good fortune" (PAP,1960:1) by various female characters. The preoccupation with socially advantageous marriage in nineteenth-century English society manifests itself here, for in claiming that a single man "must be in want of a wife," (PAP, 1960:1) the author reveals that the reverse is also true: a single woman, whose socially prescribed options are quite limited, is in want of a husband. In example 1.2) despite Elizabeth's entreaty, Mr. Collins refuses to be persuaded that she means to reject him; instead, he insists that her statement is characteristic of the courtship ritual wherein a woman invariably refused a marriage proposal once before accepting it. The reader may view Mr. Collins as lacking intelligence and common sense, yet his behaviour is in keeping with the author's aim of the exploration of female identity and aspirations in much of the novel. The female desire for marriage and matrimony and its economic necessity sustains the plot of *Pride and Prejudice.* Yet Elizabeth's comments illustrate the disparity between the internal feelings and thoughts of a woman and their socially acceptable exterior manifestations.

If 'elegance' consists of dissembling and falsifying feeling, Elizabeth surely cannot satisfy the societal standard, "My feelings in every respect forbid it" (PAP, 1960:80). She herself points out the dichotomy between femininity and being true to oneself: "Do not consider me now as an elegant female...but (rather) as a rational creature speaking the truth from her heart" (PAP, 1960:80). The socio-cultural milieu within which Austen's characters lived and the situations faced by them are not specific to that period alone, but are prevalent even now in a patriarchal structure. The 'mutual cognitive environment' that she created in her text can still be processed with least effort because the concept of money and well-being provided by a husband is still optimally relevant. Austen's society is a microcosm of the desire present in human beings which is not restricted to one place or time but encompasses society's belief regarding women's need for comfort and stability, which as has been mentioned earlier, is still relevant in a patriarchal, male – dominated society. In the second example too we can easily relate to Elizabeth as a woman who acts against the social conventions of her time which prescribe that a woman should reject a man once before finally accepting him. As mentioned earlier, social norms regarding courtship and proposing marriage have not changed materially since Austen's time which accounts for its relevance in present day society. The right to choose is still not acceptable insofar as a woman is concerned and the right to propose is still in the hands of men.

2) Human Traits:

This category discusses the basic human traits and characteristics that have existed since time immemorial. The pride of a rich well-established man of high social standing and the prejudice of a woman against that man resulting from being slighted or insulted in a social gathering is not difficult for present-day readers to relate to. Even the cynicism of a witty man who is married to an uncommonly dim wife is not a situation that is unimaginable for denizens of any society. Austen's use of these traits in her characters gives the novel their human appeal which reaches across temporal and spatial barriers. Here are two examples:

2.1) "You judge very properly," said Mr Bennet, "and it is happy for you that you possess the talent of flattering with delicacy. May I ask whether these pleasing attentions proceed from the impulse of the moment, or are the result of previous study?" (PAP, 1960:73) or "Mr Bennet treated the matter differently. " So, Lizzy," said he one day, "your sister is crossed in love, I find. I congratulate her. Next to being married, a girl likes to be crossed in love a little a little now and then" (PAP, 1960:151)

2.2) "...Vanity and pride are different things, though the words are often used synonymously. A person may be proud without being vain. Pride relates more to our opinion of ourselves, vanity to what we would have others think of us." (Mary Bennet, PAP, 1960:20)

Fundamental human traits such as pride, cynicism and prejudice are central to the novel. Both Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy are disliked at separate points for their pride and prejudice. For example Darcy is described in the earlier part of the novel as the "proudest, most disagreeable man in the world."(PAP: 1960:9) At another point in the novel Miss Bingley says to Darcy about Elizabeth that he should "endeavour to check that little something, bordering on conceit and impertinence, which your lady possesses."(PAP, 1960:56) She is referred to as having an "abominable sort of conceited independence, a most country-town indifference to decorum" (PAP, 1960:37); her manners are described by Miss Bingley as "very bad indeed, a mixture of pride and impertinence…" (PAP, 1960:37) And yet Elizabeth is the main character, the one we are to identify with and the only one who seems to have any self–respect. Mr. Bennett is a character who is throughout seen as a person who takes life and its problems with cynicism. He treats all with scepticism and disregards the social norms of a host, father and husband. The characters still remain as life–like as ever for the reader as the author portrays those human traits which are universal in nature and can be found in all societies. Present-day readers can process these qualities which can be

seen by them in their own families, neighbourhoods etc. Other examples of the human qualities of pride and prejudice can be seen as being embodied in Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth when the former confesses his love for Elizabeth and his disappointment at her inferior social status; "'Could you expect me to rejoice in the inferiority of your connections? To congratulate myself on the hope of relations, whose condition in life is so decidedly beneath my own?'".(PAP, 1960:211) "Elizabeth retaliates, 'You are mistaken Mr. Darcy, if you suppose that the mode of your declaration affected me in any other way, than as it spared me the concern which I might have felt in refusing you, had you behaved in a more gentleman-like manner'". (PAP, 1960:211) This same exclamation of prejudice haunts Elizabeth after Darcy tells her the truth about Wickham and Bingley and explains how prejudiced she was with her quick baseless judgements. Realizing that she had been "wretchedly blind", Elizabeth "grew absolutely ashamed of herself. - Of neither Darcy nor Wickham could she think, without feeling that she had been blind, partial, prejudiced, absurd".(PAP,1960:229)

3) Hierarchical social status:

The key feature of eighteenth-century English society was that it was arranged as a status hierarchy, not as a class society. In the sense that a historian or sociologist can assign the people he or she is studying to predetermined pigeonholes called "classes," then all societies are and have been class societies. But in the historically more important sense of how people actually related to each other and identified themselves in their social order, then eighteenth-century English men and women ordered themselves in a status hierarchy. The basic sets of relationships should be envisioned as vertical, not horizontal. Each person was thought to have been ascribed at birth a position in the natural-indeed, divinely established order and each felt that his or her loyalty was to social superiors, not to fellow workers. Hence the social structure was like a status ladder, or rather a number of parallel ladders, each rung being a status gradation with its own generally accepted duties and privileges. If a person moved up or down the ladder, it was off one rung and onto another, the ladder itself remaining unchanged. Dr. Samuel Johnson, the great man of letters, remarked that the English people were set in their hierarchical places "by the fixed, invariable rules of distinction of rank, which create no jealousy, since they are held to be accidental."1 By the late 20th century, a new status system evolved which was different as it was born out of late capitalism and the mass media, and its dynamics reflected the conditions of the modern era. Nevertheless a status system does exist and the members of the high-status group still expect obsequious deference, and lay claim to certain privileges,

as aristocratic and caste elites did in earlier centuries. (Kurzman et al: 2007.Web) An analysis of the following examples from the text reveal the manner in which the concept of a status hierarchy operated in Austen's time and the manner in which it is relevant to present-day readers.

> 3.1) "But it must very materially lessen their chance of marrying men of any consideration in the world," replied Darcy." (PAP, 1960:38)
>
> 3.2) "Elizabeth, having rather expected to affront him, was amazed at his gallantry; but there was a mixture of sweetness and archness in her manner which made it difficult for her to affront anybody; and Darcy had never been so bewitched by any woman as he was by her. He really believed, that were it not for the inferiority of her connections, he should be in some danger." (Elizabeth and Darcy, PAP, 1960:55)

An in-depth study of the characters' behaviour and conversations in the text reveals that in Austen's society, manners were associated with social class and accordingly with the quality of a person's character. Thus members of the aristocracy, such as Darcy or Lady Catherine De Bourgh, are perceived as justifiably proud in their manners because of their high status in society. The Bingley sisters, who aspire to a higher level in the hierarchy of social status, are also proud and careful in their manners and scrupulously differentiate between those with whom they associate from amongst the members of the Bennet family. This discrimination is based on manners and so Jane and Elizabeth, who display correctness and decorum in their behaviour, are acceptable, whereas Mrs. Bennet, Mary, Kitty, and Lydia, who speak and act on whims with no thought for propriety, are rejected. The differences in the Bennet girls' manners could be viewed as being indicative of the differences in their parents' class and social status: Jane and Elizabeth are more closely associated with their father, a land-owning gentleman, whereas Mary, Kitty, and Lydia emulate their mother, the daughter of a lawyer. However, the author's sense of irony comes through as she plays with this traditional societal perception of class and manners. Throughout the novel, she satirizes the manners of all classes, exposing people who have excessive pride as rude and often foolish, regardless of wealth or station. In the text, Austen uses Mr. Collins as an extreme example of how ill-conceived and baseless pride can affect one's manners. Mr. Collins prides himself on his sense of respectability, his profession, and his association with Lady Catherine. As a result, he behaves in an absurd manner, going so far as to break one of society's rules and introduces himself to Darcy rather than waiting for Darcy to acknowledge him. Similarly, Mrs. Bennet appears absurd as she ignores decorum and talks

unrestrainedly to all and sundry about Jane's prospective marriage to Bingley. With both Mr. Collins and Mrs. Bennet, Elizabeth acts as the voice of propriety, explaining to her unreceptive relations the proper way to behave. Readers today can relate to the social construct of class and the ensuing status portrayed by Austen in her novel with ease. As mentioned earlier, social status and a hierarchy based upon it is not difficult to imagine by the present day readers as remnants of it though, in a different form, may be found even today. The desire and aspiration to move up the status hierarchy is not uncommon even in the modern era and the depiction of characters like the Bingley sisters who aspire to be elite by imitating the manners and style of the upper class continue to be relevant. The author's satirizing the construct of class acts as a further ostensive stimulus for the readers and they can process it with little effort because class hierarchy still exists even as the struggle against this hierarchy continue.

To conclude, this paper has examined *Pride and Prejudice* in order to explicate and explain the timeless appeal it has had for generations of readers. This has been done through the analysis of text examples under three categories of gender, human traits and class. This Relevance theoretic analysis of the examples also provides the ground for the overall interpretation of the novel as well as the author's sustained popularity. Austen's novel *Pride and Prejudice* is still relevant in today's world because she dealt with constructs that are not only relevant but to a certain extent also timeless. Moreover, she is a 'social' novelist as for Austen and her contemporaries literature was an important vehicle for social and cultural significance and the novel in particular played a vital role in creating an image of middle-class identity; indeed, the novel was a product of middle-class society, and catered to its interests and tastes. It was also seen as relevant to contemporary issues, and, since these issues were unusually deep and clear-cut they can be explained with the help of a theory of cognition and communication such as the Relevance Theory. The theory helps in explaining its value by foregrounding the fact that all the social and human traits highlighted by Austen in the novel are prevalent in present-day society in some form or the other. This, in turn, facilitates maintaining the 'mutual cognitive environment', providing optimal relevance for the reader and decreasing the processing effort in its interpretation. Thus, the author with her constructs of women in a patriarchal society, human traits of pride and prejudice, and social status in her novel, creates an understanding between herself and the reader which transcends a gap of two centuries and which accounts for an effect and appeal which is timeless.

Notes

1 Website <lyceumbooks.com/pdf/PeoplesBritishIslesII_Chapter_03.pdf>

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