**The questions never asked**

BY R A F I A Z A K A R I A 2020-12-23

I FIRST read Jane Austen`s Pride and Prejudice in Grade 7 or 8 and immediately loved it. I had good reasons; Austen`s world seemed very much to resemble the one that I saw around me in Pakistan.

The first line of the novel, `It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man, in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife`, reflected the concerns of mothers and grandmothers, and the general narrative of life, played out in the domestic and usually all-female interiors of this or that person`s house, reflected the goings-on of my own extended f amily.

I am, of course, not the only one to have swallowed whole this seeming resemblance as a reason to love Jane Austen. There have been movies, notably Bride and Prejudice, and a handful of books that situate the catty and gossipy and the ever-righteous cast of women into the South Asian context, all to great ef fect.

For all these reasons, I was shocked when I learned that the whole Austen enterprise its gleeful promotion by foreign book editors who want South Asians to appear as modified versions of themselves is a colonialist trap.

The evidence is plentiful. First, when South Asian authors produce Jane Austen fan fiction set in South Asia, they prove the colonial thesis: the South Asian present is really just a version of (in this case) the British past.

The consequence of such productions is that they situate formerly colonised countries in South Asia at a rate of progress that is slower than that of the Western world. After all, if all of us are simply living out what the British did hundreds of years ago during the era of the British Empire, we are backward and they are forever further along.

The second reason is the politics of Jane Austen herself. A close look at Pride and Prejudice and Mansfield Park reveals an erasure or, at best, a fleeting mention of how the great fortunes of men like Mr Darcy and Mr Bingley have been earned, and how the massive estates on which they live (and which the Bennet sisters Jane and Elizabeth marry into) have been procured.Since this is the Empire period, this largesse is connected inextricably to what Britain happened to be doing abroad. In simple terms, it was the plunder in the colonies that made such lives, such estates, men like Darcy and Bingley, possible.

Sometimes it is what a novelist doesn`t include that is important; in this case, Austen erases the dirty origins of things, presenting English country life as not only idyllic but as morally righteous.

This bit of moral righteousness is also important.

Austen`s heroines sheltered girls as they are spend a great deal of time agonising over and iron-ing out what the right thing to do is. At the same time, the larger injustice being carried out abroad (some of the novels are situated around times when there were rebellions in many colonies) in the name of Britain is made invisible.

The central concerns are figuring out whom to marry, the necessity of marrying and, of course, the morality of angling for a rich husband. In focusing on the micro politics of Darcy and Bingley, everything else is obscured from view. White and Western f ans of Austen are entirely willing to overlook allthis,butgiven thefactthatthelandthatis today Pakistan is one of the places that was plundered and divided by the purveyors of Empire, we should refuse to forgive Austen`s racist and colonist sins.

Finally, a word about what Austen-worship and the proliferation of would-be Austen stories say about Pakistanis as the formerly colonised. Like the cossetted women of Austen`s domestic dramas,the middle and upper middle-class women in Pakistan are only too used to lives where the injustice behind their own comfort are obscured.

The servants who clean homes and wash clothes rarely appear in the ever-slicker domestic dramas that are set in front of television viewers. The cultural message is easily absorbed; like Austen`s heroines, who never ask how the money is made or whether the farmers in the countryside are happy with the arrival of Bingleys and Darcys, Pakistani women keep quiet and do not ask the questions that must be asked.

Literature presents a lens through which to view the world, but when the lens suggests seeing less, not noting how the lives of others not as fortunate are impacted by actions and livelihoods, it is not worthy of adoration or emulation. Austen is one of fender, but she is hardly the only one. Presenting her case here is representative of how stories of the British past carry within their bones the unquestioned architecture of colonialism.

Rejecting does not mean a cancellation of all literature that goes against the current decolonising project. It is instead a call to understand how we were made invisible and continue to remain invisible. Seeing how unmentionable the actual inhabitants of the colonies were in most British literature from the Age of Empire must direct us to consider deeply the mini-colonialisms of our own lives.

It is all very well to get lost in the dramas about who loves who and who will marry who, but it is time all women began to go beyond just that. The people, the servitude, the injustice, the inequality, that makes lives of leisure possible deserves more consideration. December, with its weddings and parties which are continuing apace despite a global pandemic is an excellent time to start.

Domestic dramas are not the sum total of our postcolonial lives, and Pakistan`s present is not and never will be Britain`s abhorrent past.  The writer is an attorney teaching constitutional law and political philosophy.

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