

**MANSFIELD PARK: DETERIORATION OF VALUES IN REGENCY ENGLAND**

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Jane Austen in her art of the transpersonalization of human emotions includes the universal pattern of the art and the cultural paradigms. In pursuance of the milieu of her times, she satirizes the social setup foregrounding the inner darkness that pervades human psyche. Her art of characterisation is symbolic of a metamorphosis that her characters undergo shunning the evil and symbolising the triumph of reason.

The objective of present paper is to analyse the properties of social convergence and cultural changes. At the instance of language society too acts as an organic force and creates certain marks of its territories which mould the behavioural norms of the man who inherits it. The paper also envisages to examine the invisible threads that work and insinuate the drama and propel the action of characters working to reveal the motifs behind them. She is a forerunner in series of writers whose writings present a glimpse of up-coming socio-cultural convergence which shall take shape in spiritual and cultural signs in the times to come.

Keywords: *Jane Austen, Mansfield Park, Regency England, Fanny Price, 19th century novel.*

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Jane Austen is one of the few novelists in the world literature who is regarded as a classic and yet is widely read. She is the only novelist before Charles Dickens who still has a significant popular readership. She, arguably the most beloved of all English novelists, has been regarded both as a feminist ahead of her time and as a social conservative whose satiric comedies work to regulate rather than to liberate.

Mansfield Park is an absolutely wonderful book, revealing beautifully English Regency period's political, economical and social condition and its effect on domestic life. It is Austen's most profound and problematic work. It is the only novel of Austen, in which she compares and contrasts the values of country and town. Not only this, Austen also focuses on the major issue of her era like slave trade, Napoleon War, deterioration of Christian values and the new meaning of love and marriage in the novel. It may not be the greatest, but the most serious and challenging of Austen's novels.

Set in the relatively isolated world of the English landed gentry, *Mansfield Park*, a comedy outwardly concerned with marriages of social advantage, reflects not only Austen's superb narrative craftsmanship, but also her brilliant sensitivity to the human concerns of love, virtue, morality and family. It is highly regarded by Austen followers as a tale of character and sensibility very much along the lines of *Emma*. It has also been called, by Mrs. Leavis, 'the first modern novel', an anticipation of George Eliot and Henry James.

Mansfield Park is the first of the three works, which were written after Austen moved to Chawton, and published without any extensive later revision. According to Cassandra's Memorandum and Austen's own note, the novel is begun about February 1811 and finished soon after June 1813 and published as 'by the author of S & S and P & P' in the middle of the next year.

Mansfield Park seeks almost everywhere to frustrate and complicate straightforward moral and political judgement. Its themes are very different from those of her other books, which can generally be simplified into one sentence, or even one phrase: *Sense and Sensibility* is about balancing emotions and thought, *Pride and Prejudice* is about judging others

too quickly, *Emma* is about growing into adulthood, and *Persuasion* is about second chances. The theme of *Mansfield Park*, on the other hand, cannot be so easily described. Either it is about ordination or about allegory on Regency England or about slavery or about the education of children or about the difference between appearances and reality or about the results of breaking with society's mores. Any or all of these themes can, and have been applied to *Mansfield Park*.

Like its preceding novels *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice*, *Mansfield Park* also revolves around the theme of love and courtship. But unlike them, in *Mansfield Park*, Austen treats marriage not as a simple sentimental climax, but instead as a complex moral and social negotiation that reveals much about human nature and frailty. The different purpose of marriage, its complex relation to love, prudence, security, ambition, social cohesion provide her with an inexhaustible series of dilemmas, subtle discriminations and fine shades. Austen revolts against the established norms of marriage that women should get marriage to protect themselves from financial insecurity and spinsterhood. She views that marriage should be first and foremost based on mutual love and respect, and that union of true equals has nothing to do with their respective socio-economic status.

Education in its complete sense, as a preparation for life, is an important aspect of the main theme of the novel. Austen reveals that any education that does not develop commonsense and right thinking falls short of its purpose and is of no good. So education should be combined with good sense and good taste, as is the case with Fanny Price. It can change one's whole personality and make one more intelligent and understanding. It would be easy to assume, on the basis of our modern expectations, that the ability to form mature judgements, assess character, and act well towards others is at least in some sense related to education and experience of the world.

The novel not only reveals the good aspect of education, but also the impact of bad education on children. Bad education is the root of the many problems that arise and is the central and comprehensive theme of *Mansfield Park*. Mary and



Henry are only the most conspicuous proofs of bad education in the broad sense of religious, moral, and social environment. They are from London where, at the home of their uncle a dissolute, adulterous Admiral, they have received a bad moral education. Not only Mary and Henry, but also Maria and Julia- as the novelist says and as their father laments, too late-have had no proper upbringing. Their preparation for life's duties has been left to Mrs. Norris.

The issue of choice of profession is the first major issue to be raised in the novel, as a crucial element in the secondary plot of the courtship of Edmund and Mary Crawford. The novel witnesses how the value of Church and Clergyman is deteriorated in the early nineteenth century. The clergy on the whole becomes an uninteresting profession as well of little 'importance' or 'consequence' for the society. As Lionel Trilling comments:

In nineteenth-century England the ideal of professional commitment inherits a large part of the moral prestige of the ideal of the gentleman. . . . The concern with the profession was an aspect of the ethical concept which was proponent in the spiritual life of England in the nineteenth century, the concept of duty. (Trilling 1959,215)

Even then there are people like Edmund and Fanny who thinks choice of profession as a social institution. The Crawfords should so disastrously lack a real understanding of the nature of sermons and preaching, which reveals their mental and moral deficiencies to Fanny and Edmund. In fact there is contradiction between the city people (Mary and Henry) and country one (Edmund and Fanny) about the choice of profession.

Mary like her brother has always considered choice of profession only as a matter of sheer economic necessity and personal convenience, that is, of sheer personal interest. Edmund and Fanny, however, do not regard the matter from the point of view of mere individualism. Rather, Edmund has a sense of what a profession is as a social institution

and what owes from the individual to that institution. Mary sees devotion as forced and cannot see how anyone can choose to be a clergyman. Edmund protests that a clergyman has the guardianship of religion and morals, and consequently of the manners which result from their influences, while Miss Crawford translates it into other terms, "supposing the preacher . . . to do all you speak of? Govern the conduct and fashion the manners of large congregation." Furthermore, for Mary Crawford a clergyman is a mere public reader who may at least have enough sense to read aloud someone else's texts besides his own of a Sunday. She cannot conceive of a clergyman outside of his pulpit, as a member, a leading member of society, a social individual giving social leadership. Theirs (Henry and Mary's) is a world faithlessness, irreligion and immorality – a world apart and in collision with Mansfield Park. Her conception of clergyman is limited, as Edmund is quick to realize, and to suggest as he tells her, 'You are speaking of London', 'I am speaking of the nation at large.' It is the clergyman as the national leader that Edmund has in mind.

Austen condemns adultery, which was spread in her era and those people too; who only get married just because of physical attraction as well status. *Mansfield Park* witness sexuality and desire represented in the darkest of terms, and often resulting in the most sinister of outcomes. Those who emit a sexual persona or awareness are to be seen as dangerous, and those whom possess sexual desire are inevitably the ones in danger, and are often punished for their untamed emotions and erratic behaviour. The production of the play, *Lovers' Vows*, is perhaps the sole episode in the book that is most abundant with sexual desire and transgression. The play accentuates the sexual tensions and desires that have surfaced earlier in the novel by allowing, as Butler says:

A license for what would normally be entirely improper. Their scenes together permit physical contact between the sexes (as when Henry holds Maria's hand) and a bold freedom of speech altogether



outside the constraint imposed by social norms. (Butler 1975, 28)

Mansfield Park is a play that contains a play; the novel itself is a drama within the larger drama played out on the stage of human affairs. Acting of Elizabeth Inchbald's *Lovers' Vows* is a moral and ethical matter, a matter of serious social consequence: by reading aloud something written and published by someone else, people may say to one another, and in public, what social convention would not permit them to say in ordinary circumstances unless they were willing to abide by the consequences of their speaking. Kelly Gray comments in this regard:

The subject matter of the play, sexual seduction and liberal social views, is relevant too, but it is the enacting of the play's love texts without any consequence, or without responsibility for any consequence, that is improper and inappropriate. (Gray 1982, 38)

To make speeches of love to another person in private, let alone in public was a marrying matter. To speak one's love was to undertake to accept the ethical consequences of such verbal action; to do otherwise, to speak love while not intending to accept the consequences, or to speak love that was not felt, was coquetry or mere seduction and did said, often, to social banishment.

Characters reveal their sexually charged agendas during the rehearsals as well. Henry Crawford snubs Julia, and consequently, strengthens his flirtation with her sister, by proposing the part she wanted to play go to Maria. Maria, instead of declining to participate on account of her engagement, sees nothing wrong with accepting the part offered to her. Julia, hurt and perhaps, desperate to be noticed and flattered, flirts with Yates. For the ladies and gentleman at the Park, acting is not only an escape 'from their proper selves into 'irony'. It is also an escape from their own moral obligations. Mary Crawford can do, from behind the mask of a dramatic character, what she knows she should not do in *propria persona*. She can play Amelia, a 'forward young lady'. Thus, by stepping

behind a 'character' everybody has managed to avoid facing moral issues squarely.

The novel moralizes the form too. It singles out the novel as the sanctuary of austere and unforgiving self-knowledge. The novelist's omniscience imposes on all characters; and exposes the drama as the shoddier realm of evasive and corrupt self-dramatization. But this opposition is not blatantly stated in *Mansfield Park*. Although the drama is condemned, only implicitly is the novel proposed as an alternative, because the novel's virtues are now the undemonstrative qualities of Fanny Price. The novel owes its power to its discretion in seeing through people who congratulate themselves on their impenetrability, in making the obtuse aware of their own shifty motives; it is superior because it is circumspect, stealthy and externally innocuous.

The novel thematically centers on the issue of morality in three different layers of society: the aristocratic Bertrams, the fashionable, city-dwelling Crawfords, and the down-and-out Prices. The novelist, through these sections of society, shows that none is morally high only because he has taken birth in the upper class, to become morally superior one should practice the ethics and mores of the society. As the protagonist, Fanny Price, is merely a poor, shy relation, more than willing to be marginalized by the effusive Bertrams and the sophisticated Crawfords, but she surpasses them all through her innate sense of morality and familial duty.

Mansfield Park preserves eighteenth century's feature in applying the primarily aesthetic standards to the moral sphere. The application of aesthetic terminology to morals is only a minor indication of how the analogy between art and morals affects the novel. The house and the garden were also examples significant artistic achievement in the eighteenth century with, moreover, specific associations with morality. The aesthetic meaning of place can indicate the moral. This results in a special relation between setting and character in the novel. In other words, improvement and taste are evaluated through a comparison of places as well as of characters.



In the world of *Mansfield Park*, Sotherton and Portsmouth represent two extremes of which Mansfield becomes the just mean. The moral contrasts between the three are conveyed through their physical features, which have specific values attached to them when judged in the light of contemporary landscaping theories. Sotherton's meaning is seen specifically in the description of its chapel, the house's physical and symbolic center, and of its grounds. The two literally express the moral and aesthetic dichotomy, as does Edmund, in his dual role of clergyman and amateur gardener. Like the grounds, the chapel becomes the symbol of formality hiding moral emptiness, especially in the appropriateness of its sumptuous physical appearance to its lack of function, and in its rigid rules, which force human nature into pre-established moulds.

The ethical norm of *Mansfield Park* remains outside the novel and can be inferred only by its absence from the novel: London, Mansfield Park, and Portsmouth are equally corrupt. When Fanny returns to her family in Portsmouth, she is oppressed with the disorder and dirt in her mother's household and her father's drunken thoughtlessness; she yearns for the order of Mansfield Park. However, the class-conscious Mrs. Norris tyrannizes her through a series of cruel deprivations, and Sir Thomas Bertram misjudge her through his false sense of propriety. Mansfield Park has its own demerits, which is hidden in the form of merit. Fanny's moral stand has to be made against Mansfield. She would have had Sir Thomas's sanction in holding out against the theatricals, but she is deprived even of his support when she resists advantageous marriage to a man whom she doesn't love and whose moral outlook she mistrusts. Certainly she valued Mansfield for its civilized order and decorum, and for the restraint and tranquility which Maria hated, but in the profounder matters of personal good feeling and insight into the moral worth of other people, she helped to alter Mansfield, to change it from what it has been shown to be all through the novel. The need to do this produces the sharpest conflict in her, since she also loves so much that Mansfield holds her, and respects so much of Sir Thomas's code. The traditional contrast between city and country does operate as a minor

motif. Mary Crawford's boast that any favour can be bought in London appals her; yet she is equally shocked by the extravagance of Tom Bertram, whose spendthrift habits reduce his younger brother Edmund to poverty. Both city and country foster the insensitive and cruel. In the country, Fanny's health and the Crawford's moral tastes improve; in the city, Edmund claims, morals have been corrupted. Tom's illness results from a wild party in London, Maria's elopement occurs in London, and Mary's real values are revealed to Edmund in London. Yet London does not change them.

Mansfield Park is certainly the book in which Austen conducted her deepest exploitations of the human heart and head. It may be that, on the threshold of middle age and for reasons unknown to us, she felt a special need of getting some things said about her world. Although, *Mansfield Park* has not enjoyed the same degree of popularity as Austen's other novels, largely due to issues related to the characterization of Fanny. Still, the work has been considered a complex and rich production of one of the nineteenth century's most insightful novelists. The novel remains true to the traditional ethos of the comedy, but it also shows that maintenance of inward order against worldly pressures, and the tragic flaws and waste that attend the lack of such order, on a level well above the comic.

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