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Echoes of Empire as Reverberated in Jane Austen's Mansfield Park

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Abstract

In its most broad sense, imperialism refers to the configuration of an empire, and as such has been a characteristic of all periods of history in which one nation has extended its domination over one or several neighbouring nations. Famous postcolonial critic Edward W. Said's definition of imperialism is one that specifically appeals to the active upshots of culture. Though Said is keen to ascertain how the idea and the practice of imperialism gained the consistency and density of a continuous enterprise, he does not have a systematic theory of imperialism. Said's aim is to delineate the alliance between culture as imperialism. Nineteenth-century novel had contributed a lot to the imagination of the empire. The text has been reckoned as a vehicle of imperial authority. As is dramatized in Jane Austen's Mansfield Park (1814), in the nineteenth-century novel as in broader society, social status and moral standing, in a word propriety, were contingent upon the possession of property. This paper tries to divulge the imperial traits in Austen's Mansfield Park with the support of views on imperialism as expressed by Edward Said.

Key words*: Imperialism, Authority, Fanny Prize, Civilization, Movements, Antigua.*

V. G. Kiernan makes the following scrutiny about imperialism in *Marxism and Imperialism*: "the empires must have a mould of ideas or conditioned reflexes to flow into, and as young men dream of fame and fortune, youthful nations too dream of a great place in the world" (qtd. in Said 80). Everything in European and American culture prepares for or fuses the grand ideas of empire. It is also historically imprecise to ignore those tendencies — whether in narrative, political theory or pictorial practice — that enabled, encouraged and otherwise assured the West's gameness to presume and take pleasure in the experience of empire. In his essay "Jane Austen and Empire," Edward Said comments that the British Empire at its height has been a vast communication network, "a global sprawl of hubris" (107). In its effort to have a handle on other lands, and also in its need to proliferate itself, and, importantly, legitimise its presence, it has depended on ingenious assistance.

Between France and Britain in the late eighteenth century, there had been two competitions: the clash for tactical gains abroad and the battle for a triumphant nationality. Both battles distinguished "Englishness" with the "French", and no matter how intimate and closeted the hypothetical English or French "essence" come into sight to be, it had always been thought of as being made, and being fought out with the other great competitor. These deliberations suddenly provide a fascinatingly prolonged dimension to Austen's *Mansfield Park*, the most unequivocal in its ideological and moral pronouncements of Austen's novels. Like many other novels, *Mansfield Park* is specifically about a progression of both small and large dislocations and relocations in space that occur before at the end of the novel which form an important facet of imperialism. It is the best example of a contrapuntal analysis formulated by the postcolonial critic, Edward Said.

Mansfield Park was published in the first half of the nineteenth century. By the late-nineteenth-century, the British Empire had wielded its ascendancy in various divisions of the world. 1800-1870 was a period in full view for the land enclosure which was a major result of industrialisation. A complete dislocation which had resulted in domestic budge is a major point of dialogue in *Mansfield Park*. The movement in the novel parallels colonial movement thereby averring its imperial connection. Just as in Austen's other novels, the vital characters that finally come together in marriage and become heir to property "ordained" are not rooted

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exclusively upon blood. Thus, Fanny Price, the poor niece, the orphaned child from the outlying city of Portsmouth, the neglected, demure and upright wallflower gradually acquires a status commensurate with, even superior to that of most of her more providential relatives. Fanny is both a device and an instrument in a larger archetype of imperialism.

Fanny entails the patronage and outside authority that her own impoverished experience cannot provide. Her conscious connections are to some people and to some places, but the novel reveals other connections of which she has faint glimmerings that nevertheless demand her presence and service. She comes into a situation that opens with an intricate set of moves which, taken together, demand sorting out, adjustment and rearrangement. The first movement that is described in *Mansfield Park* is that of Fanny being sent to Mansfield to begin a new life:

> The little girl performed her long journey in safety; and at Northampton was met by Mrs Norris, who thus regulated in the credit of being foremost to welcome her, and in the importance of leading her to the others and recommending her to their kindness. Fanny Price was . . . received her very kindly; and Sir Thomas, seeing how much she needed encouragement, tried to be all that was conciliating. *(*Austen 28)

Parallel to this movement, the Bertrams give up London as a result of Lady Bertram's bad health and have come up to reside entirely in the countryside.

Mansfield Park becomes a citadel in a turbulent world. It enjoys quiet and order, everyone has his or her own place and possessions, everyone is cared for and the labour necessary to sustain this carefree and comfortable life goes unseen, miraculously efficient and apparently part of the natural order of things. What sustains the life in Mansfield Park is the Bertram sugar estate in Antigua which runs with the help of slave labour and which is not doing well at present. Establishment of estates and gaining mastery over it has always been an important part of the imperial culture and it holds well in this novel too. Austen shows two seemingly incongruent but actually convergent processes: the growth of Fanny's value to the Bertram family's economy, including Antigua and Fanny's own persistence in the face of numerous challenges, threats and surprises. A contrapuntal reading brings in the parallel between Price's raising importance and Sir Thomas Bertram's economic growth. A pattern of domestic imperialism works in parallel with the international or the overseas dominion.

Fanny, in the first half of the novel, is presented as a frightened girl of ten years, whose ignorance is signified by her inability to put together the map of Europe. The action is concerned with a whole range of issues whose common denominator, misused or misunderstood, is space: not only is Sir Thomas in Antigua to make better there and at home, but also at Mansfield Park, Fanny, Edmund and her aunt Mrs Norris parley where Fanny is to live, read, and work, where fires are to be lit, the friends and cousins concern themselves with the importance of chapels, i.e. religious authority, to domesticity is envisioned and debated. With the background of English culture and education, the Bertrams enter into the mission of "educating" Fanny even without her consent. Fanny is even made aware of the dream fortune she is to receive on reaching Mansfield Park. The typical imperialistic schema of civilising the uncivilised nations through imperial hegemony thereby making the native people subjugated is undertaken in Fanny's case also. One of the distinguishing features of modern European empires that they aim to rule and civilise those nations lost in barbarism as indicated by Said in *Culture and Imperialism* can be compared to the mission of civilising Fanny in the novel.

Antiguan estate is the major source of wealth for the Bertram family and it is grasped by each and every family member. The extravagance and thoughtlessness of Tom Bertram, heir to the estate undermines the family's wealth thereby giving way to a situation that Sir Thomas must go to Antigua to shore up the family holdings there. Sustenance of the Antiguan plantations thereby keeping hold of the imperial control over the imperial establishment is very important for the survival of the Bertrams. Said's definition of imperialism that it is the practice, attitude, ideas etc. of a dominating metropolitan centre ruling a distant territory proves right here with the portrayal of Sir Thomas as the imperial master:

> Sir Thomas found it expedient to go to Antigua himself, for the better arrangement of his affairs, and he took his eldest son with him, in the hope of detaching him from some bad connections at home. They left England with the probability of being twelve month absent. The necessity of the measure in a pecuniary light, and the hope of its utility to his son, reconciled . . . time of life. (Austen 43)

The threat to the traditional habits and values that had originally soared from humanity's reliance on the land is posed most generally in *Mansfield Park* by an ethics based on convenience, ready cash and individual pleasure. *Lovers' Vows*, the play rehearsed at Mansfield in Sir Thomas's absence brings together all the elements and agents of this threat and unleashes within the great house itself the anarchic energies that social conventions ideally restrain. When as a device for stirring things up the Crawfords insinuate the play, Fanny's discomfiture is evidently acute. Fanny's credo resonates beyond her particular disapproval of staging *Lovers' Vows* for even when the play is not in question, Fanny spurns to act. She cannot easily accept that the rooms for living are turned into theatrical space, although, with all its confusion of roles and purposes, the play, Kotzebue's *Lovers' Vows* is prepared for any way. She is unwilling to be a part of that endeavour that would turn upside down all the discipline and order which her uncle has established in his presence. This clearly shows Fanny's adaptation into the typical imperial setup of Mansfield Park without even her knowledge and her reluctance to change. The inculcation

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of the play in the novel clearly proves true the imperial view of Said that the imperial culture exists even in aesthetic forms; one of whose major aims is pleasure. The rehearsals of the play at Mansfield liberate each character's repressed desires, pre-occupations and anxieties. The Bertrams become free of the mastery and control exerted over them by Sir Thomas.

Sir Thomas's hasty return from the West Indies after nearly a year is thought about as an unmitigated disaster for the young people who have been completely free from all parental constraints. It indicates the re-establishment of order and discipline. The master of Mansfield wants "a home that shuts out noisy pleasures," (Austen 156) and his gesture firmly re-establishes those boundaries that "shut out", restoring a space that has been profaned. Finally Mansfield Park itself exists as both metaphor and metonymy of the colonial realm of Sir Thomas, without whose overseas chattels, the ordered life of the Park cannot operate. Said's sense of the contrapuntal process as a way of "rethinking geography" (Ashcroft and Ahluwalia 92) holds good over here: "Sir Thomas's return made a striking change in the ways of the family, independent of *Lovers' Vows.* Under his government, Mansfield was an altered place. Some members of their society sent away, and the spirits of many others saddened – it was all sameness and gloom compared with the past – a sombre family party rarely enlivened" (Austen 168).

Most clearly, than anywhere else in her fiction, Austen orchestrates domestic with international authority, making it plain that the values associated such higher things as ordination, law and propriety must be grounded firmly in actual rule over and possession of territory. She sees clearly that to hold and rule Mansfield Park is to hold and rule an imperial estate in close, not to say inevitable association with it. This clearly shows Said's revelation of the power of imperial authority that preserves the belief that a particular society by having access to those civilised and civilising values can benefit the whole world. What assures the domestic tranquillity and attractive harmony of one is the productivity and regulated discipline of the other. While Sir Thomas's arrival depresses other characters, only Fanny is able to tell Edmund with honesty: "I suppose I am graver than other people, said Fanny. The evenings do not appear long to me. I love to hear my uncle talk of the West Indies. I could listen to him for an hour together. It entertains me more than many other things have done – but then I am unlike other people I dare say" (Austen 169).

Fanny is zealous to know the details, instead of being cynical or making jokes about other people's experiences. Here is a direct reference to slavery in the novel. Her interest in slavery is presented as a usual thing by Austen because the slave-trade has been a much-discussed subject during Austen's time. Having ventured one evening to ask her uncle about the slave-trade, she is so embarrassed by the dead silence that followed, that she never breaches the topic again:

> And I longed to do it – but there was such a dead silence! And while my cousins were sitting by without speaking a word, or seeming at all interested in the subject, I did not like – I thought it would appear as if I wanted to set myself off at their expense, by showing a curiosity and pleasure in his information which he must wish his own daughters to feel. (Austen 170)

In Mansfield, the Crawfords and the Bertram girls live in a sealed and static space, totally self-obsessed and completely unheeding of the world external, where a war has been going on and where slaves have worked in plantations to ensure the comfort and elegance of their lives in a country mansion. One conjecture is that it is not just the cousins who are silent, but Sir Thomas as well. After this direct reference to slavery, from Fanny and Austen herself, both fall silent on the subject for the remainder of the novel. This attitude of the Bertram family reveals Said's idea of imperialism as connected with money-making, sustained possessions, fortune-enhancing etc.

Fanny's homecoming in Portsmouth presents even more subtle connection with empire. Here happens Fanny's second major relocation. Her visit upsets the aesthetic and emotional balance she has become accustomed to at Mansfield Park, as she has already begun to take its wonderful; luxuries for granted, even as being essential. Fanny sees her family home as stained and polluted when compared to Mansfield Park. To be at "home" for Fanny is to be in exile, displaced from the only ground to which her history has truly attached her. Everything in her home is in entire contrast to that in Mansfield. The elegance, propriety, harmony and peace of Mansfield is remembered and missed by her at every moment. The message is an imperial one as per Said: "To earn the right to Mansfield Park, you must first leave home as a kind or transported commodity . . . but then you have the promise of future wealth" ("Jane Austen and Empire" 106).

Fanny is the true casualty of imperial hegemony. Instead of achieving a successful rejection of the dominant imperial culture, she enters into a binary relationship with it thereby transforming it in ways that establish cultural difference within the cursive idea of resistance, i.e. cultural reconstitution as indicated by Said. This binary relationship with the dominant culture makes Fanny the true spiritual mistress of the empire of Mansfield Park in the end with Susan Price replacing Fanny's position as a green girl and providing the imperial centre of Mansfield Park another chance of a civilizing mission. In short, Austen's *Mansfield Park* can be considered as revealing various aspects of imperialism thereby making it a typical imperialistic novel.

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