

A Deeper interpretation of Mansfield Park

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Abstract:

For a long period of time, Mansfield Park has been read as a fictional romantic novel. However, when applying different ideological approaches, the true meaning of the novel is revealed. This study aims to examine Jane Austin's Mansfield Park by placing it in its cultural context to achieve a better understanding of the novel and to see where the author stands regarding certain issues. This study reads the novel from a feminist, Marxist and post-colonial perspectives. The study makes use of Edward Said's theoretical frame work on culture and imperialism and other significant thinkers.

key words: Nation building, empire, England, Slavery, colonialism, superiority, feminism.

an introduction :The belief that literary work is self-sufficient in its meaning and that its interpretation does not require the interference of any extra-textual factors created the idea of what is called "art for art's sake". Which means that culture, religion, politics or any other social event, has no effect on the authors' writings, nor does the writings have any meaning related to these factors. Therefore, they were viewed from a generic point of view, which means that literary works were categorized according to the events that took place inside of the work into various genres such as romance, drama and many others. However, authors do not only write to entertain but rather to inform and express. Which means that each literary work has a meaning and certain intention behind its creation (study.com). Thus, many critics challenged literary

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studies by emphasizing the importance of placing the literary work in its context in order to get the real intended meaning of the work and to understand how the author was inspired to write it and how it will inspire readers. Hence, Edward Said suggests to carry out revisionist readings on the European literature for they have a hidden message and nation-building ideas that were not emphasized when traditionally reading them (xv). A resistant reader or a revisionist reader is not satisfied with reading what is written on the paper but rather interprets the text to read between the lines and criticize them to find where the author stands regarding certain issues.

Edward Said is one of the critics who believed of the importance of cultural studies in literature. He pointed out how critics should concentrate on the marginal aspects and prudently read what is unwritten then plan a detailed research on the political, social, cultural and historical contexts during the time of its production (xiv). Thus, it is extremely important to understand that the content of a literary text is not simple and easy to interpret. According to Barthes, “To interpret a text is not to give it a (more or less justified, more or less free) meaning but on the contrary to appreciate what *plural* constitutes it” (247). What is meant here by plural, is that it is necessary to read the text from different perspectives in order to get as meaningful authentic interpretation as possible. In short, literature shifted from the idea of being “art for art’s sake” to what Said calls “art for society’s sake.”

Reading the novel in its cultural context means understanding the daily life of that period and emphasizing any power relation that exists. It also means that the novel is a product of its time; it is shaped by that period of time and it is written to influence the reader. In Simon During’s words:

Cultural objects are simultaneously ‘texts’ (that is, they have meaning) and events and experiences, produced out of, and thrown back into, a social force field constituted unevenly by

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power flows, status hierarchies and opportunities for many kinds of transportation, identification, and pleasure. (6)

Mansfield Park, a novel written by Jane Austen during the nineteenth century made a lot of fuss about its real meaning. The novel then was considered a fictional romance novel. However, Said's reading and analyses of the novel show how its genre is deeper than just being a fictional romance novel. His reading of *Mansfield Park* is up until now the most influential one (Mukai, 63). Said exposed how literature of the West, in general, was used to emphasize their superiority by degrading the East using false assumptions they created to serve and justify their inhuman colonization of the East. In *Culture and Imperialism*, Said expanded his argument by drawing attention to the writings of the West on various countries like India and Africa (xi). He pointed out that the main purpose of these writings is to show how barbaric, primitive and uncivil these countries are. He mentioned that if *Mansfield Park* is not fully read, readers would not understand how powerful it is, but when it is read carefully we can understand "how ideas about dependent races and territories were held both by foreign-office executives, colonial bureaucrats, and military strategists and by intelligent novel-readers educating themselves in the fine points of moral evaluation, literary balance, and stylistic finish" (95). Said also stated that the idea of narrating these stereotypes gives the nation the power to either wipe off or create certain ideas to serve their purposes. Thus narration is considered a very important tool that plays a huge role in imperialism, as it is in *Mansfield Park* (Xiii).

Austen used the characters of the novel to create what she believes is the perfect English empire. It is expected to find such literature, full of Englishness, especially when England was on the edge of collapsing. Austen created the characters of Sir Thomas Bertram, Fanny, and Edmund to educate the English about the behaviors needed in such situations and to remind them

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of their superiority in order to keep England safe and strong. Although such ideas are not quite clear in the novel, modern critics believe that the gaps Austen left in her novel reveal more than what she wrote clearly. In this respect, Spivak points out that:

It should not be possible to read nineteenth-century British literature without remembering that imperialism, understood as England's social mission, was a crucial part of the cultural representation of England to the English. The role of literature in the production of cultural representation should not be ignored.(798)

Using different lenses when reading the novel can open our eyes to its hidden meaning and its "structure of attitude and reference", which Austen used sophisticatedly in her characters and tools to brilliantly hide her intentions. Austen is trying to maintain the status quo by holding the white man supremacy, where Mansfield Park represents Britain and its colonies. In her novel, she used The Bertram sisters to show how moral corruption was a huge issue during that time. Fanny, on the other hand, is the model of the well behaved English lady that Austen wished women of the society to imitate. The play Maria and Mr. Yates planned when Sir Thomas Bertram was on a business trip, exposed how corrupt and immoral they are. It also shows how Sir Thomas Bertram is the one who brings order to the house which is quite understandable in a patriarchal structured society.

During that period of time, women did not have an important role in society. They were taught how to think, behave and dress. Their main goal was to get married in order to be freed from their fathers' control, however, that did not mean that they will be free from the husbands' control. Women's position in society was determined by their choice of marriage, which was shown in the novel when three sisters, who were born and raised in the same house, were drifted into different lives and social classes after their marriage choices. Thus having the attention of a

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gentleman was such a great honor that is hard to simply refuse. When Fanny, who is from the lower class, rejected Henry's marriage proposal, Sir Thomas and Edmund believed that she does not understand how it is impossible for women in her social class to have such a proposal again and how it is such a reckless mistake to refuse it. Thus Sir Thomas Bertram decided to send her back to her family's house so she could learn from her mother's mistake:

He (Sir Thomas) certainly wished her to go willingly, but he has certainly wished her to be heartily sick of home before her visit ended; and that a little abstinence from the elegancies and luxuries of Mansfield Park, would bring her mind into a sober state, and incline her to a juster estimate of the value of that home of greater permanence, and equal comfort, of which she had the offer. (342)

During the 19th century, Wealth and social class were also extremely significant. In the novel, we can see how Fanny's mother was looked down on because of her social class. Fanny was also ill-treated by her cousins and her own aunts. Although Sir Thomas, Lady Bertram, and Mrs. Norris helped raise up Fanny, they all implied that Fanny should not have the same privileges as of her cousins' because they're simply not from the same social class:

I should wish to see them very good friends. And would, on no account, authorize in my girls the smallest degree of arrogance towards their relation; but still, they cannot be equals. Their rank, fortune, rights, and expectations, will always be different. It is a point of great delicacy, and you must assist us in our endeavors to chuse exactly the right line to conduct. (12)

It is also worth mentioning, that when Fanny first arrived to Mansfield Park, they were expecting her to be ill-mannered and barbaric because she comes from a lower social class.

By the distinction made between Fanny and her cousins, it is obvious that her cousins are superior and that she is inferior, so Fanny here is considered the 'other'. She is somehow a slave;

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she is ill-treated yet she has to serve her aunts to repay their favor of having her in Mansfield Park. Austen uses gratitude to justify imperialism so she uses Fanny as a slave that should be grateful for having the opportunity to live under the control of the colonizers. Just like a slave, Fanny is taken away from her family and her home for what they, the colonizers, call improvement and civilizing (Caddy, 13). In the 18th and 19th century, slave trade and having plantation in the West Indies were one of the main financial sources in England. Although Austen did not directly mention them in her novel, she definitely created her own English empire to justify colonization and to expand the empire, which is the foremost debatable part of the novel.

In the novel, Sir Thomas Bertram runs businesses in the West Indies and in Antigua. Any British owning business in such places was definitely involved in the colonial process. As Edward Said mentions in his book *Culture and Imperialism* “what sustains life (at Mansfield Park) is the Bertram estate in Antigua, which is not doing so well” (94). And that “the Bertrams could not have been possible without the slave trade, sugar, and the colonial planter class” (94). In her novel, Austen did not criticize Sir Thomas but rather praised his behaviors, morality, and generosity, which implies how she is a supporter of him. In another scene, William, Fanny’s brother, received a new job as a navy sailor, which during that time meant to transport and sell slaves as if they are objects (Caddy 13). Here also, Austen showed how excited Fanny was about her brother’s job, which clearly implies that she, and the characters she created to speak her mind, support imperialism.

Austen chose a passive character to ask a question about the slave trade which received ‘dead silence’ (Said, 85). Fanny did not push for an answer but rather accepted the “dead silence” because she did not want to set herself “at their expense by shewing a curiosity and

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pleasure in his information" (184). Ayi Kwei Amrah criticizes this in his article "*Don't mention Slavery*" saying that in Mansfield Park "...the discomfort of a couple English sisters are given more weight than the immense suffering of hundreds of Africans reduced to slavery" (44-45). Although some critics believed that the "dead silence" received was the family's wish to not talk about how their financials depends on colonialism (Mukai 78). However, this is not the case since Edmund asked Fanny to be more active and to talk more to Sir Thomas Bertram. It is worth mentioning, that when the estate in Antigua was falling apart, immoral behaviors started to occur in Mansfield Park, but when Sir Thomas Bertram took care of things in Antigua, Mansfield Park's immoral behaviors disappeared, which shows that "what assures the domestic tranquility and attractive harmony of one is the productivity and regulated discipline of the other" (Said, 87).

Throughout the novel, the motif of improvement is obviously shown. Edmund Burke points out that there are two kinds of improvements, the improvements as a necessity and improvements as destruction (Brenner 25). When Fanny was first taken to Mansfield Park, it was Sir Thomas, Lady Bertram and Mrs. Norris' attempt to improve her. Sir Thomas Bertram leaves Mansfield Park to improve his business in Antigua. However, there is an emergence of another kind of improvements, such as the improvements suggested by Rushworth to cut off trees, which is considered his way of getting rid of history and traditions (Duckworth 40). Henry, Mary, and Mrs. Norris also suggested improvements that symbolize their rejection of traditions and religion. It is also worth mentioning, that Marry tried to improve Edmund by convincing him to be "a man of fashion", she asks him to "shut down the church" and "sink the clergyman" (248). However, Edmund insists on being a clergyman for he believes he has a mission bigger than a regular clergyman "You are speaking of London, I am speaking of the nation at large" (87). In

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Austen's Empire those, who wanted to get rid of religion, tradition, and history and showed immoral behaviors, who are not well coopted with the Englishness of her empire, were eventually excluded from Mansfield Park. Fanny, Edmund, and Sir Thomas Bertram were the ones who were included in Mansfield Park, wherein Austen's empire, Sir Thomas Bertram represents power and order, Fanny represents morality, tradition and obedience and Edmund, who became Fanny's husband, represents religion.

To conclude, using her novel, Austen managed to create an empire that she wished to exist. It is said that *Mansfield Park* is the most complex work written therefore it was not much likable (Vii). If we read the novel using the traditional reading, we wouldn't have understood its complexity. For, authors would not risk showing their support to immoral and inhuman colonization. Therefore, when close reading of the text and placing the novel in its historical and cultural context a deeper meaning is revealed, such as in *Mansfield Park* where a new meaning that emphasizes the boys of the empire and celebrates the empire and the English superior identity is discovered. In other words, the different lenses used when reading the novel allowed the reader to view different perspectives of that period of time, it also allowed the reader to get the sense of the real intention of the author. This proves the point that there should not be any conflict between literary and cultural studies as they complete each other to provide a deeper dimension of the hidden meaning of the text.

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