



INCHING TOWARDS FREEDOM: FANNY'S ORDINATION AT MANSFIELD PARK

Dr. DIVYA JOSHI



ABSTRACT

The novel *Mansfield Park* is a record of the growth of Fanny Price and her personality that is shaped by a house Mansfield Park. The structure of *Mansfield Park* is severely built round the contrast between the girl's education and its consequences. The career of the heroine Fanny defines a growth in awareness that is capable of ensuring her self-actualisation. Fanny Price not only takes in the impressions of Mansfield Park but also assimilates them into her consciousness. The novel shows her development from immaturity to maturity. This paper focuses on the ordination of Fanny, expansion of her consciousness and the subtle interplay of three aspects of Fanny's development.

Key Words: self-actualisation, consciousness, ordination, personality.

©KY PUBLICATIONS

Mansfield Park is the only novel of Jane Austen that delineates a philosophy of life or a strategy of life (acceptable to her own age) calling upon one to deal with the world by condemning it, by withdrawing from it and shutting it out, by making oneself and one's mode and principles of life the very centre of existence and to live the round of one's days in the stasis and peace thus contrived (Trilling115).

Jane Austen projects the place Mansfield Park as an objective reality, capable of providing to a thinking mind like Fanny Price's "an opportunity for thought, a pure pretext to think and see myself think", as Sarah N. Lawall observes in *Critics of Consciousness: The Existential Structure of Literature* (89). Fanny Price not only takes in the impressions of Mansfield Park but also assimilates them into her consciousness, which shows that her relation to the place is not "in the category of having but in the category of being"(94). Indeed Mansfield Park becomes the

essential ground of her very being, a region in her mind defining its movements, responses and impulses. *Mansfield Park* is described in the following words:

Here's harmony! here's repose ! here's what may leave all painting and all music behind, and what poetry can only attempt to describe ! here's what may tranquillise every care, and lift the heart to rapture there could be neither wickedness nor sorrow in the world; and there certainly – would be less of both if the sublimity of nature were more attended to, and people were carried more out of themselves by contemplating such a scene (91).

The subject of *Mansfield Park* is solemn in itself as Austen herself, in a letter to her sister, says that this is an attempt at something new and is to be about 'ordination'. This is what forms the central dilemma. Fanny is the heroine, but her fate depends on Mary Crawford, hating the office and status of Clergyman.

The novel was published in 1814 and its impulse is not to forgive but to condemn. Its praise is not for social freedom but for social status. Fanny Price is overtly virtuous and consciously virtuous. Mary Crawford is the antithesis of any Fanny Price and she is conceived to win the admiration of almost any reader. The strange and perverse rejection of Mary Crawford's vitality in favour of Fanny's debility lies at the very heart of the novel's intention. Fanny is a Christian heroine: it is therefore not inappropriate that the issue between her and Mary Crawford should be concentrated in the debate over whether or not Edmund Bertram shall become a clergyman. Fanny sees the church as a career that claims a man's best manly energies but for Mary, ordination is a surrender of manhood. In the 19th century England the ideal of professional commitment inherits a large part of the moral prestige of the ideal of the gentleman. Humility is obviously an appropriate virtue for the Christian heroine, but equally important in Jane Austen's canon is, as always, the impulse towards self-knowledge.

Fanny's sense as a Christian of her own frailty, her liability to error, and her need of guidance outside herself, is the opposite of the Bertram girls' complacent self-sufficiency. For Jane Austen 'vanity', the characteristic of the fashionables, is a quality with a distinctly theological colouring. It means both an unduly high opinion of oneself and a pursuit of worldly goals, 'vanities'. Such an error arises from an inability to place oneself in a larger moral universe, a context in which the self and the self's short-term gratifications become insignificant as Mary Evans says in *Jane Austen and the State* (243). The entrance of the Crawfords soon extends and enriches the didactic case. The Crawfords are sophisticated, fully aware disciples of a worldly creed to which the Bertram girls merely veer unconsciously, on account of the vacuum left in their education. Mary Crawford has actually been instructed; by her social circle in general, the marriage of her uncle and aunt in particular, in a wholly sceptical modern philosophy. Her doctrine includes the notion that there are no values but material ones, and that the gratification of the self is

the only conceivable goal. The triple contrast, of three kinds of education, three kinds of moral attitudes is maintained in every early scene. The cynical Crawfords, planning their pleasures with cold selfishness, the Bertram girls, equally selfish but more naïve; Fanny, who alone after a few days retains enough insight and objectivity to see that Henry Crawford is still plain. Whatever the topic of dialogue, the moral landscape of the various characters is what really receives attention. Mary, for instance, brings up the question of whether Fanny is 'out' or 'not out', so that Jane Austen can contrast two widely diverging ideals of young womanhood.

The career of the heroine Fanny defines a growth in awareness that is capable of ensuring her self-actualisation. Coming to Mansfield from Portsmouth, she is struck by the distance, psychological and otherwise, separating them, especially, the contrast between the affectionate concern of her family and the indifference of the people at Mansfield Park where nobody meant to be unkind, but nobody put themselves out of their way to secure her comfort, and she is disheartened by 'Lady Bertram's silence, awed by Sir Thomas' grave looks and quite overcome by Mrs. Norris's admonitions'. Further her elder cousin mortified her by reflection on her size, and abashed her by noticing her shyness. Miss Lee wondered at her ignorance and the maidservants sneered at her clothes. Her self-actualization is possible only when she is able to integrate the objective and the subjective realities underlying her reactions to Mansfield Park and its human complement.

Through Fanny Jane Austen reveals a steadiness of character and a consistency paralleled only by Anne Elliot, she doesn't suffer from any moral stasis but strives for an enlargement of consciousness through a conscious attempt at relating herself to the world. She is completely misunderstood in her new house. The members of the Bertram family do not understand the predicament of the new arrival. Fanny is treated simply as a curiosity because of her silence or her ignorance. She is a means for the young Bertram girls to show off their superior attainments

and an object for Mrs. Norris's scolding on her need to be grateful. Only her cousin Edmund perceives and understands her unhappiness and helps her to get over it. Fanny is retiring by nature but she is also naturally good. She learns much from Edmund who forms her taste; but she also learns the Christian virtue; of humility and self-denial from her position. (Pinion 108)

Fanny is shown as a passive girl in the beginning of the novel. The main plot revolves around the development of Fanny. It shows her development from immaturity to maturity. The main interest of the plot lies in the subtle interplay of three aspects of Fanny's development. These three aspects are (i) Fanny's relation and her deep love for Edmund Bertram. (ii) Her relation with Henry Crawford (iii) Her relation with Mansfield and the people who live there. It is true that Fanny remains submissive, but she does feel compelled to reassess her own abilities at Portsmouth. She comes to realize that she's capable of seeing and judging correctly, of giving, of being positively useful. Fanny despises Henry from the very core of her heart. Henry's wooing means a series of trials for Fanny. When Sir Thomas and Edmund ask her to consider Henry's proposal sympathetically she tells them bluntly that she just cannot think of marrying Henry. Jane Austen says – "She was feeling, thinking, trembling, about everything, agitated, happy miserable, infinitely obliged, absolutely angry. It was all beyond belief. He was inexcusable, incomprehensible". (140) This firmness in her negative attitude to Henry shows a remarkable firmness of character. She knows that she has to act firmly if she wants to have her say. Hence-forward Fanny's free but indirect speech becomes the vehicle of the narrative, and the special quality of her mind colours, or dominates the story. Fanny has now learnt how to face the dangers, which are wrought in complicated situations. When she finds that her individual freedom is in peril, she knows how to protect it and how to assert herself, no matter what the cost may be. Mary Lascelles in her work *Jane Austen and Her Art* writes that:

Characters like Fanny who respond to the call of their conscience firmly believe in a delicate adjustment of social and moral values. Their judgement is also balanced and they also know how to distinguish correctly between the right and the wrong course of action (42).

Fanny's rejection of Henry represents her censure of his presumptuous attempt to author his own life, his past history, and his present fictional identities. Self-divided, indulging in his passions alienated from authority, full of ambition, and seeking revenge for past injuries, the false young man verges on the Satanic. While he manages to thrive in his own fashion, finding a suitable lover or wife and generally making his fortune in the process, his way cannot be the Austen heroine's. Although his crimes are real actions while hers are purely rhetorical, she is more completely censured because her liberties more seriously defy her social role.

It is not surprising that her stay at Mansfield Park starts on a note of suffering, which virtually sets the tone to the rest of her story. It is only in Edmund, with his strong, good sense and uprightness of mind that she finds a possible source of expansion of her consciousness and also genuine affection (19). The relation of Fanny and Edmund may be likened to that of Emma to Mr. Knightley, although Emma doesn't idealise Mr. Knightley, as Fanny does Edmund. Fanny "regarded her cousin as an example of everything good and great as possessing worth, which no one but herself could ever appreciate Her sentiments towards him were compounded of all that was respectful, confiding and tender" (31-32). Fanny's love for Edmund originates in her feeling of gratitude to him for speaking words of sympathy to her whenever she is in distress. For instance, when she speaks of her own foolishness and awkwardness, Edmund says to her:

As to your foolishness and awkwardness, my dear Fanny, believe me, you never have a shadow of either. You have good sense, and a sweet temper, and I am sure you have a

grateful heart, that could never receive kindness without wishing to return it (61)

These words by Edmund give us the key to Fanny's character. Fanny's reticence is constantly associated with her moral scruples. The complete episode of the theatricals exposes the impropriety of mimicking passions one actually feels, but locally Fanny's objection – No, indeed, I cannot act" (145) – is a personal statement which exposes her to a reminder from Mrs. Norris of "who and what she is" (147). Later, another outspoken moment is turned against her; Henry Crawford nostalgically recalls the theatricals : "We were all alive. There was employment, hope, solicitude, bustle for every hour of the day". The word "bustle" gives him away and when he goes on to regret that Sir Thomas was not becalmed, Fanny is firm :

As far as I am concerned, sir, I would not have delayed his return for a day. My uncle disapproved it all so entirely when he did arrive, that in my opinion, every thing had gone quite far enough! She had never spoken so much at once to him in her life before, and never so angrily to any one; and when her speech was over, she trembled and blushed at her own daring (225-26).

This is an important stage in Fanny's development of a healthy ability to articulate what she feels – and she feels a good deal of anger in the novel. On this occasion, as on so many others, Fanny is relieved to be able to preserve her "tranquillity" by relapsing into silence, and although the departure of the Bertram girls has increased her social importance, she is still the Fanny who used to prefer quiet evenings with Lady Bertram to balls and parties because the calm of such tete-a-tete was "unspeakably welcome to a mind which had seldom known a pause in its alarms or embarrassments" (35). Fanny's diffidence is a sign of proper reserve, and as such it reveals the dangers of her rival Mary's social fluency, but it can be seen in a more negative light : it is, after all, only partly due to the selfishness of the scene-stealers around her. It is also a character trait, which is associated with her tendency towards a type of moral paralysis.

Fanny's need to do the right thing for the right reason makes her mistrust decisions based on feeling. She broods in the white attic: "It would be so horrible to her to act, that she was inclined to suspect the truth and purity of her own scruples" (153). The heroine's self-scrutiny is laudable, but Austen deflates Fanny's deliberations. Edmund interrupts the meditation and their talk veers her thoughts away from self-doubt to doubt of Edmund himself; Fanny's inner dilemma thus collapses. Fanny's inner upheaval is clearly intended to parallel the disturbance of domestic peace caused by the theatricals, but it is by no means certain that Austen sees the heroine's agonizing as an exemption from the charge of misguided energy, even egotism. The novel thus is a record of the growth of Fanny, her personality that is shaped by a house Mansfield Park. The structure of *Mansfield Park* is severely built round the contrast between the girl's education and its consequences.

References

- Evans, Mary. *Jane Austen and the State* Routledge Library Edition. Vol 2. London: Routledge. 2011
- Lawall, Sarah N. *Critics of Consciousness: The Existential Structure of Literature*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. 1968.
- Pinion, F.B. *A Jane Austen Companion: A Critical Survey and Reference Book*. UK; Palgrave Macmillan. 1973.
- Trilling, Lionell. *The Opposing Self: Nine Essays in Criticism*. Harcourt Brace : Jovanovich. 1979.