

FANNY'S EMOTIONAL SUBJECTIVITY: A POSTCOLONIAL ANALYSIS OF FANNY PRICE AS AN AGENT OF IMPERIALISM IN JANE AUSTEN'S MANSFIELD PARK

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Abstract

Multiple classic texts in English literature have portrayed how emotions are fraught with politics during different moments in human history. This paper highlights how Jane Austen's Mansfield Park is one such nineteenth-century classic which demonstrates the complicity between emotions and imperial discourses by analyzing the subjectivity and agency of its protagonist, Fanny Price. By drawing on Edward Said's contention in Culture and Imperialism, this paper will demonstrate how Fanny's movements across domestic spaces correspond to the movements of her master Sir Thomas Bertram and how her subjectivity transforms from that of a slave into a subordinate imperial agent, as the narrative unfolds. A reader might consider Fanny to be the heroine of Mansfield Park, but one cannot ignore how almost all the other characters foist their perceptions and decisions on her. While Fanny thwarts some decisions, she is helpless to absorb and reinstate certain discourses of imperial hegemony which influence her emotions and thoughts infinitely. The textual language in Mansfield Park is ruptured with words and symbols which relegate Fanny into a slave's disposition. Yet, by the end of the narrative, she is reinstated as a successful agent of imperialism. This paper will throw light on how the imperial discourses which are complicit with Fanny's emotions come to define her subjectivity and her unique imperial agency. It will unpack Fanny's interpellation of the ideas of home, morality, propriety and ordination in Mansfield Park.

Keywords: Postcolonial, emotions, subjectivity, imperialism, interpellation.

In his book *Beginning Postcolonialism*, John McLeod explains the conceptual difference between colonialism and imperialism. He states:

'Colonialism' is sometimes used interchangeably with 'imperialism', but in truth the terms mean different things. As Peter Childs and Patrick Williams argue, imperialism is an ideological project which upholds the legitimacy of the economic and military control of one nation by another... Colonialism, however, is only one form of practice, one modality of control which results from the ideology of imperialism, and it specifically concerns the settlement of people in a new location (7).

This paper draws on the concept of imperialism to demonstrate its application in the textual context of the nineteenth-century novel, *Mansfield Park*. The basic argument in this paper is to demonstrate how the emotional subjectivity of Fanny Price in Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* was constructed by the imperial discourses underlying the narrative.

Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* is set "in 1808-9" in the British county of Northampton when slavery was legally abolished, but continued to be practised (Downie 433). The owner of *Mansfield Park*, Sir Thomas Bertram, owns an imperial estate in Antigua. The profits which he earns from the Antigua estate are used for the sustenance of *Mansfield Park*. The narrative is complicit to the imperial discourse not only through this economic sustenance, but also through persistent modes of ideological sustenance.

In his book *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said contends that the "positive ideas of home, of a nation... of proper order, good behaviour, moral values" (81) which circulated as "great humanistic ideas" (82) before the twentieth century created the ideological and hegemonic frameworks which facilitated the smooth functioning of imperialism. Said uses the example of *Mansfield Park*. He states that in this novel, "...Austen... synchronizes domestic with international authority, making it plain that the values associated with... 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...". Sir Thomas was an imperialist in that he owned and benefitted from sugar plantations in Antigua. But he also asserted what Said calls "local rule"

(87) within Mansfield Park. This meant that Sir Thomas was a stern father, a stern husband and a master of the house who ensured that everything was according to his opinions and dictates. He ensured that Mansfield Park remained an abode of the imperial values of “...elegance, propriety, regularity, harmony...” (Austen 407). Fanny was interpellated into accepting such an idea of home as perfect, and such a master of it as appropriate. In other words, she was unknowingly interpellated into ensuring the smooth functioning of the imperial discourse.

In her article “Mansfield Park: Slavery, Colonialism and Gender”, Moira Ferguson contends that “[y]oung Fanny Price’s removal from her family is described in terms often reserved for epiphanic moments in the narrative of slavery”. Thus, Fanny is brought to the Mansfield household like a slave and her stay there is also contrived by keeping such a disposition in mind. Even before Fanny can set foot into the Mansfield household, the means of her social conditioning are debated between her uncle and aunt, Sir Thomas and Mrs Norris. This initial debate is characteristic of the fact that decisions for Fanny are mostly made by the other characters. Ferguson indicates how “[a] marginalized, near-despised family, the Prices lose one of their own to accommodate Mrs Norris’ need to appear charitable...” (122). Mrs Norris wanted Sir Thomas to adopt Fanny so that she would help her “in any little matter [she] would ever have to bestow” since she did not have children of her own (Austen 4). This meant that Mrs Norris required a niece who would function as her servant so that she herself could be largely relieved of the endless tasks Lady Bertram bestowed on her. Sir Thomas gradually agrees to adopt Fanny because this act is presented as a charitable and utilitarian one by Mrs Norris. However, he informs Mrs Norris that she would need to assist them in helping his daughters and Fanny become conscious of the social distinction between them, without allowing his daughters to become arrogant or Fanny to feel inferior. In this way, Sir Thomas intended to interpellate a distinction between “[t]heir rank, fortunes, rights and expectations” without having to settle any emotional concomitants that such conditioning might generate (9). This reveals that Sir Thomas envisions the successful adoption and upbringing of Fanny only if it were complicit with the imperial hierarchical patterns.

Sir Thomas’s behaviour justifies Moira Ferguson’s statement that “Power relations within the community of Mansfield Park re-enact and refashion plantocratic paradigms; those who work for Sir Thomas and his entourage both at home and abroad are locked into hierarchical and abusive patterns of behaviour...” (121). Here, Sir Thomas’s entourage at home refers to his wife Lady Bertram, his two sons, his two daughters and most importantly, his sister-in-law Mrs Norris. All these characters are emotionally bound by Sir Thomas’s domestic plantocratic hierarchical norms and they go on to successfully bind Fanny within these same imperial norms. Sir Thomas’s elder son, Tom Bertram simply “made [Fanny] some presents and laughed at her”. The daughters, Maria and Julia Bertram perceive Fanny as “prodigiously stupid” right from the beginning (Austen 16). Crucial among Sir Thomas’s entourage, however, are the roles of Edmund and Mrs Norris in framing Fanny’s emotional subjectivity. While Edmund interpellates Fanny into absorbing imperial values through the rhetoric of brotherly love and concern almost like a kind imperial overseer, Mrs Norris interpellates Fanny more directly with her cruel imperial perspectives and admonitions.

In Moira Ferguson’s words, “The cruel officiousness of protagonist Fanny Price’s aunt, Mrs Norris, who is effectively Sir Thomas’ overseer and lives in the suggestively named white house ‘across the park’ from the Great House underlines his plantocratic style of administration” (121). Mrs Norris bestows Fanny with admonitions from her very first journey from Northampton to Mansfield Park as a ten-year-old until the end of the narrative when Henry Crawford elopes with Mrs Rushworth. While she lives in the white house, she ensures that Fanny is placed in the “little white attic” which is closer to the rooms of the instructress and the housemaids (Austen 8). This would allow Fanny to stay closer to the servants whose hierarchical status was closer to her own inferior subjectivity. In her article “Austen’s Later Subjects”, Emily Rohrbach argues that “[Fanny’s] room in the house is not so much chosen for her clearly belonging there as for her clearly not belonging anywhere else. Fanny is neither immediate family nor servant, precisely. And the question of her room is also that of her subject position...” (739). Rohrbach’s statement further clarifies Fanny’s complicated subject position. While she is not an outsider like a servant, she is treated like a servant because she is not a Bertram. Taking advantage of the distinction in rank that Sir Thomas insists on, Mrs Norris like a typical plantocratic overseer tries her best to relegate Fanny to the disposition of slavish servitude. She ascertains that Fanny never leaves the domestic sphere of the Mansfield household and is always present to assist Lady Bertram in her chores. Lady Bertram’s own selfish desire to have Fanny perpetually by her side serves to aid Mrs Norris’s schemes.

Even when Sir Thomas allows Fanny certain comforts in the latter half of the narrative, Mrs Norris feels wary and begins to bestow admonitions on Fanny and interpellate her into her inferior subject position. In her article “Mansfield Park: Slavery, Colonialism and Gender”, Moira Ferguson states that “Fanny thinks ‘too lowly of her own claims’ and ‘too lowly of her own situation’ to challenge values that keep her low” (123). In the second half of the narrative, when Mrs Grant invites Fanny to dinner and Sir Thomas permits her to go, Mrs Norris is disconcerted that Fanny was “stepping out of [her] rank” and could possibly entertain hopes of such receptivity again. Since Mrs Norris could not accompany Fanny and keep an eye on her manners, she repetitively admonishes Fanny to remember her inferior status in comparison to her cousins and never to express her opinions like her cousins. She tells Fanny, “Remember, wherever you are, you must be the lowest and the

last...". However, by this stage in the narrative, Fanny had already absorbed her inferior subjectivity. To her heart and mind, Mrs Norris's admonishes were "perfectly reasonable. She rated her own claims to comfort as low even as Mrs Norris could..." (Austen 228).

While Mrs Norris's perpetual cruelty turns Fanny into a passive imperial subject, the function of Edmund as a kind, brotherly imperial overseer serves to interpellate Fanny into an active and emotional subject of imperialism. While Mrs Norris reminds Fanny of her inferior rank, Edmund interpellates Fanny to consciously and intellectually assimilate the imperial values of ordination, propriety and duty, using the rhetoric of brotherly care. As the second son of Sir Thomas, Edmund enacts the role akin to that of a kind, new colonizer who is able to interpellate his colonized subject by using kindness and empathy, instead of sternness and cruelty. Thus, Edmund helps Fanny to conform to the same imperial values perpetuated by Sir Thomas. After Fanny enters Mansfield Park as a ten-year-old, Edmund is the first to comfort her. Edmund perceives Fanny with his imperial gaze as "an interesting object" to interpellate. He helps Fanny write a letter to her beloved brother William and thus makes a niche for himself in Fanny's heart. Fanny begins to cherish morals complicit with imperialism because Edmund does not perceive her intellectual faculties as inferior. "[H]e recommended the books which charmed her leisure hours, he encouraged her taste, and corrected her judgement; he made reading useful by talking to her of what she read, and heightened its attraction by judicious praise" (Austen 15, 21). Edmund's dream of ordination and dictating morals becomes Fanny's own dream. In the last quarter of the narrative, Fanny enacts this dream herself when she begins to teach Susan at Portsmouth.

Fanny gradually falls in love with Edmund. She transforms from a sister who simply "loved to hear... whom Edmund danced with" at balls, to a young lover who "wondered that Edmund should forget her and felt a pang" in her heart as his attention towards Miss Crawford increased (Austen 34, 69). Despite his attraction towards Miss Crawford, Edmund is able to attend to Fanny with his brotherly love and he comes to her rescue whenever she is ignored or mistreated by the other characters. Towards the end of chapter seven in Mansfield Park, when Fanny develops a headache after being made to work by Mrs Norris like a slave in the heat, Edmund makes sure that Fanny drinks a glass of Madeira and determines to offer her the exercise of horse-riding even if it meant disallowing Miss Crawford the same. In this way, Edmund comforts Fanny as she performs her slavish duties by offering her emotional solace and attention. With Edmund as her perpetual support, Fanny becomes not just a passive subject but an active contributor and agent of imperialism.

When Sir Thomas is in Antigua and the Bertrams are carried away by the Crawfords, Fanny begins to decipher impropriety in the other characters and at times even attempts to correct them. Though she is unable to successfully correct any immoral behaviour, she ensures that she herself behaves modestly and becomes the sole mouthpiece of dictating morals to the readers. Through Fanny, the readers are aware that Miss Crawford does not display ideal propriety. Even though Edmund does not comprehend it, the readers are told that Miss Crawford demonstrates ungratefulness by the manner in which she speaks about the Admiral, and she abhors Edmund's professional dream of ordination only because of her own love for money and luxury. When Maria Bertram and Henry Crawford flirt at the grounds of Sotherton, the readers are informed that Fanny was "astonished at Miss Bertram and angry with Mr Crawford" because Miss Maria Bertram was engaged to Mr Rushworth and their behaviour was totally inappropriate and immoral (Austen 103).

Fanny's imperial agency becomes further pronounced when she refuses to act in the French play *Lovers' Vows* which her cousins decide to perform at Mansfield Park. Fanny reads a volume of the play and informs the reader that the character of Agatha and Amelia were "totally improper for home representation... so unfit to be expressed by any woman of modesty" that she longed for Edmund to disallow her cousins from playing these parts (Austen 143). Though Edmund recognizes the immodest aspects in the French play, Miss Crawford lures him into acting along with her. Fanny remains the only character who persistently refuses to act in the play. Said notes that similar to Sir Thomas's hatred for *Lovers' Vows* "Fanny's discomfiture is polarizingly acute. She cannot participate, cannot easily accept that rooms for living are turned into theatrical space..." (86). Fanny is resolved not to participate in the play even though Mrs Norris labels her as "a very obstinate, ungrateful girl". It is only Edmund's repeated wish "with a look of even fond dependence on her good nature" that Fanny agreed to participate in the play (Austen 153, 179). However, she is saved from breaching the imperial value of propriety and modesty as Sir Thomas returns from Antigua and destroys every dream of ever staging any French play at Mansfield Park.

Fanny's imperial agency reaches its summit in two final actions - her refusal of Mr Crawford and her imperial education of Susan. After the marriage of Maria, she and Julia go to Brighton. In their absence, Mr Crawford turns his male sexual gaze towards Fanny. Mr Crawford initially wished to only flirt with her, but once he learns that Fanny does not like him and is unaware of his feelings, he gets further attracted to her. In order to win her heart, Mr Crawford even makes sure that her brother William secures the post of a lieutenant. He then approaches Sir Thomas with his proposal to marry Fanny. But Fanny's own feelings for Edmund and her awareness of Mr Crawford's notoriety as a flirt cannot allow her to accept him. When she refuses the proposal, Sir Thomas perceives her as an unproductive subject of the imperial discourse and accuses her of harbouring "ingratitude" and "that independence of spirit... which in young women is offensive and disgusting beyond all common offence" (Austen 329, 328). Despite her refusal, Mr Crawford is permitted to continuously impress her. Fanny experienced "a grievous imprisonment of body and mind" as Mr Crawford sat beside her and told

her that he was enamoured by the “touches of the angel” (356-57) in her character and that he deserved her because he would conduct himself with steady fidelity. Lady Bertram told Fanny that it was her “duty to accept such a very unexceptionable offer” of marriage from Mr Crawford (344). Even Edmund said that if she accepted Mr Crawford, she would “be the perfect model of a woman, which [he had] always believed [Fanny was] born for” (360). Despite all these accusations, Fanny decides to remain steadfast in her imperial values of modesty and declines Mr Crawford’s offer. Frustrated, Sir Thomas decides to send Fanny away from Mansfield Park to Portsmouth so that the lack of comfort there would make her homesick and anxious to return and accept Mr Crawford’s offer of marriage.

Fanny had longed to return to her home in Portsmouth to spend time with her real family. But the moment she sets foot in the house, she perceives it from an imperial gaze. In other words, she perceived her parents’ house as an imperialist would derogatively perceive the abode of his colonized subjects. Fanny regretfully perceived that her home at Portsmouth was the opposite of Mansfield Park. It was “the very reverse of what she could have wished. It was the abode of noise, disorder and impropriety. Nobody was in their right place, nothing was done as it ought to be”. She could not respect her parents because her father was too loud and her mother was unable to maintain order. She attempted in vain to tame and teach propriety to her younger brothers. But Fanny soon realized to her surprise that Susan took pains to decrease the chaos in her house. Susan used to ensure that her mother and sister Betsey were restrained from over-indulgence. And Fanny perceived, in such behaviour, a potential for rectification and an innate gift of a “natural light of the mind which could so early distinguish justly...” (Austen 404, 411). Fanny chose to strengthen her bond with Susan as such. Here, Susan’s behaviour is similar to Mr Norris’s behaviour in Mansfield Park. Like Sir Thomas favoured Mrs Norris for a large part of the narrative, Fanny also began to favour Susan since she noticed in her the potential to become an agent of imperialism.

Fanny took pains to secure for Susan the possession of a silver knife which she had cherished. Susan expressed her gratitude to Fanny and became more favourable in her behaviour towards her. This made Fanny believe that Susan was looking up to her to secure her guidance. This allowed Fanny “to entertain the hope of being useful to a mind so much in need of help, and so much deserving it” (Austen 413). Basically, Fanny misunderstood Susan’s gratitude and curiosity as her longing to be advised and taught propriety. In his article “Moral Integrity and Moral Anarchy in Mansfield Park”, Joseph M. Duffy, Jr. states that “Fanny’s education of Susan parallels her own early training under Edmund” (78). Just as Edmund had interpellated Fanny into revering imperial morals through the rhetoric of brotherly love, Fanny begins to teach Susan all that she had learnt at Mansfield Park through the rhetoric of sisterly love. Since Fanny partially imagined herself as incompetent for the authoritative role of an advisor, she began to advise Susan in a subtle manner so that the advice became acceptable.

Fanny began to suggest Susan to rectify the chaos in the house by teaching her “the juster notions of what was due to everybody, and what would be wisest to herself, which [Fanny’s] more favoured education had fixed in her” (Austen 412). Fanny also began to educate Susan in the realms of biography, poetry and history. As a student, Susan was “a most attentive, profitable, thankful pupil” (435). She preferred Fanny’s style of narration to any other author of historical texts. This shows that Susan was basically in awe of Fanny’s teaching because they were new to her, and Fanny took advantage of Susan’s curiosity by further describing Mansfield Park and its imperial value of propriety to her. Fanny often gave Susan “a description of the people, the manners, the amusements, the ways of Mansfield Park. Susan, who had an innate taste for the genteel and well-appointed, was eager to hear, and Fanny could not but indulge herself in dwelling on so beloved a theme” (436). Such descriptions obviously made Susan eager to see Mansfield Park. Thus, Fanny sympathized with Susan’s longing and her own inability to provide for it. Fanny teachings had actually unhomed Susan from her own home because she began to revere different ideas of propriety, unavailable in her own house. When Mr Crawford continued to display a steady conduct and fondness for her, Fanny imagined allowing him to marry Susan. However, the news of Mr Crawford’s elopement with Mrs Rushworth destroyed her scheme. Yet Fanny knew that if Susan would continue to stay in Portsmouth, she would try to rectify the so-called chaos there. But Susan was invited to Mansfield Park and because of Fanny’s interpellation she became well adapted to it. Said rightly points out that “Susan is brought in ‘first as a comfort to Fanny, then as an auxiliary, and at last as her substitute’ when the new import takes Fanny’s place by Lady Bertram’s side” (92). Thus, whether Susan lived in Portsmouth or Mansfield Park, Fanny had interpellated her so that she too could replace her and ensure the discursive function of imperialism to continue unabated. It is because Susan replaces Fanny that she can marry Edmund and reinstate herself within the imperial structure and discourse at Mansfield Park more fervently.

In this way Fanny’s visit to her parents’ house and her ability to transform Susan proved her own capability to be not only an emotional subject but also an active agent of imperialism. This contention ties up with Said’s viewpoint in Culture and Imperialism where he says, “I think Austen sees what Fanny does as a domestic or small-scale movement in space that corresponds to the larger, more openly colonial movements of Sir Thomas, her mentor, the man whose estates she inherits. The two movements depend on each other” (89). It proves that Fanny not only inherited Sir Thomas’s imperial ideas as a subject but also contributed to the creation and maintenance of imperial subjects through the rhetoric of love and as an active agent of imperialism.

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