

Familial Relationships as Portrayed by Jane Austen in Mansfield Park

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ABSTRACT

Jane Austen (1775–1817) a well known English novelist was born in the period of prolific literary productivity. Jane Austen's novels realistically portray middle class life in England in the eighteenth and the early nineteenth century.

Jane Austen presents the English society of her period in all its essence. She deals with all the familial and social concerns of both men and women of her days. She brings out all the aspects of her society which begins at home and stretches out to cover society, politics, education, gender, marriage, religion, profession and economy in her works. With a minute and penetrating social observation, she paints a realistic picture of the English society of which she was an integral part of her entire life.

This paper tries to bring out the familial relationships in the society of nineteenth century mainly focussing on the life of a particular section of people who is popularly known as 'gentry' through Jane Austen's novel, "Mansfield Park".

1. Introduction

Jane Austen's family was a big one with six brothers and one sister, therefore she had the probability of exploring the inner health of her parents, their love and affection, their duties and familial responsibilities. She strongly believes that a good family can create a good society. Jane Austen's notion of the well-knit structured family exposes social reformation which had taken place during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The revolution was led by legendary figures with the assertion that the family bonds is generally the source of familial joy, well-being and upbringing the children in proper manner and also in the victorious task of making up of the larger society.

2. Materials and methods

John Lock(e)'s socio-political theories offered vast renovation towards the function of parents in children's brought up and family. Writers like Daniel Defoe, endorsed fundamental changes in the scenario of matrimony. These modern principles lay concrete for the decline of the patriarchal family structure. This change in the structure of family had impact on the relationships between husband and wife, parent and children. This results in a firm and neutral share of dominion inside the family.

Jane Austen exhibits the age of evolution limited by the two value systems in her writings. She appears to sustain the free spirited ideas of the social reformers. The ethics of John Lock and Defoe can be traced in her heroes and heroines and also in marriage scheme. Only some members of the parent generation achieve enviable balance concerning adult supervision and personal independence of their children. Jane Austen assures that insufficient parental guidance is the birth place of misfortune for both her central characters and the rivals. Jane Austen may be warning her readers against bad parenting by exposing them the pessimistically influenced parents and how their treatment has effect on their children's present and future. She asserts the most far-reaching outcome of a miserable marriage is the failure of husband and wife to

perform their duties as father and mother effectively. She even goes to the extent of analysing the relationships between sisters and brothers. In the novelist's vision, a person's family circle is incomplete without siblings. One's character is judged by his handling of relationships with his or her siblings.

3. Result

At present, parents are very much caring about the brought up of their children and there are numerous media that offer a multitude of ways on moulding children successfully. This creates an everlasting bond between the parents and children. In Jane Austen's era, the parents' point of view in childrearing was exceptional and the way they treated their children distanced the parent and children emotionally. This unattached attitude creates a gap and leads to eloped marriages when the children grow to an adult age. The novelist suggests that a good parent who fed up their children in better manner can successfully get good brides and bridegrooms for their sons and daughters. Therefore she focuses on all the families of the protagonists in her novels how far family is responsible for the marital life of the young men and women. The following quote gives idea of the family in *Mansfield Park*.

"At Mansfield no sounds of contention, no raised voice, no abrupt bursts, no tread of violence, was ever heard; all proceeded in a regular course of cheerful orderliness; everybody had their due importance; everybody's feelings were consulted. If tenderness could be ever supposed wanting, good sense and good breeding supplied its place." (MP, p.320)

Jane Austen thoroughly studies the family and all its members in her novels. The father, who goes without saying, is the most important member in the family. Leonie Villard comments:

"Nowhere do we find the part played by the father in family rule so important as in English society, with its hierarchy which lingers on to this day, in spite of the

bursting from the bud of a new spirit." (Jane Austen: French Appreciation, pp.214-215)

Bertrams are not at all sad at the prospect of such a long period of separation from their father.

4. Discussion- Portrayal of familial relationships in mansfield park

It is true in the upper classes, where the father is not only the head of the family, but the possessor of the name and property. In *Mansfield Park*, the father is rather abnormally conscious of his power and everything gives way before him when he makes it a point to exercise his power. While transferring the estate to the eldest son, Sir Thomas is very anxious to secure the future of his other children. He wants his second son, Edmund, to take a place in the world that befits the younger son of a good family. To reimburse a little for the injustice of the law which renders nothing to the younger children while the first born inherits both the title and the property, Sir Thomas prepares Edmund for the church. Edmund would have the advantage of the various livings in the gift of the owner of Mansfield Park. After the death of Rev. Mr Norris, the living of Mansfield was to be for Edmund and in case of his uncle's earlier death, it was to be looked after by some friend till Edmund was qualified for orders. But due to the extravagance of Tom, his elder brother, there was a change in the calculated plan of the living for Edmund. Sir Thomas could not but feel it to be an act of injustice to his younger son and disputed with Tom breaking off all the arrangements of the father to ensure the economic security of Edmund:

"I blush for you, Tom,' said he, in his most dignified manner; 'I blush for the expedient which I am driven on; and I trust I may pity your feelings as a brother on the occasion. You have robbed Edmund for ten, twenty, thirty years, perhaps for life, of more than half the income which ought to be his. It may hereafter be in my power or in yours (I hope it will) to procure him better preferments; but it must not be forgotten that no benefit of that sort would have been beyond his natural claims on us, and that nothing can, in fact, be an equivalent for the certain advantage which he is now obliged to forego through the urgency of your debts." (MP,p.37)

Sir Thomas Bertram is always conscious of his parental duties and responsibilities. From the very beginning, we find him taking care of his children's education and deciding and directing the way they are to be brought up. He visits his children's study room to learn their progress in studies frequently. He takes excessive pains to teach and train his boys. In spite of all his labour, he is sorely disappointed in all his children except Edmund. He never knew the heart of his children. As the novelist says 'he did not know what was wanting, because, though a truly anxious father, he was not outwardly affectionate, and the reserve of his manner repressed all the flow of their spirits before him.' (MP,p.34) He is all that the head of a family should be. Amid the cares and complacency which his own family suggested, he supports his poor relatives. He is generous with the children of his wife's sister, Mrs Price. He adopts Mrs Price's daughter Fanny to whom he is as kind as to his own children. However, he is not loved by his own children. When he leaves England for Antigua with the probability of nearly a twelve month absence, the Miss

"The Miss Bertrams were much to be pitied on the occasion-not for their sorrow, but for their want of it. Their father was no object of love to them; he had never seemed the friend of their pleasures, and his absence was unhappily most welcome. They were relieved by it from all restraint; and without aiming at one gratification that would probably have been forbidden by Sir Thomas, they felt themselves immediately at their own disposal, and to have every indulgence within their reach." (MP, p.44)

Whenever Miss Bertrams receive letters from Antigua about the arrival of Sir Thomas to Mansfield, they are not happy. They desire that something would happen and their father's return would be postponed:

"November was the black month fixed for his return.... It would hardly be early in November; there were generally delays a bad passage or something-that favourite something which all who shut their eyes while they look, or their understandings while they reason, feel the comfort of it. It would probably be the middle of November at least; the middle of November was three months off. Three months comprised thirteen weeks. Much might happen in thirteen weeks." (MP, p.102)

The novelist adds: "Sir Thomas would have been deeply mortified by a suspicion of half that his daughters felt on the subject of his return." (MP, p.102) As Maria and James Rushworth has been engaged during Sir Thomas' absence, their marriage is to take place when he comes back to England. Sir Thomas, in spite of all his goodwill for Mr Rushworth, expects a very different son-in-law. He soon comes to know that Mr Rushworth is "an inferior young man, as ignorant in business as in books, with opinions in general unfixed, and without seeming much aware of it himself."(MP, p.171) Knowing this, he feels much worried for his daughter's life. He also observes her behaviour towards Mr Rushworth being careless and cold. She does not like him. Therefore, he tells Maria about his fears and advises her to give up the engagement if she feels apprehensive about the outcome of this wedding. He also promises her to release her from this connection. But Maria gives a convincing reply to him saying she has great admiration and confidence on Mr Rushworth and their life will be pleasant in future. Sir Thomas has to accept the choice of his daughter. At this point, we find how much she endures the restraint imposed by her father. The liberty which his absent is now much expected by Maria. Above all, she has no patience to be married. At this juncture, Jane Austen says:

"In all the important preparations of the mind she was complete, being prepared for matrimony by a hatred of home, restraint, and tranquility; by the misery of disappointed affection, and contempt of the man she was to marry."(MP, p. 173)

With a predetermined thought, she avoids her marriage with Rushworth which would bring ruin to her life. She elopes

with Henry Crawford who did not marry her. Besides Maria, Julia, the second daughter of Thomas also elopes with Mr Yates. Hence, in both cases, we note that the girls elope with men in order to escape from her father and their home. Sir Thomas then becomes aware of his conduct as a father. He also realises his faults in bringing up of his children.

"Too late he became aware how unfavourable to the character of any young people must be the totally opposite treatment which Maria and Julia had been always experiencing at home, where the excessive indulgence and flattery of their aunt had been continually contrasted with his own severity. He saw how ill he had judged, in expecting to counteract what was wrong in Mrs. Norris by its reverse in himself—clearly saw that he had but increased the evil, by teaching them to repress their spirits in his presence, as to make their real disposition unknown to him, and sending them all for their indulgence to a person who had been able to attach them only by the blindness of her affection and the excess of her praise." (MP, p.481)

Sir Thomas feels that he had not handled his daughters' education well and he had failed to teach them to meet out their inclinations and tempers by a proper sense of duty. As the father fails with the children there is another character who has equal part in lifting the life of her children, the mother. The mother's role is more prominent than the father's as she is more close to the children and she can mould them better than a father does. However, we find in Bertram's family that the role of the mother proves to be useless. The opening of the novel states this fact clearly:

"To the education of her daughters Lady Bertram paid not the smallest attention. She had not time for such care. She was a woman who spent her days in sitting nicely dressed on sofa, doing some long piece of needle-work, of little use and no beauty; thinking more of her pug than her children, but very indulgent to the latter, when it did not put herself to inconvenience; guided in everything important by Sir Thomas, and in smaller concerns by her sister. Had she possessed greater leisure for the service of her girls, she would probably have supposed it unnecessary; for they were under the care of a governess, with proper masters, and could want nothing more." (MP.p.34)

Lady Bertram could not discharge her duties and responsibilities as a mother in her husband's absence. Mrs Grant observes her as a cipher in this concern. Only once she renders an advice to her adopted daughter, Fanny when she learns about the offer of Mr Crawford. On the other hand, Fanny feels more for her aunt after her marriage that she will surely miss her. Lady Bertram has an instant reply for Fanny:

'No, my dear; I should not think of missing you, when such an offer as this comes in your way. I could do very well without you, if you were married to a man of such good estate as Mr Crawford. And you must be aware, Fanny that it is every young woman's duty to

accept such a very unexceptionable offer as this.' (MP, p.273)

This is the only piece of counsel given by Lady Bertram throughout the story. She is not a woman of passion to her family. She just lives with them with least concern for the family members even at the time of distress. When her eldest son, Tom is ill she could not nurse him. One cannot expect anything from such a mother.

Jane Austen portrays the affection of mother to be more instinctive and when it lacks for the children it will be the root cause of the ruin of their lives. When their expectation is not fulfilled, it leads to disappointment. As we can see Fanny's life this holds true:

"Her [Fanny's] disappointment in her mother was greater; there she had hoped much, and found almost nothing. Every flattering scheme of being of consequence to her soon fell to the ground. Mrs Price was not unkind; but instead of gaining on her affection and confidence, and becoming more and more dear, her daughter never met with greater kindness from her than on the first day of her arrival. The instinct of nature was soon satisfied, and Mrs Price's attachment had no other source. Her heart and time were already quite full; she had neither leisure nor affection to bestow on Fanny." (MP, p. 318)

Sir Thomas, being the head of the family enjoys the advantages and pleasures rather than fulfilling his fatherly responsibilities. Due to his self-centred nature, his family suffers a lot. The family loses its reputation and wealth because of the egoism and extravagance of the father. Such fathers are not only guilty of affecting their family but also their society.

Dealing with the problems of familial life in all her novels, Jane Austen assigns certain duties to every member of the family and believes that if they all realize their responsibilities, there will be no clash. Loyal wedded to the principle of harmonious relationship between husband and wife, she considers their ability to achieve perfect adjustment an essential qualification to perpetual family life. It is precisely because of this that she stresses in one novel after another the sanctity of married life.

According to Jane Austen, marital disloyalty can never be tolerated as it shatters one's home and affects the whole society. Maria's intrigue, after it is known, causes a major scandal and she and Henry Crawford who are guilty of a serious moral lapse are not the only sufferers. Hers was not an ordinary case of a girl's elopement. Such cases were pretty frequent in the eighteenth century and always ended in marriage. Maria was a married woman who left her husband, Mr Rushworth, and eloped with Mr Crawford whom she loved. She acts in defence of the moral code of her age and what she does is a crime against her family and society. Sir Thomas can think of no compromise between right and wrong. If she has lived in sin there can be no possibility of her ever enjoying a good reputation again. Just like Rev. Mr Primrose, who sets out

for London on learning Olivia's flight, in order to prevent his daughter from persevering in her sinfulness, Sir Thomas Bertram, on receiving the news of Maria's departure from her husband, leaves Mansfield to go and snatch the unfaithful wife away from sin and shame.

For Sir Thomas the word 'sin' does not have the same theological severity of meaning which Mr Primrose had thirty-five years earlier. But he judges his daughter from the social and not the religious point of view. He does not judge her less severely than the Vicar judges Olivia.

One who violates the laws of moral behaviour has to abandon every hope of leniency and gives up his reputation and place in his society. Sir Thomas Bertram alone does not condemn Maria, but the whole community spurns a woman who has failed to maintain the purity of married life. Jane Austen considers such oddities of conduct to be seriously hostile not only to the happiness of married life but also to the interests of the larger society.

5. Conclusion

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The novelist disapproves the play in the reflections of Tom Bertram in the course of his recovery from his illness. He criticises himself on being a part of his sister's immoral activities with Henry Crawford during the rehearsal of the play. He had been totally unaware of the consequences of Maria's intimacy with Crawford. Jane Austen is noted for her treatment of sex and is strongly reticent in portraying the relationship of men and women. Other than Jane none of the novelists suffered from any sort of embarrassment in this portrayal. But Jane's middle class morality won victory to a larger extent. She suggests an unreserved acceptance of the rigorous moral code of her age. The morality taught by Richardson is fully realized and reflected in Jane Austen's novels.

Jane Austen's was a social world of three or four families in countryside and the chief concern of this world was personal relationships in the domestic plane. Naturally, thus, her characters are neither great nor wicked. They are average men and women we meet in our daily lives. They are presented in their daily quest of life, apparently frivolous, yet, highly sensitive while considering their total character. Whether they are lovable or foolish, they attract us as real human beings.