

# Imperialism in the *Mansfield Park*

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**Abstract:** The works of Jane Austen mostly focus on the emotional entanglements of characters and it seems that they never get involved in social ideology and political consciousness. Her novel *Mansfield Park* focuses on the growth of the heroine Fanny Price: from a neglected young girl to be adopted to finally marry the second young master of the estate, Edmund Bertram, and become the spiritual mistress of the Park. However, in fact, this story contains Jane Austen's strong imperialist ideology. The heroine Fanny's growth process is also the process of continuous assimilation by the imperial ideology. Antigua provides the economic support for *Mansfield Park* and helps the people at the manor to establish the superiority of the hierarchy. At the same time, it is with the economic support of Antigua that the two young ladies of the estate are able to marry into wealthy families. This paper focuses on the colonial thoughts of Fanny and the description of locations in the novel.

**Keywords:** *Mansfield Park*, Spiritual mistress, Antigua, Colonialism.

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. An Introduction to Jane Austen

Jane Austen is a famous English female novelist. In December 1775, she was born in Steventon, Hampshire. Her father was a learned priest and her mother was born of a relatively wealthy family which also had a certain culture. Therefore, although Austen was not in regular schools, the good family condition and reading environment nurtured her the habit of self-study and cultivated her interest of writing. She wrote six full-length novels in her lifetime, which can be divided into two periods. The first three were written in her hometown of Steventon, namely *Northanger Abbey*, *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sense and Sensibility*. The latter three novels were written after she moved to Jordan in 1809, namely *Mansfield Park*, *Emma*, and *Persuasion*. Most of her works take the daily life in villages and towns of the middle classes as the subject which

reflect the British social style and features at that time.

Both Austen's earlier and later works have an enduring appeal. The famous critic Edmund Wilson once said: "For more than a hundred years there have been several revolutions of interest in England. The renovation of literary tastes has affected the reputation of almost all writers, except Shakespeare and Jane Austen (Zhu Hong 26)." In *Great Tradition*, F.R. Leavis speaks highly of Jane Austen:

"Jane Austen provides a highly instructive object of study that reveals the nature of originality, and she is an excellent example owning individual talent and tradition ..... Not only did she create a tradition for those who came after her, but her achievements have a retrospective effect. .... Her work gives meaning to the past" (8).

Austen's works has proven to be classic for every generation of readers after nearly two hundred years of critical appraisal.

### 1.2. An Introduction to *Mansfield Park*

When Fanny Price was about ten years old, she was fostered in a rich aunt because of poverty. In *Mansfield*, Aunt Norris was always deliberately put obstacles in her way. Her cousins Tom, Mary and Julia did not like her, and only

Edmund was friendly to her. Fanny had a lower status because actually she was a maid in this family. When Fanny was fifteen, uncle Thomas Bertram was away on business, Maria, the eldest daughter, became engaged to Mr. Rushworth, a rich but extremely foolish young man. Meanwhile, Henry Crawford and Mary Crawford arrived and lived near the parsonage. They are so energetic and charming that both Maria and Julia are attracted to them. Edmund was also enamored with Mary.

Being bored, several young people decide to rehearse a play for fun. However, the return of Sir Thomas aborts the rehearsal. Maria wants to break her engagement to Mr. Rushworth, and she hopes that her father's return will cause Henry to announce that he is in love with Mary. Instead of any indication, Henry announces that he is going to Bath for a while. Maria's pride was hurt and decided to never let Henry know that she took their flirtation so seriously. So she married Mr. Rushworth as promised. Later, Henry turns to the shy Fanny and asks for her hand in marriage. However, she refused. As punishment, Fanny is sent back to her parents' home in Portsmouth. After pursuing Fanny for some time without progress, Henry and Mary have an affair in London. Meanwhile, Mary's rational attitude to the affair sharpens Edmund's eyes. Due to debauchery and illness, Tom almost dies. When Edmund picks up Fanny to take care of Tom and Mrs. Bertram, *Mansfield* is in the most difficult period. Eventually, Edmund and Fanny got married and lived in *Mansfield* for the rest of their life.

### 1.3. Literature Review

*Mansfield Park* has received less attention than Austen's other works. Although it has been subject to some relatively unfavorable reviews and misunderstandings by critics such as Byatt, it has never been excluded from study.

Many scholars have commented on the novel's heroine. Antonia Susan Byatt (160-174) argues that *Mansfield Park* can be considered one of the finest works in the history of Western literature, but the novel's heroine is difficult to accept. The Bertrams adopt Fanny at the suggestion of Mrs. Norris, but the poorest and least successful daughter in the family ends up being the brightest and most beloved. Scholars have also explored the motives for Fanny's adoption. Byatt

suggests that the female characters who are willing to adopt Fanny can be divided into two kinds. In the first kind, people take initiative to attack Fanny in her face. Another kind of people are indifferent to Fanny. Harold Bloom (8-10) in the preface of *Why We Read Jane Austen* thinks that Austen shapes the character image, creates a kind of cognitive style, and produces ways of showing character's consciousness. He comments that no one except Austen can create such fantastic central and periphery characters after Shakespeare.

In addition, some scholars have analyzed Fanny's feminine consciousness. Lei Yun analyzes the themes of female self-formation and self-realization embodied in *Mansfield Park* in "The Spiritual Portrait of Fanny Price: Female Self-Formation and Self-Realization in *Mansfield Park*" and suggests that the novel's heroine Fanny Price's image condenses Jane Austen's unique insights on female value and female influence, and thus points out the novel's significance for contemporary women seeking self-emancipation. In "The New Female Character in *Mansfield Park*", Song Xiaohan (11) demonstrates that Jane Austen's work is a feminist call and deeply questions the prejudices against women in English society at the time. Zheng Ke (24) analyzes Fanny's change of psychological state by defining her identity, demonstrating that Fanny's moral code and discourse are determined by her different identity in "Identity and the Change of Psychological State: An Analysis of Fanny's Image in *Mansfield Park*". Through Fanny and Mary's contradictory views of marriage in "I Read *Mansfield Park*", Lin Wenchen (88-93) reproduces the rational and emotional state in love. He also thinks that Jane Austen is an artist who writes about life based on reality. Her novel's value lies in its emotional reproduction of the contradictions of life that the writer is most concerned about.

Finally, some scholars have analyzed the locations that appear in the novel. Jiang Jiuwen's "The Absence Narrative in *Mansfield Park*" (255-257) analyzes the absent authorities and characters in the novel and discusses the effects of the absence narrative. Liu Yuan's "The Temporal Extension of *Mansfield Park*" (224-225) focuses on the importance of four locations-Mansfield, Portsmouth, London, and Antigua-by analyzing the characters' experiences, social values, and their connections to space.

However, there is relatively little exploration of the colonial factors embodied in Fanny. At the same time, the relationship between Mansfield Hall and Antigua alludes to the relationship between the Western empire and the colonies. These are the values of this thesis.

## 2. Fanny's Imperial Spirit in Mansfield Park

### 2.1. The Chosen Adoptee

Austen is excelled at depicting healthy and lively women (Huang Mei 95) but Fanny Price's taciturnity is an exception. Fanny came from poor Portsmouth, dominating an extremely humble position in the imperial hierarchy. She spent her childhood in Portsmouth. In *Mansfield Park*, Fanny was an adopted girl in danger of being driven away at any time. The loss of the Antigua plantation and the rejection of Henry's proposal of marriage both brought her to the brink of expulsion.

Before Fanny came to Mansfield, the elders of the park expressed their views on how to define her identity. Sir Thomas made it clear:

"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" (7).

Sir Thomas has drawn a strict line of identity between Fanny and his daughters, and Fanny herself is caught up in identity anxiety. Fanny was frightened by unsmiling Sir Thomas, the silent Lady Bertram, the two superior cousins, the fussing Aunt Norris, and the maids who mock her. *Mansfield Park* is completely different from *Portsmouth* and she is not valued by others here.

Fanny completes the process of being transformed secretly and Edmund is her best teacher. Edmund's care gives Fanny comfort, and his personal interests become the Fanny's study object. All Fanny's reading interests follow Edmund's closely. When the avenues of Sotherton were to be cut down, she could only express her thoughts by copying Cooper's poems. In addition, French, geography, history, painting and music, which were essential to the two Misses Bertram's education, were also the subjects that Fanny studied. The assimilation of thought is subtle. Before Fanny learns Mansfield's system of discourse, silence and obedience will be her camouflage and she can only fill her limited knowledge with what she has learned.

### 2.2. The Domesticated Follower

Fanny's silence and obedience kept her out of the limelight in *Mansfield Park*. But during Sir Thomas's absence, she gradually ceased to be timid and fearful and became a directly involved member of the Bertram family in *Mansfield Park*. In the transformation of Sotherton and rehearsal of "Lovers' Vows", Fanny highlights principle that is very different from the others. Although she is powerless to change the status quo, she strives to adhere to Sir Thomas's moral code and works diligently to maintain the order he has established.

From Fanny's first arrival at *Mansfield Park* to her adulthood, Edmund has been the guardian of Fanny's heart. When the Crawford siblings appear, Edmund's role as a protector is weakened by sudden love, which causes Fanny to experience the crisis of losing her protection. For example, before Mary's arrival, Edmund gives a horse for Fanny as a gift, just like her two cousins. It is a mare that was very easy to tame.

"Her sentiments towards him were compounded of all that was respectful, grateful, confiding, and tender (35)".

However, Mary's arrival deprived Fanny of the exclusive use of the horse, and Edmund did not believe that Fanny had suffered a loss. He asked Fanny for more riding time on her behalf Mary and Fanny had to accept. Then Fanny plays the role of anyone with a discerning eye in the transformation of Sotherton and play. In Sotherton, Fanny witnesses Henry's maneuvering between the two Misses Bertram, and once again experiences the suffering caused by Edmund's love for Mary. Fanny continues to remain silent, trying to maintain their harmonious relationship. But in the rehearsal, a group of people are forcing Fanny to play the role of the cottager's wife, even Edmund also became the accomplice of forcing Fanny. When Edmund came up with some grand reasons to cover up his decision to play Anhalt's real purpose, Fanny saw that he was caught in this absurd farce and could do nothing. Fanny loses her last territory when Edmund and Mary occupy the East Room as a rehearsal space.

While young people were immersed in the madness of the

rehearsal, only Fanny kept a cool head because during her eight years in Mansfield Park, no one had learned the moral code more intently than Fanny, and she was most familiar with the order of Mansfield Park. After Sir Thomas's return home, the two Misses Bertram were indifferent to Sir Thomas's experiences in the West Indies and only Fanny was relieved that things were back to normal, and she was curious about the West Indies and the slave trade:

"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...Did not you hear me ask him about the slave-trade last night (174)?"

Fanny, the future mistress of Mansfield Park, is far more eager for overseas colonies than her cousins' love of acting and flirting. She always maintained close ties with the overseas world.

### 2.3. The Assimilated Spiritual Leader

After the two cousins left, Fanny became the only young woman and her status was raised, earning an invitation to be a guest. This event made Fanny become the focus. After the necklace incident and the marriage proposal, people began to notice her good qualities.

After the departure of the two Miss Bertram, Henry temporarily lacked the target of flirtation and then he turned to Fanny. William's visit made Henry recognize Fanny's good qualities. Therefore, he decides to propose to her. The necklace affair is the beginning of Henry's declaration and a tool for Mary to win Edmund's affection again. Fanny tries her best to balance love and friendship, and wears both necklaces at the same time when attending the ball, which shows her valuable personality. But the proposal pushes Fanny into the limelight again. When Henry decided to marry Fanny, it seemed that their wealth and status were unmatched, but in Henry's eyes, Fanny's rationality attracted him deeply.

After repeatedly refusing Henry's proposal, Fanny was sent back to Portsmouth by Sir Thomas. But she can't adapt to the life in Portsmouth completely. She was distressed by her father's rude language and her mother's laziness and slovenliness. The cramped rooms, corridors, and staircases were beyond her imagination.

Fanny was used to this life long before she was ten years old. But now, she was fully integrated into Mansfield's life. In Portsmouth, she saw no signs of luxury and experienced no taste for elegance. There were no rules or order in the small space and everything was in chaos. When Edmund picked her up, Fanny returned to Mansfield Park with great gratitude.

The elopement scandal of the two cousins is an opportunity for Fanny to become a spiritual pillar of Mansfield Park. Edmund sees her as his only sister, and Mrs. Bertram sees her as a lifesaver. In fact, Mrs. Norris should take responsibility for caring for her sick nephew and comforting people. But she became less talkative after the shock. As a result, Fanny's position in Mansfield Park rose. Mary's self-centered attitude made Edmund see her true colors completely. He eventually falls in love with Fanny.

Sir Thomas was tired of a marriage that covets power and money, and valued personal morality. Fanny wins the respect of the upper class with her noble quality and helps Mansfield out of the predicament. Eventually, she was married with Edmund. Fanny was no longer a passive receiver but Mansfield's spiritual mistress. At the end of the novel, Sir Thomas has to admit that Fanny is the daughter-in-law he

needs, which was in sharp contrast to Sir Thomas' superiority when Fanny first came to the Mansfield Park. The choice of Edmund and Sir Thomas was out of consideration for personal morality. They praised Fanny's character and Fanny's choice implied her acceptance of ideology and value system of Mansfield Park. Finally, she obtained the inheritance right of Mansfield Park.

## 3. Imperial Consciousness Embedded in the Locations

### 3.1. Mansfield Park: The Symbol of Empire

It can be concluded from the novel that no matter how isolated some parts of England (such as Mansfield Park) were, they needed to be fed overseas. Sir Thomas' property in the Caribbean was a sugar plantation maintained by slave labor. Before the Anglo-French competition, early empires were devoted to plunder and the transportation of wealth from the colonies to Europe, with little concern for the development of the colonies themselves; both Britain and France wanted their empires to be long-term and lucrative concerns. They competed with each other, most intensely in the Caribbean colonies. There, the transportation of slaves, the operation of large sugar plantations, and the development of sugar markets gave rise to problems of protectionism, monopoly, and price (Xu Shaohong 91-93).

Mansfield Park is undoubtedly a symbol of empire. Said is the founder of postcolonial theory and the most accomplished and important representative of postcolonial theory. Postcolonial theory focuses on the cultural relationship between the colonial East and the suzerain West, that is, the relationship between the inferior East and the superior West. In the eyes of the West, the East is synonymous with backwardness. Although East and West are on the same planet, they are not comparable in Orientalists' opinion. The West is civilized and advanced and the East is ignorant and backward. This logic is so deeply rooted in the minds of Orientalists that they consciously or unconsciously take this dichotomous way of thinking as the basic principle of Oriental studies (Said 57).

As Said puts it, his reading of the novel is only possible after "the emergence of a postcolonial consciousness" (151). His narrative changes the focus of the text itself: in Mansfield Park, what is unstressed, secondary, and occasionally touched upon, becomes center and subject of his reading. Said declare that Austen synchronizes domestic with international authority. He argues that Fanny Price, a "transported commodity" (171), replicates the slave, and that Sir Thomas's efficient management of his estate on his return (which involves burning unbound copies of *Lovers' Vow*) evokes the authoritarian style of the slave-master. (173)

To Orientalists, Mansfield Park, as a symbol of the superior empire, was advanced and civilized. The other places mentioned in the novel, such as Antigua and Portsmouth, were the symbols of the backward, uncivilized, inferior East. Sir Thomas was always reluctant to leave England and his happy family life at Mansfield Park. His family got into some trouble when he had to make the long trip to Antigua to tend his plantation. Fanny Price was a young girl from a poor family in Portsmouth. She was raised in Mansfield Park by her wealthy aunt and uncle, Sir Thomas and Lady Bertram. She grew up with her four cousins, but she was always treated as inferior to them; only Edmund showed real kindness to her. It was only later, when Fanny showed her ability to manage Mansfield Park and his spirit of imperialism, that she became

the spiritual mistress of Mansfield Park and earned the respect of others. The change in the attitude of the Bertrams toward Fanny reflects the dichotomous mindset of the superior East versus the inferior West.

### 3.2. Antigua: The Strong Support of Mansfield Park

In *Mansfield Park*, one of the threads is the emotional disputes between the members of the Thomas Brent family and their respective friends and relatives, and another thread is Sir Thomas's trip to Antigua to attend to his affairs.

"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 nearly a twelvemonth absent" (30).

This is the first time to mention "Antigua" in the novel. It is an unremarkable piece of information for the plot of the novel, yet it reflects the colonialism.

The fictional Antigua is located in the northern part of the Leys Islands in the Caribbean and consists of Antigua and Redonda, Barbuda. In 1493, Columbus arrived at this island on his second voyage to America and named the island after the church of Antigua in Seville, Spain. In 1632, the island was occupied by the British and blacks were trafficked from Africa to grow tobacco and sugar cane. In 1667, according to the Treaty of Breda, the island became an official British colony. Until November 1, 1981, it became independent. In this novel, Antigua is an allusion to the British colonialism of the time. After the arrival of Sir Thomas's eldest son in Antigua, the author begins to describe in detail the social life of the family members. In Chapter 4, she mentioned that by September, Sir Thomas is still overseas. And when he begins to think about returning home, he encounters other matters that need to be dealt with and has to send his son home first. He stayed behind to deal with matters of Antigua. During Thomas' absence from Mansfield Park, other family members were only active in the social sphere, with no apparent connection to the plantation overseas. They spent most of their time hosting balls and making friends with the upper classes. From the plot of the novel, it is clear that they were not concerned with financial sources.

However, there is one sentence in the novel that illustrates the relationship between the Antigua's plantation and Mansfield Park.

"The necessity of the measure in a pecuniary light, and the hope of its utility to his son, reconciled Sir Thomas to the effort of quitting the rest of his family, and of leaving his daughters to the direction of others at their present most interesting time of life." (25)

"Pecuniary" expresses the economic relationship between Antigua and Park, which shows that the operation of the colonial plantation was the necessary foundation for the functioning of Park. Without financial support, lavish social activities were almost impossible. As a member of Parliament, Sir Thomas personally dealt with the affairs of the colonies, which also symbolized the rule of a country over its colonies. There is an essential source of economy for the functioning of the domestic and Mansfield Park's economies. As a part of Britain, Mansfield Park had a special relationship with overseas colonial territories, which was a microcosm of the relationship between the whole country and overseas at that time.

Moreover, Antigua enabled the colonists to establish the

superiority of their social hierarchy in their own country. Austin acknowledges that *Mansfield Park* is a novel about "hierarchy" (100). The wealth derived from Antigua allowed Sir Thomas to gain political rights in Parliament, giving him an admired status in society. The possession of Antigua's wealth also led to strict boundaries between the Bertrams and their poor relatives.

Actually, Antigua also gave the colonizers a moral superiority. On the one hand, the new value system of the 19th century led to an increasing tendency toward expansion throughout society. Sir Thomas' expansion fit in part with the new values and was consistent with the expansion of the domestic market during the rise of capitalism. On the other hand, in an era when identity was determined by property, Antigua's wealth helped Sir Thomas gain more respect and enabled him to help the lower classes. The fact that Mr. Crawford could effortlessly provide assistance for William's promotion and that Sir Thomas offered Mr. Norris a well-paying pastorate gave them great moral superiority.

Moreover, Antigua was the primary guarantee for finding a good son-in-law for the two Bertram ladies. Austen mentions at the beginning of the novel:

"About thirty years ago Miss Maria Ward, of Huntingdon, with only seven thousand pounds, had the good luck to captivate Sir Thomas Bertram, of Mansfield Park, in the county of Northampton, and to be thereby raised to the rank of a baronet's lady, with all the comforts and consequences of a handsome house and large income...her uncle, the lawyer, himself, allowed her to be at least three thousand pounds short of any equitable claim to it (1)".

Each of Austen's works, with the exception of *Emma*, centers on money and marriage or status and marriage. From a secular point of view, the property of husband and wife in a marriage must match, and a wealthy man like Darcy must find a woman with higher social status and more fortune. The wealth of Antigua provided money for social activities of Mansfield Park and the two Misses Bertram had more opportunities to meet young men of their class. Sir Thomas's fortune was sufficient for them to have a marriage commensurate with their fortune.

Antigua, which keeps order at Mansfield Park, is mentioned only briefly and does not receive the same attention as London or the northern industrial centers such as Manchester and Birmingham. This masked not only its important role but also the pillage of the colonists.

## 4. Conclusion

The themes of Jane Austen's works are mainly related to love, marriage and family life, so the textual analysis of her works is usually conducted from the perspective of love and marriage. But in fact, her novels also contain a strong imperial spirit.

Fanny demonstrates the spirit of imperialism. She is "the other" in *Mansfield Park* and is insignificant to the others in the Park. But through her own efforts, she makes up for what is missing in the estate that is important: morality. Eventually, she grows from adoptee to the spiritual mistress of the estate and gets into the center of power.

Several places are mentioned in *Mansfield Park*, including Mansfield Park, Antigua, Portsmouth, etc. These places have some metaphorical meanings, especially Mansfield and Antigua. In this novel, Mansfield Park symbolizes the superior empire and the other places symbolize the backward and uncivilized East, especially Antigua, which symbolizes

the remote colony under the control of Mansfield Park. Said argued that Orientalism, guided by dualism, imposed all the negative characteristics on the East. They believed that Orientals are lustful, lazy, cunning, cruel, radical, irrational, rigid, inhumane, anti-democratic, arbitrary, dishonest, backward, barbaric and uncivilized. By contrast, Westerners are at the other end of the spectrum. In the eyes of Orientalism, Westerners are the active subjects and Easterners are the passive objects. To some extent, Antigua was like London or Portsmouth, less desirable than Mansfield Park, but it produced goods for everyone's consumption, although it was owned and maintained by a small group of aristocrats and gentlemen.

However, now, the silent East is beginning to speak, although their discourse should be seen as peripheral. In recent years, Western writers, travelers and politicians have entered Eastern countries to provide not only with knowledge of Orientalism, but also to infiltrate their culture and values.

Under the cover of the romantic love story of Mansfield Park, the author's strong imperialist ideology permeates the entire novel. Growing up during the colonial expansion of British imperialism, her underlying thought is fully aligned with the British Empire's superiority in national culture, moral values, and domestic order. And she speaks highly of colonial expansion and imperialism through her works.

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