

Male-female antagonism in Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*

Priyanka

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Tika Ram Girls College, Sonapat, Haryana, India

Abstract

It is an established fact that Jane Austen is one of the most prominent and towering personalities who contributed to the development of English fiction in the history of English literature. Though she wrote during the romantic period but in her novels, we come across an air of realism which is the hallmark of her fictional writings. In her novels, the male-female antagonism is the pivot and around this concept all of her incidents revolve. The male-female antagonism in her novels is the result of certain lack of judgement and misunderstanding that arise between different characters in the development of plot.

Keywords: antagonism, relationships, male-female, novel, comedy, irony

Introduction

Jane Austen is one of most significant woman novelists during the first quarter of the nineteenth century whose novels bears the stamp of her craftsmanship and artifice. Jane Austen is very important novelist in the history of evolution of novel whose works are filled with an air of realism as she draws her material from the actual life. She is in fact the sincerest example of art for art sake.

Mansfield Park is Jane Austen's masterpiece in which she shows an important development by combining the gaiety of the earlier books with the gravity of later ones. *Mansfield Park* shows the triumph of reality over inner romanticism by marking an important stage in the development of English fiction. This novel is often judged as the most interesting and most intractable to the different schemes of the author's work. *Mansfield Park* is as rich and subtle as *Emma*, with the exception that the former has the lightness of tone that is notably absent from the story of *Emma*. In fact, this novel is considered as the purest and driest comedy dealing with adultery, elopement and corruption.

As far as the central concern of the novel *Mansfield Park* is concerned, it is the theme of ordination which Jane Austen declared in the novel, but without any shadow of doubt this novel also depicts the issue of male-female antagonism that is delineated by the novelist skillfully. In the present novel, this problem can be discussed from various angles as antagonistic feelings are generated in various characters for various reasons. Antagonism, in the novel, is to be studied chiefly between Fanny and Edmund; between Edmund and Marry; and between Fanny and Henry Crawford.

The ultimate outcome of these antagonistic feelings is best to be appreciated against the background of the complications between these characters. First, tension can be witnessed between Edmund and Fanny Price though in a very subdued form as there is no direct avowed opposition between the two. Edmund wants to go for the profession of a clergyman but Fanny dissuades Edmund to make his choice when she prefers some other profession for him as she says: 'You are really fit

for something better. Come do change your mind. It is not too late. Go into the law.'

Edmund, however, asserts that a clergyman is the guardian of religion, morals and manners as he says: "A fine preacher is followed and admired."

Right from his childhood, Edmund shows a great care and affection for Fanny who is brought up and educated by her uncle Sir Thomas Bertram, but all her cousins except Edmund ignore her and make fun of, for instance Edmund says to her: "You have a good sense and sweet temper, and I am sure that you have a grateful heart that could never receive kindness without wishing to return it." But, some critics like Lionell Trilling, that Austen created Price as "irony directed against irony itself"¹

Fanny also shows power to endure Edmund just because of her love when he accepts the role of a clergyman just only to protect the grace and dignity of his family during the theatrical episode of the play, *Lovers' Vow*. Fanny shows calmness and remains mute even when Edmund plays the role of Mary Crawford's lover in the play as says Nina Auerbach "Price was a genteel version of a popular archetype of the Romantic age; the monster who by the sheer act of existing does not and cannot ever fit into society"² According to some scholars like Thomas Edward, "this theatrical episode, *Lovers' Vows*, is a way to win Edmund and Maria, as both the Bertrams come to understand.

The theatrical episode also throws light on the characters of Maria and Julia who want to play the role of Agatha because it will bring them close to Henry Crawford, whom they both love. But, the role of Agatha is assigned to Maria, Julia is full of wrath and after protesting, she even does not stay for the rehearsals and comes out full of jealousy.

But according to D.H. Lawrence, in *Mansfield Park*, the relationship between man and woman is made the supreme and exclusive relationship, where all the meanness and insufficiency comes in." in the same way, Jane Austen also agrees that some conflict and antagonism is the integral part of every woman relationships.

But, as far as the novel *Mansfield Park* is concerned, there is no active animosity between Edmund and Fanny that can help them in bringing together as we witness during many occasions between Fanny and Edmund when Fanny feels distress to see Edmund courting Mary whom Fanny considers to be the most unsuitable as Edmund's wife as on one occasion she remarks: "He is blinded and nothing will open his eyes, nothing can, after having had truth before him so long in vain. He will marry her and will be poor and miserable."

However, in Jane Austen's novels the probability of male-female antagonism is presented more as a social problem than as a psychological one, though the latter aspect also not neglected, what is meant by this is that antagonism between man and woman in Austen's novels is usually caused by a fair perception, a misunderstanding because of social pressure at work. Thomas Bertram considers Henry Crawford to be a perfect match for Fanny, but Fanny loves Edmund, and when Edmund, too, encourages her for this, she says with firmness: "O never, never, he never will succeed with me."

When Mary urges Fanny to agree to Henry's proposal of marriage on the ground that to marry a man like Henry would be a triumph for Fanny, she at once answers: "I can't think well of a person who sports with other women's feelings."

But, both of them never attempt to prove one's supremacy as we come across in case of D. H. Lawrence novels. As in Austen's novel *Sense and Sensibility*, the main reason of antagonism between Marianne and Colonel Brandon is Marianne's wrong romantic notion and her misunderstanding of Brandon's disposition. In the same way, in *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth gets antagonized towards Darcy because of her pride showed by her during their first meeting.

It is the case with Edmund and Fanny in *Mansfield Park* who are not aware of their love for each other, and do not have a deeper insight into each other's disposition. Among the major thematic concerns of the novel, *Mansfield Park* some readers find it to be not ordination, but examination of Christian values towards human life which further focuses the attention on the profession of a clergyman and the importance of family prayers.

So, it is clear that while the probability of male - female antagonism is a successful structural device to make the story go, and also reflects the fact that Jane Austen's characters do not remain static but grow considerably within the limitations within which they are placed.

In this connection, Lionel Trilling maintained that Austen created Price as "irony directed against irony itself" By contrast, the American English professor Nina Auerbach argued that Price was a genteel version of a popular archetype of the Romantic age; the monster who by the sheer act of existing does not and cannot ever fit into society.

References

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