*The Interiors,* Vol. 3, 2014 ISSN 2319-4804

# Exploration of Women's Identity in Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*

**Nageshwar Singh**

Feminist scholarship aims at forging a new identity for women. The Women Liberation movement explored women's identity by asking in Chris Weedon's words "the very question what it is to be a woman, how our femininity and our sexuality are defined for us and how we might begin to redefine them ourselves".(1) In the nineteenth century some women novelists used their writing to redefine it. (Gilbert and Gubar 44) All of Charlotte Bronte's novels for example" deal to some extent, with a woman in search of her identity". (Miles 39) In this paper I shall be looking at the ways in which women are represented in Austen's texts. Jane Austen questions women's inherited identity and creates women protagonists who display rounded characters. In addition, her work creates an awareness of the way in which woman's identity has been constructed and a consciousness that women have artificially been endowed with qualities such as emotinality and natural mothering.

The feminist tradition in the English novel was well established when Jane Austen began writing and though not particularly distinguished, the best work embodied a view of life which she could accept as partly valid and relevant. One of the novels that served as a model was Charlotte Lennox's *The Female Quixote*, published in 1752. It was a burlesque of the voluminous seventeenth-century French romances of La Calprenede and Madeleine do Scudery. In a letter to Cassandra in 1807, Jane Austen describes her disgust on reading the badly translated and indelicate Alphonsine of Medame de Genlis and continues, "We changed it for the 'Female Quixote', which now makes our evening amusement; to me a very high one, as I find the work quite equal to what I remembered it".(Austen 47)

In Austen's day the image of woman was created and maintained by men. According to Nancy Armstrong, the educational curriculum introduced by the male-dominated government in the eighteenth century aimed at producing a specific view of what it meant to be a desirable woman (14). Woman's image as so-called "Angel in the House" (Showalter 14), as "custodian of the moral values" (Miles 11) and as a sweet and subservient being made her believe that her purpose on the earth was to please men and that by surrendering the self, she would find fulfilment

(Gilbert and Gubar 25). She was encouraged to remain fragile and was told that her dependence was a tribute to the man's strength and competence. (Miles149) Nancy Armstrong has argued that in the nineteenth century "the dynamics of the sexual exchange [were] apparently such that the female [gained] authority only by redeeming the male, not by pursuing her own desires". (55)

Stereotyped woman by means of the written word is not, however, restricted to canonical texts but can also be seen in modern fiction. The difference is that today feminist writers make women aware of how they are stereotyped and, in addition, suggest alternative images of women. Patricia Waugh points out that "the 'splitting' of women characters into idealised and asexual or highly sexualised objects is the norm in much modern fiction" (68). It would seem that against certain stereotypes of women Austen depicts complex women characters. Although Austen does not explicitly challenge women's portrayal in male texts, her fiction promotes the idea that women are not one-dimensional and predictable. One could therefore, argue that, in her own way, Austen identifies alternative images of women.

The women in Austen's fiction challenge the stereotypes associated with femininity' particularly in exhibiting contradictory traits. In *Mansfield Park* Fanny Price's character appears to develop as the novel progresses. She from frightened and often victimised poor relation "is gradually transformed into a directly participating member of the Bertram household at *Mansfiled Park*" (87). In the beginning, Fanny herself believes that she can never be important to anyone because of her "situation, [her] foolishness and awkwardness" (*Mansfield Park* 25). She is frightened of Sir Thomas and, according to the narrator, "quite overcome by Mrs. Norris's admonitions". (13)

In *Mansfield Park*, Fanny Price's favourite room has 'three transparencies, made in a rage for transparencies, for the three lower panes of one window, where Tintern Abbey held its station between a cave in Italy and a moonlight lake in Cumberland. When a comparable scene occurs in *Mansfield Park*. Jane Austen's sympathy with the heroine is modified by irony, 'When I look out on such a night as this', Fanny Price remarks, "I feel that 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".(97)

Fanny Price's nest is in the former school-room, and was 'quite deserted, except by Fanny, when she visited her plants, or wanted one of the books, which she was still glad to keep there, from the deficiency of space and accommodation in her little chamber above'. The aspect of the east room in *Mansfield Par*k was so favourable, that even without a fire it was habitable in many an early spring, and late autumn morning... Her plants, her books of which she had been a collector, from the first hour of her commanding a shilling- her writing desk, and her works of charity and ingenuity, were all within her reach. There is, of course, an element of burlesque in Jane Austen's treatment of her heroine, Fanny Price, 'giving air to her geraniums', to see if by doing this 'she might inhale a breeze of mental strength herself', is more a self-conscious worshipper of nature than Emily.

Fanny always seems to do as is expected of her. She tries to convince Maria that it is improper to climb over the gate with Henry's help and is firmly set against performing the play. As time moves on, however, Fanny seems to become more outspoken. Whereas in the beginning Fanny hardly manages to speak for herself, she later remains firm in her refusal of Henry. Neither Edmund's aversion to her being so very determined and positive" (351), nor her fear of her uncle can make her change her mind. Her concern is that she might not always "be able to appear properly submissive and indifferent" (220) is warranted when she is "forced by the anxiety of the moment even to tell her uncle that he [is] wrong". (317)

At first Sir Thomas feels Fanny is "[s]elf-willed, obstinate selfish and ungrateful" (322) because she will not heed him and marry Henry. When both his daughters elope however, Sir Thomas begins to realise and to value Fanny's good nature. What is more, he welcomes the news that she and Edmund are to marry for she is "indeed the daughter that he wanted". (477) Sir Thomas realises how much his opinion of Fanny has changed:

> [Sir Thomas] had pondered with genuine satisfaction or the more than possibility of the two young friends finding their mutual consolation in each other...and the joyful consent which met Edmund's application, the high sense of having realised a great acquisition the promise of Fanny for a daughter, formed just such a contrast with his early opinion on the

> subject when the poor little girl's coming
> had first been agitated... (477)

Not only is Fanny valued by Sir Thomas towards the end of the novel, but she herself believes that she could be useful and of service to every creature in the house when she hears about Maria eloping with Henry Crawford. Fanny proves to be very useful indeed, as she helps Edmund to forget Mary Crawford and consoles Lady Bertram. Though her 'usefulness' is questionable in relation to gender and class politics, that she asserts herself in this way is commendable.

If, indeed, it was Austen's intention to explore and even suggest a multifaceted identity for women then surely she was not being prescriptive. Toril Moi's criticism of feminist theorists such as Luce Irigaray who come to "analyse 'woman' in idealist categories" (148) is illuminating in relation to Austen whose work resists essentialist definitions of what women should be, and offers alternative possibilities of what they might also be.

**Works Cited**

Amstrong, Nancy. *Desire and Domestic Fiction* : *A Political History of the Novel*. New York : Oxford University Press, 1987.

Austen, Jane. *Mansfield Park*, London, Penguin, 1994.

Gilbert, S.M. and S. Gubar. *The Modwoman in the Attic : The Woman and the 19th Century Literary Imagination*, New Haven : Yale Publications 1979.

Miles, R. *The Female Form : Women Writers and the Conquest of the Novel*. London : Routledge,1987.

Showalter, Elaine. *A Literature of their Own : British Women Novelists from Bronte to Lessing*. Princeton : Princeton University, 1977.

Weedon, Chris.: *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory*. Oxford : Blackwell Publishers, 1987.

***Assistant Professor, Dept.of English, B.D. A. College, Bermo, Bokaro (Jharkhand)***