

**Foils in Jane Austen's Mansfield Park and Anita Brookner's Providence – A
Comparative Study**

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The main objective of this paper is to spell out the juxtaposition of the two types of women, plain looking yet virtuous and physically attractive yet morally shallow present in Jane Austen's Mansfield Park and Anita Brookner's Look at Me. Jane Austen (1775-1817), the prominent woman writer of the eighteenth century was a creative artist of great singularity and unique vision. Austen not only limits herself to the sphere she understands, she even picks and chooses amongst the raw material of experience available to her, '3 or 4 Families in a Country Village is the very thing to work on,'¹ and develops the themes of the novels that are significant for the moral concern, perplexity and commitment.

Following the same trend, Anita Brookner (1928 -), the twentieth-century woman novelist is one of the English novelists to spell out the feminine experience of emancipated women in the 21st century. Had Anita Brookner not written any novels, she would have been known only as an Art Historian. Indeed, when she started writing novels, in 1981, her reputation was already established as an art critic. After obtaining BA

1. Jane Austen, "To Anna Austen," 9 Sept. 1814, Letter 100 of Jane Austen: Selected Letters 1796 - 1817 ed. R.W. Chapman, vol.2 (Oxford and Newyork: Oxford University Press, 1985)

in French Literature at King's College in London, Brookner went on to obtain an M.A. then a Ph.D (on Greuze) in Art History, in 1953 from the Courtauld Institute of Art. After being a visiting lecturer at the University of Reading from 1959 to 1964, she lectured at the Courtauld from 1964 to 1988. She was the first woman to hold the position of Slade Professor of Fine Arts at the University of Cambridge, then of King's College (1990).

Both Jane Austen and Anita Brookner employ foil characters to bring out the characteristics of the two extremely different types of women and also their status in the society. In their fiction, the virtuous heroine presents a contrast to one other female character known for her manipulative beauty that operates the sexual markets, especially in the way she attracts the hero.

The heroine, Fanny Price, adopted and brought up by the Bertrams, her aunt's family is always right in her actions and judgment but she is overtly virtuous. When Fanny first arrives at Mansfield Park, the Bertrams' abode - she is a slight girl of ten years, 'exceedingly timid and shy, and shirking from notice.'² She feels terrified and homesick as their charity does not extend to an understanding of her predicament. Misses Bertram, Julia and Maria make fun of Fanny for her timidity and lack of knowledge of maps. Only Fanny's cousin Edmund perceives and understands her unhappiness and always treats her with immense consideration and affection which no one else in that household could do to her. When her uncle, Sir Thomas departs for Antigua, Edmund and his sisters feel relieved as they can be at their own disposal, and to have every indulgence within their reach. Edmund, a prospective clergy man, becomes the temporary head of the house.

² Jane Austen, Mansfield Park (New Delhi: UBS Publishers, 1996) 12.

The sociable, sophisticated, fascinating, Mary and Henry Crawford are staying with the Grants near Mansfield and they become the tempters. Mary is very pretty and Henry, if not handsome, is captivating. Both are emancipated individuals whose sophistication goes well beyond the social attitudes represented by the rural Bertram family. Henry is “the most horrible flirt”³ the Bertram sisters have ever known yet they are “delighted with him.”⁴ Edmund is so much attracted by Mary who thinks “Matrimony was her object, provided she could marry well,”⁵ and he is ready to overlook her faults and falls in love with her. Mary finds Edmund’s company increasingly pleasant and his growing admiration for Mary troubles Fanny.

Edmund is soon to be a clergyman, and Mary’s determined attempts to shake his intention by a combination of charm and raillery make Mary a source of moral danger to him. Mary’s beauty becomes a trap, her gaiety a snare, her free and vivacious conversation an invitation to indulgence and error. Edmund is fascinated by Mary, and Fanny is quick to see the growing intimacy between them and feels that he is deceived in Mary. This is further acknowledged when Fanny, on her visit to her parents, receives a letter from Edmund stating that he is blind to the glaring faults of Mary and is still determined to marry her. Edmund declares, “She is the only woman in the world whom if I could ever think of as a wife. If I did not believe that she had some regard for me, of course I should not say this but I do believe it.”⁶

³ Mansfield Park 36.

⁴ Mansfield Park 37.

⁵ Mansfield Park 35.

⁶ Mansfield Park 328.

Later at Mansfield Park, Edmund tells Fanny of his calling on Mary, by invitation in London. He could not propose to Mary as he had been utterly disillusioned by Mary's attitude and says that "Her's are faults of principle,... of blunted delicacy and a corrupted, vitiated mind."⁷ He would- as he had told Mary- endure all the pain of losing her rather than have to think of her. Mary had been greatly astonished angered, perhaps half-ashamed, and had, with affected indifference, uttered some gibes about his preaching. Immediately, Edmund started walking out, but Mary followed to call him, with a smile, "ill-suited to the conversation that had passed, a saucy, playful smile, seeming to invite, in order to subdue me...I resisted."⁸ Fanny realizes that Mary must have thought of the possibility of Edmund becoming the heir which must be the reason for the reconciliation.

The last news of Mary is that the Grants, moving to London, could give her a home and that her beauty and fortune were long in attracting a suitor to "satisfy the better taste she had acquired at Mansfield... or put Edmund sufficiently out of her head."⁹ Mary Crawford's bright vivacity is altogether charming to those who fail to see how much of it, is brittle flippancy. As Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) said, Jane Austen lets Mary, "...rattle on against the clergy, or in favour of a baronetcy and ten thousand a year with all the ease and spirit possible; but now and again strikes one note of her own, very quietly but in perfect tune, and at once all Mary Crawford's chatter, though it continues to amuse, rings flat."¹⁰

⁷ Mansfield Park 356.

⁸ Mansfield Park 358.

⁹ Mansfield Park 367.

¹⁰ Qtd in Douglas Bush, Jane Austen (London & Basingstoke: The Macmillan Press,1978) 131.

The real charm of Fanny Price lies in strict adherence to the moral values. Fanny has in her a great share of womanly uprightness and she symbolizes a wise and consistent moral identity and all “heroism of principle.”¹¹ The well-known critic, Tony Tanner sums up the contrast between the heroine, Fanny Price and Mary Crawford Jane Austen’s Mansfield Park as “Whereas Mary is a distinctly forward woman, always in her element in the arena of society, Fanny is marked by ‘natural shyness’ ... a true unassertive reticence of soul. A selfishness: a quietness.”¹²

Fanny Price is rewarded for her virtuous behaviour: Edmund chooses to marry Fanny, rather than the selfish, worldly seductress, Mary Crawford. He prefers “her soft, light eyes to sparkling dark ones,”¹³ thereby opting for a simple frank relation, based on love as respect and communication instead of giving in to the manipulation of a sexual predator. As Tony Tanner points out in his introduction:

It is the story of a girl who triumphs by doing nothing. She sits, she waits, she endures; and when she is finally promoted, through marriage, into an unexpectedly high social position, it seems to be a reward, not so much for her vitality, as for her extraordinary immobility...there is something of the Cinderella theme in the story: Fanny, more sensitive and fine than her lowly origins, is finally rewarded by marrying the handsome price. It is also the story of the ugly duckling who turns out to be a swan.¹⁴

In *Providence* (1982), Brookner dissects the life of Kitty Maule, an orphan, (born of an English father and French mother), who has been raised by her French

¹¹ Mansfield Park 207.

¹² Tony Tanner, introduction, Mansfield Park, by Jane Austen (London: Penguin, 1966)

¹³ Jane Austen, Mansfield Park (New Delhi: UBS Publishers, 1996) 367.

¹⁴ Tony Tanner, introduction, Mansfield Park, by Jane Austen (London: Penguin, 1966)

grandparents. She specializes in the Romantic Tradition (French Literature) and wins an appointment as a teacher in a provincial university and moves to live in a small flat in Chelsea where she falls in love with Maurice Bishop, a devout Roman Catholic. Kitty feels an admiration for Maurice and Brookner explains the situation thus:

...dressed in her best, although Maurice could not see her, would watch the handsome smiling figure mounting the steps to the platform, and try not to sigh as he surveyed the image on the screen before turning to his audience, his hands on his hips, his legs and buttocks braced as if for sexual activity. He was a beautiful man and everyone was faintly in love with him.¹⁵

Since Kitty is obsessed with her love for Maurice, she takes so much care to prepare and serve a special dish for Maurice than to write a paper or prepare for one of her seminars. Kitty returns from grandparents' home in France to the university hoping to spend time with Maurice. Kitty's teaching duties are apparently limited to a seminar on Constant's *Adolphe* with three students, 'painfully thin, excited and excitable'¹⁶ John Larter, 'polite, cautious, bifocalled'¹⁷ Philip Mills and between them, Jane Fairchild (full and rather low bosom/pre-Raphaelite tendrils of beige hair), so beautiful, in fact, that 'it seemed a concession for her to have written anything at all.'¹⁸ In the university, Kitty comes to know more about the family background of Maurice and dreams of marrying him.

¹⁵ *Providence* by Anita Brookner (Frome & London: Butler & Tanner Ltd, 1985) 19.

¹⁶ *Providence* 41-42.

¹⁷ *Providence* 42-43.

¹⁸ *Providence* 43.

Maurice is perhaps the prime specimen of the men described by the novelist as ‘conservative Establishment creations’ because his impeccable social background includes a large country home in Gloucestershire, a titled mother and a comfortable private home. Once, when Kitty calls him home for dinner, he comes very late and they converse on ‘providence’ the novel’s complementary theme which is pitted against Kitty’s determinism. Kitty cannot bring herself to share his much-expressed belief in Providence and at the same time, Kitty remains blind to Maurice’s combination of bland sententiousness and utter insensitivity to her feelings. Kitty disagrees with him often but is too absorbed in her love for him to recognize either his shortcomings or her superior knowledge. She expresses:

His brilliance and ease, his seeming physical invulnerability, the elevated character of his decisions, the distances he covered, his power of choice and strength of resolve, cast him in the guise of the unfettered man, the mythic hero, the deliverer. For the woman whom Maurice would deliver would be saved forever from the fate of that grim daughter, whose bare white legs and dull shoes, designed perhaps for some antediluvian hike or ramble, continued to register in Kitty’s mind’s eye. Maurice’s choice would be spared the humiliations that lie in wait for the unclaimed woman. She would have a life of splendour, raising sons. Ah! thought Kitty with anguish, the white wedding, the flowers. How can it be me? How could it be me?¹⁹

Kitty’s case is entirely different as she is one among those ladies, who “never made arbitrary demands on their [men’s] time, never caused them to wait for her nor to

¹⁹ Providence 91.

see her home at inconvenient hours, never made them fetch and carry for her; she fed them and flattered herself that she was a good listener.”²⁰ Consequently, she remains only a listener and not a lover.

Kitty travels to France to join Maurice and to visit the cathedrals with Maurice. On her arrival in France, she has pined away for Maurice doing nothing but waiting for his call and experiences an improbable renewal of powers. But the arrival of Maurice on an architectural field trip is a profound anti-climax. His only contact with Kitty is on the day before he leaves France, when the couple visits the abbey church of Saint-Dennis and Maurice falls asleep in the train. On returning to Kitty’s hotel, Maurice does no more than take a bath, after which the would-be lovers consume apple chaussons and croissants filled with almond paste and she is happy just to feed him and let him eat for both of them. Suddenly, he tells her that he is going back to England in the morning and she feels disappointed. Before he leaves, the couples kiss – exchanging identical breaths and Kitty vows that she will never forget that particular taste as long as she lives. Still, visiting cathedrals that one day they have together, she lulls herself into believing that their separation is at fault, thinking, “But I am mad, she thought. It is simply that our earlier unity was broken. This is quite natural. People take some time to come together again.”²¹

On her return to England, however Kitty begins to work in earnest on her public lecture, and a new cycle of hope begins, particularly after Maurice’s promise of a celebratory dinner. Kitty wants to please Maurice by making her lecture on the Romantic Tradition to be excellent. The sense of anticipation is now stronger and Kitty appreciates the fine weather and dry sunny evenings, grows lyrical about the time of promise and

²⁰ Qtd in Shulamith Firestone, The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1970) 143.

²¹ Providence 121.

fulfillment, and begins, for the first time, to feel a sense of her own worth. Her desire for Maurice and a peaceful home increases, “I want more, she thought, blowing her nose resolutely...I want to be totally demanding, and very beautiful. I want to be a part of a real family. ...I want a future away from this place. I want Maurice.”²²

The account of the lecture itself is limited to the opening words, but with their inevitable application to Kitty herself, they provide one of the neatest ironic touches in the entire novel “I should like to imagine, if I may, some aspects of the Romantic Tradition, a tradition which still affects us today, although we may not recognize it. For although we think we know what a Romantic is, Romantics do not always know it themselves.”²³ This is a clear evidence to Kitty’s characteristic combination of intellectual insight and emotional ingenuousness.

Well launched in her career as a staff in the University, Kitty receives an invitation for a dinner party by her lover, Maurice Bishop. She travels to the party, thinking “Soon I shall be where I have always wanted to be,”²⁴ but going there she discovers, not only that he has not told her of his plans to move to Oxford, but also that he has got another lover, the sensual Jane Fairchild, and that while she was unaware of this relationship, it has been well known to other people and so she thinks to herself “Quite simply, I lacked the information.”²⁵

Finally, Kitty comes to a realization that the emancipated woman who makes lesser demands and has lesser expectations is “(at best) respected, but seldom loved.”²⁶

²² Providence 59-60.

²³ Providence 171.

²⁴ Providence 180.

²⁵ Providence 182.

²⁶ Shulamith Firestone, The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1970) 143.

Kitty is denied the love and happiness which she seeks through marriage but she is not ashamed of her failure. The predicament of Kitty can be best expressed in the words of Mahadevi Verma, the famous Indian writer, “Man wants blind devotion and mute acceptance from a woman. If the woman is the man’s equal in intellect, she can question about her rights anytime and on not getting a satisfactory reply can also revolt. So why will a man create a disturbance in his peaceful life by marrying such a woman.”²⁷

At the end of the novel, though Kitty does not succeed in joining the English society, she succeeds in finding her distinct identity. Kitty comes to realize that she could assert herself for reasons other than simply to please a man and learns to accept the reality and begins to view things in a clear light. Positively, Kitty looks straight at the future and knows that she can live, “a life of very great fullness and happiness, teaching, learning, taking notes, taking note; she saw herself calm, and pleasant, and controlled, and suitable.”²⁸ Kitty Maule, like all the Brooknerian heroines, does not want to adopt the way of life which is imbibed by those women who are self-seeking and possess an effortless grasp of how to please and charm men. So, these socially graceful but shallow and manipulative foils of the heroines win in the game of getting the hero and baffling the heroine.

The Austenian novels, which recommend moderation and reasonable self-control, reflect the morality of the pre-Victorian time, founded on reason in the name of social order. In the second half of the twentieth century, such reasonable behaviour is meaningless, because society is dominated by materialism, individual desire and free competition. This ironic version in poetic justice points to the change in moral rules

²⁷ Mahadevi Verma, *Shrankhala Ki Kariyan* (New Delhi: Radha Krishan Prakashan, 1997) 63.

²⁸ Providence 160.

upholding behaviour between the two centuries. In Brookner's twentieth-century text, the upper class men choose the frivolous sexy women than the serious reliable heroines which continues to be prevalent in twenty first century too.

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