

Solving The Maze Of Mothers In Jane Austen's Select Fiction

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Abstract:

At the advent of “Romantic Age” in the history of English literature Jane Austen stood up as a “Realist” among the novelists. She created a miniature world of her own in her novels critiquing the lives and norms of the gentry-centric society then. In my article I would evoke the ineffectual role of mothers in Jane Austen's select novels. After giving a close reading to her novels, I learnt that she caricatured such ridiculous and negligent mother figures in order to project her heroines as stronger and independent figures as compared to their living mothers. Only absent mothers are seen as good mothers. Most of the young ladies such as Emma, Elizabeth Bennet, Fanny Price and Anne Elliot sought to fight the troubles in their life, but definitely gave importance to the aspect of moral integrity in pursuing their goals in life. The aim of my article is to ascertain the never-ending importance of heroines of these “Classics”. Their sticking strongly to the ethics and morals cite an example for the readers present young generation too.

Keywords : Realist, irony, negligent, motherhood, moral integrity,

Jane Austen is figured as a “Realist” amid the period of sentimental novels; as from Richardson to Francis Burney in the eighteenth-century sometime around the herald of age of romantics in the history of English literature. In her novels the influence of mothers on the protagonists can be well seen as being prominent in urging for their unpleasant fate.

The most memorable maternal character to be remembered in Jane Austen's novels is comically ridiculous Mrs. Bennet of *Pride and Prejudice*. Her aspiration to marry all her daughters to eligible bachelors, earning rich income led her nearly to recklessness. Mr. Bennet right from the beginning liked to stay aloof from her. He was duped by her beauty at young age and married her, finding her to be extremely foolish and garrulous woman. The above quote expresses their relation : “Mrs. Bennet – “You take delight in vexing me. You have no compassion on my poor nerves.”

Mr. Bennet – “You mistake me, my dear. I have a high respect for your nerves. They are my old friends. I have heard you mention them with consideration these twenty years at least.”

It was Mrs. Bennet who was indignant with her daughter Elizabeth Bennet when she rejected clownish Mr. Collins's proposal. Her behaviour led her daughters to acknowledge troublesome and shameful situations. At Meryton ball Mrs. Bennet's despicable conduct led to the prejudice of Darcy against Bennet family thus isolating Elizabeth from him. As a mother

Mrs. Bennet practiced unequal behaviour towards her daughters. Her negligence as a mother led her younger daughter to move to Brighton quite many times who resultantly elopes with wicked Wickham venturing disgrace to her family. Jane Austen basically concocted such motherly figures who added to the distortion in relations and becoming reason for the moral and cultural deterioration of their children. The sensible daughters like Jane and Elizabeth Bennet grow and learn substantially through their trials and tribulations. Wherever mother is shown to be over caring and pampering, as in case of Lydia the aftermath is nearly disastrous. In fact Elizabeth acts as a mothering daughter who warns her father also to take step and control Lydia's shameful proceedings. Jane Austen actually caricatured the living style and class-centric late eighteenth-century society and through the tool of irony and symbolism tried to stress upon the rational approach in life, specially the youth.

In the novel *Mansfield Park*, yet other inadvertent mother Mrs. Bertram can be examined with the perspective of a faulty mentor. I quote the narrator, *Mansfield Park*: "To the education of her daughters Lady Bertram paid not the smallest attention. She had not time for such cares. She was a woman who spent her days in sitting, nicely dressed, on a sofa, doing some long piece of needlework, 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." (52) Mrs. Bertram does not pay any attention to the moral development of her daughters Maria and Julia. She was oblivious of their flirtations. Moreover, enterprising theatricals at Mansfield Park without her knowledge is highly delinquent on Mrs. Bertram's part. She confided her duties in her sister Mrs. Norris who was extremely lenient and blind in adoration towards her nieces. Jane Austen indeed wanted the young girls to learn through their mistakes and mature through experiences. Fanny Price' who can be observed as a calm, composed and a stable figure amid the worthless shadow of lazy Mrs. Bertram, scheming and partial Mrs. Norris and negligent mother Mrs. Price herself. In fact Fanny's association with Mrs. Bertram was a reason of solace and satisfaction to Mrs. Bertram when everybody from the house were out. Fanny Price is caricatured so by Austen as self-complacent, disciplined and ethical to the core. Jane Austen propounded the necessity of moral integrity through her fiction. Renowned modern critic praised Jane Austen in his famous book *The Great Tradition* for the quality of moral purpose in her novels. The strong characters like Fanny Price and Edmund Bertram are destined to comfort and lift others. They do not waver from inadequate motherly influence rather become the source of solace to their elders. Sir Bertram regretted for the absence of right kind of education to his daughters Maria and Julia who became the reason for shame and disgrace to their family after the episodes of flirtations and elopement. Fanny Price could be evaluated as a mothering daughter in the novel *Mansfield Park*, who served as a supporting substitute daughter to the Bertram couple.

Emma is a motherless daughter in Jane Austen's novel of the same name. Her mother died when she was small, to be taken care after by a governess Ms Taylor who later became Mrs. Weston. Emma's father was although an affectionate father but a valetudinarian. He was innocent but eccentric in his behaviour mostly. Emma's maid Miss Taylor actually considered herself to be low (in rank) in front of Emma. Jane Austen probably creates Emma to let her learn from the mistakes made in her life. She and her father were both affectionate towards each other, but Emma uses this affection to act over independently in her youth. She had a married sister happily settled, whose brother-in-law was a family friend and a regular visitor at Emma's place. Emma is self-willed and a vainglorious young lady, she exhibits her power and interest in match-making amid her known people. The plot movement of *Emma* later

reveals the faults and Emma's mistaken beliefs as practiced on characters like Harriet Smith and Mr. Elton. It is Mr. Knightley who informs and corrects Emma and states the importance of mother as a mentor in her life, which actually she is devoid of. I quote Mr. Knightley: "And ever since she was twelve, Emma has been mistress of the house and of you all. In her mother she lost the only person able to cope with her. She inherits her mother's talents, and must have been under subjection to her." (55)

Jane Austen in *Emma* certainly asserts the importance of valid and effectual motherly control figure over young children growing into adults. Too much of brooding over in imagination and being devoid of proper maternal assistance could lead one to face troubles as in the case of Emma.

In the novel *Sense and Sensibility* we acknowledge another loving but ineffectual mother figure Mrs. Dashwood. Although she acts as a support and positive force in her daughter's life, yet she lacks in the power of decision. She has been characterised as possessing much pain and sensibility after her husband's death and being neglected and duped by the junior Dashwood couple. She can be likened to her daughter Marianne Dashwood in the instances of unjust treatment, like Marianne after her break-up with Willoughby. Marianne is almost under the state of depression, then it is her elder sister Elinor who protects her like a mother figure. While Mrs. Dashwood could just add to the lament by being distressed herself, she acts like a sister to Marianne actually. I quote the narrator, from *Sense and Sensibility* here: "After Willoughby leaves and Marianne's heart is broken, Mrs. Dashwood would rather hope the best for them, but Elinor is more realistic. Mothers and daughters often fail to understand each other, no?" (235) Elinor could be seen as a strong figure who whether during the period of sustaining in the humble background or when she receives a blow after she heard of Edward Ferrars' engagement with Lucy Steele. Elinor kept herself calm and composed and fought every adverse situation faced by her family. It could be seen that Mrs. Dashwood is seen realising towards the end of the novel about her being of negligible help to Elinor when she needed her the most. Actually, Jane Austen in this case made the mother's character to realise and reform through the events led in the novel.

In the novel *Persuasion* the protagonist Anne Elliot is reported to have lost her mother at an early age. But the narrator asserts Lady Elliot, like her daughter, was a gentle, submissive woman. She "had been an excellent woman, sensible and amiable; whose judgment and conduct, if they might be pardoned the youthful infatuation which made her Lady Elliot, had never required indulgence afterwards" (4). And, she had the strength of character to moderate her husband's excesses – and probably those of her eldest daughter, as well. "While Lady Elliot lived, there had been method, moderation, and economy, which had just kept him within his income; but with her had died all such right-mindedness ..." (9). The above lines denote that daughters could be replica of their mothers as great modern feminist writer Virginia Woolf asserts in her work, *A Room of One's Own*: "We think back through our mothers if we are women." (132) Yes our mother definitely reflect in our personality.

Anne Elliot is a more mature heroine of Jane Austen's fiction. The novel starts with Anne's self awakening. She suffers from isolation in her own family as she is least liked by her father and sisters. Sir Walter Elliot suffers from self love and vanity adding to his aloofness from his moral responsibilities. Anne bears the wrong advice of her governess Ms. Russell of rejecting handsome Captain Wentworth. Although Anne Elliot is more perceptive than her mentor Lady Russell, but her true values let her to obey even the faulty decision of her elders.

To sum up, in Jane Austen's novels maze of mothers are present, creating commotion in the protagonists' life. Still for younger characters, ideals for successful maternal bonding do exist, although rare to find, but fulfilled through her heroine's strong ethics and emotional as well as rational maturity.

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