

Education and Cultural Capital as Criteria of Social Mobility: A Socio-Psychological Study in Victorian Literature

Dr Sujarani Mathew

Assistant Professor of English KE College Mannanam Kottayam, Kerala
katrinsuja@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The motif of transition in social class and structures of hierarchy through human relations are central to most of Jane Austen's fiction. Ranging from the universal favourite and 'lightest' of Austen's fiction, *Pride and Prejudice* and the 'lengthiest' of her oeuvre *Mansfield Park*, this theme is conspicuous in the depiction of 18th century 'genteel' England of Austen's pen. While the former traces the fortunes of two sisters of the upper middle class gaining foothold among the rich upper class, the latter is a solemn narrative of the protagonist of lower class shuttling between the luxury of *Mansfield Park* and the squalor of *Portsmouth*. It is the 'cultural capital' that their social and personal background confer them that accord them the change in social status and power.

Education, as well as the innate good principles of the protagonist in both the novels ensures the happy conclusion and the upward social mobility therein which forms the plot of both the novels. This paper will be an attempt to analyse the two novels in the light of the theory of 'cultural capital' developed by Pierre Bourdieu which explicates the lived experience of class and cultural positions warranted by the social hierarchies in question.

The concepts of 'habitus' and 'field' also feature as corollary to the fictional context of Austen's novels since her characters constantly climb and at times regress from the class structures to which they belong. This study seeks to analyse the fortunes of the central characters in the novel *Mansfield Park* which begins with the three Ward sisters marrying to upper, middle and lower classes of society and the novel *Pride and Prejudice* that ends with the Bennet sisters' shift from the lawns of *Longbourne* to the 'shades of *Pemberley*'.

Keywords

Cultural Capital, Economic Class, Habitus, Social Hierarchy, Field

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Introduction

The early 19th century England enshrined in the classic works of the pre Victorian writer Jane Austen depicts minutely the social structure of genteel England. Her two inches of ivory that carves out the life and aspirations of the middle/ upper classes of England also dovetails the expectations and intrigues in the female heart in order to achieve eligible social status and matrimonial prizes in the form of desirable suitors. The everyday life and humdrum of existence with its social life and hardships of the period is beautifully depicted in her novels--*Pride and Prejudice* and *Mansfield Park*. The theme of social mobility that is often cited in Austen's novels can be seen in the conclusion of the novels where Elizabeth Bennet and Fanny Price rise unmistakably up the social ladder through the institution of marriage. The two novels taken up for study are *Pride and Prejudice* -the lightest and most popular of Austen's novels and her lengthiest and most moralistic work-*Mansfield Park*. Jane Austen comments on *Pride and Prejudice* was that (2008 a) "it is so light...it needs shade". In her 1813 letter to her sister Cassandra about her next novel *Mansfield Park* she speaks of a (as cited in Ivanis) "complete change of subject and [that] it will be about ordination."

But the two novels depict protagonists of opposite nature with Elizabeth Bennet as a witty, intelligent and active lady and Fanny Price as a passive, unimaginative and quiet heroine. Yet, Jane Austen depicts both as women of meritorious character and discerning temperament. Their superior reason and principles finally earn the love and respect of gentleman of quality and they are ensconced in

good marriages based on true love. Jane Austen's Regency period is one in which class structure and hierarchy was more or less rigid and social mobility was extremely limited. Women being of secondary status in 19th century, could aspire to rise from their social circumstances only through marriage. The class hierarchy was closely monitored by those that belong to the upperclass and encroachment was strongly monitored. Yet Jane Austen's outlook seems to be that real merit in character deserve to be rewarded through progression in social status as seen in the case of the heroines in the novels (one from middle class and the other of lower class) under study.

Marriage is a relationship which could cause change in social status but it is not one in which corporeal goods are transacted in exchange like commodities. Here the form of subjectivity that collude to the material, corporeal and symbolic attributes are significant as in Husserl's concept of 'lifeworld'. My intention is to analyse the change in fortunes of the characters in the two novels in the light of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's concept of 'Cultural Capital'. Similar to Marx, Bourdieu too agree that capital is the basis of social life and accorded one position in society commensurate to it. Bourdieu extended Marx's idea of capital beyond the economic and into the more symbolic realm of culture. Bourdieu's (1986) concept of cultural capital refers to the collection of symbolic elements such as skills, taste, posture, clothing, mannerism, material belongings, credentials etc that one acquired through being part of a particular group(246). This form of cultural capital according to Bordieu also could be a source of social inequality. Bourdieu categorised cultural capital into three forms—embodied, objectified and institutionalized. In the

context of the 19th century, while one's manners form the embodied form and one's art collection the objectified form of cultural capital, the credentials that one has are examples of institutionalized capital. Bourdieu's related concepts of habitus and field deserves mention here. Habitus is the deeply ingrained skills, dispositions and attitude that allow one to successfully navigate in the typical social environments. This can be exemplified in the upper class society exhibiting their taste for 'high art'. This mode of habitus is so deeply ingrained that it is often mistaken as natural, yet it is actually culturally developed. Habitus is also related to the term field which refers to the fields of practice in the social world like education, religion, art etc. There exists laws and knowledge within each field and its practices and people struggle for position and stake claims to win within a particular field.

Bourdieu's theory of Cultural Capital followed as well as the concepts of habitus and field are typical of the social structure explicated in Jane Austen's Regency England. The protagonist of the novel invest in their cultural capital and navigate in the field of marriage market with the aid of the habitus in them as well as with the change in their habitus through education and finally reaches the happy conclusion in their state of affairs.

The context or field of all Austen's novels is the objective of seeking suitable alliances as Austen(2008) ironically summarises in the opening sentence of *Pride and Prejudice*: "It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife (1). In more cynical terms in her next novel, *Mansfield Park*, Austen says through Mary Crawford's words: "Speaking from my own observation, it is a manoeuvring business.... A large income is the best recipe for happiness I ever heard of" (2008 b. p.167). Regency period often favoured marriages of convenience which were contracts ensuring financial security and in some cases 'love' acted as an additional bonus.

This is evidenced in the stupid Mr Collins's offer of marriage being accepted by the sensible friend of Elizabeth Bennet, Charlotte Lucas. Her explanation to Elizabeth typifies the case "I am not romantic you know, I never was - I ask only a comfortable home and considering Mr Collins's character, connections and situation in life, I am convinced that my chance of happiness with him is as fair as most people can boast of on entering the marriage state"(123) the superior sense and lack of unnecessary sensibilities in Charlotte which had delineated her cultural capital enable her to acquire a suitable husband who is wealthy enough, despite her lack of beauty. It is indeed because of this general world view that Fanny Price is castigated by Sir Bertram for rejecting the proposal of Henry Crawford of London connections. To marry for love alone was not considered the best option, since often this led to lowering in social rank as is seen in the background information of the protagonist's parents in the two novels. In *Pride and Prejudice* Mr Bennet is depicted as a man of sense belonging to the upper class whereas Mrs Bennet of meagre good sense is from the lower strata of society which greatly debilitate the chances of her daughters in the marriage market. Similarly, the beginning of *Mansfield Park* picturises the three Ward sisters getting married into three different social classes. Maria Ward married Sir Thomas

Bertram which represent her as upper class, Norris married to the Anglican Church secretary made her middle class and the last, Price married to the Sailor make her working class (21). Hence the heroine initially of the working class is depicted as taken into Mansfield Park for education and upbringing by the humanitarian concerns of her sisters.

Though Charlotte Lucas and Julia Bertram marry Mr Collins and Mr Yates respectively in *Pride and Prejudice* and *Mansfield Park* Austen is adamant in portraying her heroines marrying both into wealth as well as love. It is the Age of manners and morals where the manner in which they conducted themselves, their refinement in address and superiority of character ranked then in social status. Jane Austen's novels are a "fascinating repository of the manners of polite society. Manners were increasingly a set of attributes that could be learnt-and were learned- by the lower classes creating tension with the upper classes...who wish to maintain class distinctions"(Kozziar, 2015,p.39). The upper classes were undeniably superior in rank and position in society. As Keymer (2009) says "Rank placed primary emphasis on lineage, implying that social status was more or less inalienably conferred by birth and descent"(387). The snobbishness of the upper classes against the temerity of the supposed social inferiors trying to climb the social ladder can be seen in the words of Lady Catherine de Borough. She dissuades Elizabeth of middle class gentry from marrying Darcy of aristocratic lineage: "do you not consider that any connection with you must disgrace him in the eyes of everybody?... Heaven and Earth, are the shades of Pemberley to be thus polluted?" (*Pride*346) and Mrs Norris trying "to make her [Fanny] remember that she is not a Miss Bertram... they cannot be equals- their rank, fortune, rights and expectations will always be different(*Mansfield*73).

It was their rationality and good sense which is part of their embodied cultural capital that enables the heroines of the two novels to rise in social status in the end. Again, education to which they are exposed to (in Elizabeth's case-being "encouraged to read") give them refined sensibilities and Elizabeth calls herself an equal to Darcy in that "he is a gentleman; I am a gentleman's daughter; so far we are equal"(344). Being part of the landed gentry and inheriting the cultural wealth bequeathed by the Bennet family made Elizabeth Bennet's entry into the aristocracy easier. The possession of cultural goods according to Bourdieu (1986) is "possible only for those who hold the code making it possible to decipher them or in other words that the appropriation of symbolic good presupposes the possession of instruments of appropriation(251).

Elizabeth Bennet in Bourdieu's terms is an "individual previously granted a certain familiarity with the world of high culture by their family upbringing"(251) which accords her a cultural competence in having a relationship with the dominant culture. The objectified cultural capital comprising of the grounds of Pemberley and his art collection which are appreciated by Elizabeth in her visit to Darcy's estate towards the climax of the novel is a case in point. Elizabeth Bennet is the apt partner for Darcy as her habitus induces her to defy the class monopoly of Lady Catherine de Borough in stringent terms. Habitus encodes one's cultural outlook, values and mode of behaviour in a particular social context --something that one physically and mentally embody. The rational comments that she makes to the upper

class lady can be read as an outcome of her habitus. It also enables her to attract the institutionalized cultural capital of Darcy's lineage in the form of marriage vows.

The negative characters Austen depicts, reveal the lack of cultural capital such as lack of refinement in manners and education which could debilitate the prospects of the people of the period. The embodied state of cultural capital which could also be learnt -as seen in the manner of address acquired by the villain of the piece in *Pride and Prejudice*, Wickham- initially begets the attention of Elizabeth Bennet. But the lack of true morals that he exhibits deflates her opinion of him and Austen's poetic justice finally rewards him with the flighty Lydia Bennet who is the least refined with education among the Bennet sisters (who seems to take after her mother in her manners). At the same time Darcy, though of upper class and possessing of good morals, is initially depicted as being arrogant and proud thereby losing the respect of people due to his lack of good manners. As he is chastened by the reprimand of Elizabeth Bennet, he learns to amend his manners. Elizabeth notices this striking change in him "a new humility in the place of pride gentleness in the place of rudeness.... thus demonstrating that learning manners is possible" comments Koziar (2015,p.42) establishing that the embodied state of cultural capital can be learned though not easily transmitted as money and objectified capital. Though initially he had complained of "the inferiority of her connections"(165) Darcy changes his code of conduct (an embodied cultural capital) and shares his title(an institutionalized capital)with Elizabeth Bennet in the end.

Austen's depiction of society as an open marriage market is blatantly depicted in the novel *Mansfield Park*. Hair attitude that both affection and wealth are jointly needed for the success of a marital relationship is also evident in the beginning of the novel: Among the three sisters, Maria Ward makes a successful marriage in securing a Baronet in love and Mrs Norris the corporal character is pictured as a scheming an insatiable hanger-on upon her younger sister Maria. And the youngest who married for love finds herself in penury. Her daughter Fanny given shelter and education in *Mansfield Park* finds a friend only in her cousin in Edmund whom she grows to love. The plot thickens with the arrival of the modern set of London values being imported into *Mansfield* in the form of the Crawford siblings-- Henry and Mary. Both Bertram sisters Maria and Julia fall for Henry despite Maria being engaged to the wealthy Mr Rushworth. Henry makes a beeline for Fanny and Edmund pines for Mary, unaware of her materialistic nature. The negative influence of the Crawfords upon the Bertrams comes to open when they decide to stage a suggestive play *Lovers Vows* during the long absence of Sir Bertram from the house.

Edmund though principled, finally agrees to join in the play, in order to secure the good opinion of Mary Crawford. Fanny Price is morally upright enough to keep away from the staging of the repressed desires of the Young Bertram and Crawford company. The embodied attitudes and principles act as cultural capital in Fanny Price and is added on by the education she received in the household of the upper class. Her habitus had evolved due to her change from the lower class household to the upper strata and it enables her to understand the interactions and events that take place

between all the characters that populate *Mansfield Park*. Her innate reasoning also helps her to understand the lack of emotional empathy between Henry Crawford and herself leading her to reject his suit. Sir Bertram gets angry with Fanny for such wanton rejection of good fortune and sends her to her own house in Portsmouth in order to bring home to her the gravity of her mistake. The fact that Fanny Price stands firm in her decision and that she objects to familial interference in personal decisions, similar to Elizabeth Bennet speaks of both heroines as an embodiment of independent outlook -a similarity in habitus-that enable them to be appropriate addition to upper class refinement of the Regency period. Here we find that cultural capital including education being instrumental in reproducing the social order.

At the same time education that focuses on accomplishments alone for a female, does not provide for future happiness as seen in the case of Maria Rushworth who elopes with Henry Crawford. Sir Thomas Bertram finally realises the extent of his error when he muses on the deficiencies of their education in the matter of proper conduct and good manners. Here the novel can be called "a study in manners of society [where] Fanny has been properly taught and she knows what propriety is"(Wiltshire,1997,p.59). Edmund too realises like Sir Bertram, the good qualities of Fanny Price- "Fanny was indeed the daughter that he wanted"(382). Edmund understands the true nature of Mary Crawford and finds in Fanny his confidante and later life partner. Education one of the prime embodied capital that Bourdieu cites is often quoted as an underlying theme of Austen's novels. Education for females meant in Austen's period "proper conduct and truly good manners than any range of skills or information"(as cited in Koziar,2015,p.39). The importance of morality, disposition and propriety form the crux of Austen's novels. According to the critic Tanner (1986) in *Austen's England*, "property was necessary but not sufficient basis for a stable and orderly society. Decorum, morality and good manners -- in a word 'propriety' were equally indispensable. They had to be authentically embodied and enacted if that society was to survive" (79).

The education in manners and code of conduct that Fanny Price receives in *Mansfield Park* rescue her from the uncouth surroundings of Portsmouth and elevates her from being the "lowest and last" in the family acting almost as a servant 'carrying messages and fetching what they wanted' to being in the end 'so welcome and useful to all' gaining Edmund Bertram's love and admiration of everyone at *Mansfield*. Morally upright, shy and principled, yet discerning Fanny Price is rewarded by Austen with marriage to her love and being elevated to high social rank as the mistress of *Mansfield Parsonage* which is the great leap from Portsmouth alleys. Here again, the embodied cultural capital of Fanny Price leads to her acquiring the objectified and institutionalised capital of Bertram family. Thus in *Mansfield Park* the most ideological of Jane Austen's novels, the author applies herself to a rigorous 'ordering' of the social vices rampant in society and finally brings on Poetic Justice by Maria's scandalous end to marriage, Mrs Norris' banishment from *Mansfield Park* and Fanny's marriage to Edmund. Their marriage characterizes domestic

bliss- in Austen's words based on "true merit and true love and no want of fortune or friends (383).

The social structure in Regency England itself is a field wherein relationships are constantly made and frayed, where females and their well-wishers constantly try for an elevation in fortune. In the vast field of Regency marriage-market the stakes were high; matrimonial prices were lured and caught; fortunes were made and lost --as seen in the two novels *Pride and Prejudice* as well as *Mansfield Park*. Austen wrote in an age where wealth and lineage were very important. Yet she instils a message on the significance of morals and manners in order to secure a happy life. While social drama plays itself out, sociological truth of the age too can be pinned down--the habituated cultural subjectivities act on social reproduction of class structures and the embodied cultural capital like education allowed for social mobility between hierarchies within the social system.

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