

## The Home and the World in *Mansfield Park* and *Ghare Baire*.

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### Abstract

Although widely separated by time, language, country and culture, Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* (1815) and Rabindranath Tagore's *The Home and the World* (1916) share some enduring themes. The concepts of home, or a quiet secluded life in the country, and world, or the busy social life of the city and town, are set into opposition in *Mansfield Park* more markedly than any of Austen's other novels. Without wishing to strain the comparison, one could conceive of Tagore's 'eternal triangle' of Nikhil, Bimala and Sandip as having some equivalence to the triangle in *Mansfield Park* of Fanny, Edmund and Mary Crawford. Nikhil, like Fanny, adheres to a well-defined internal ethical compass, while Sandip and Mary share an amoral, modern approach to the world. The characters of Bimala and Edmund are drawn away from Nikhil and Fanny respectively by the (largely sexual) temptations of the more modern view.

There are, of course, huge problems with schema of this sort, and my interest lies as much with the differences between the novels as the similarities. However, taking this basic scheme as the starting point, I wish to examine how the forms in which the two authors were writing – Austen in comedy, Tagore in tragedy – are reflected in the construction of the respective narratives, and how the two writers use point of view either to reinforce or to undercut the conventions of these forms.

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Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* and Rabindranath Tagore's *The Home and the World*<sup>1</sup> are both serious, thoughtful novels on enduring human themes, and are at the same time works very much of their own respective times and settings. At the heart of each of these novels, both written within the realist tradition, is a contrast, which becomes a conflict, between the domestic and the worldly or political spheres – the inner and the outer. And this conflict is played out in the sexual dynamics of the principal characters.

It is difficult to establish whether Tagore would have read Austen's novels. Patrick Colm Hogan has written about Tagore's 'corrective revision' of *Mansfield Park* in *Gora*, as well as other intertextual relationships between Austen and Tagore.<sup>2</sup> However, I have not been able to find a definite causal link, and it is not my intention to assert a direct influence. My interest is in seeing how two authors from different countries and periods, using different formal structures and techniques, writing in different languages and with different intentions, deal with a dramatic situation which in its basic essence is similar.

According to Ulka Anjaria, *The Home and the World* is

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<sup>1</sup> As I cannot read *Ghare Baire* in its original language, I am relying in this paper on the translation by Surendranath Tagore, and will refer to the novel by the translated title of *The Home and the World*.

<sup>2</sup> Patrick Colm Hogan, 'Gora, Jane Austen and the Slaves of Indigo', *Rabindranath Tagore: Universality and Tradition* ed. Patrick Colm Hogan and Lalita Pandit (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2003) 178.

constituted by persistent questions around what realism is, how far it can be taken before it becomes something else and negates its own value, and its political and ethical costs. It does not offer a clear answer to these questions; its mode of representation is built precisely on the impossibility of resolution.<sup>3</sup>

I would like to explore how far this statement also applies to *Mansfield Park*. The fact that there is a resolution of the most conventional kind – a marriage – at the end of Austen’s novel, while Tagore’s novel closes with the question of whether Nikhil will die left uncertain, perhaps contradicts this. However, the resolution of *Mansfield Park* is undercut with such irony that its validity is called into question, and, as in Shakespeare’s darker comedies, the comedic formula is grafted onto far more troubling narrative material. As John Wiltshire writes, ‘this is not a story of ambition fulfilled, nor of the country house culture renewed, but [...] of healing imagined.’<sup>4</sup> And even that imagined healing is only partial.

Anjaria continues, still talking about *The Home and the World*: ‘The novel simultaneously makes use of the realist mode and draws attention to its limits, and in doing so actively represents realism as a site of both promise and disillusion.’<sup>5</sup> I have no reservations about saying that this is also true of *Mansfield Park*. We need to look no further than the beginning of the final chapter:

Let other pens dwell on guilt and misery. I quit such odious subjects as soon as I can, impatient to restore every body, not greatly in fault themselves, to tolerable comfort and to have done with all the rest.<sup>6</sup>

This is one of many such narratorial statements throughout *Mansfield Park* that draw attention to the fictive nature of the work, and the author’s sophisticated awareness of the limits of the fictional enterprise, with which she is nevertheless seriously engaged. Margaret Doody writes of Austen,

Assumptions about realism have often got in readers’ way, occluding Austen’s treatment of angles of vision and the role of assumptions and biases and habits in creating what passes for ‘reality’. [...] Craving the authoritative narrator, we think we are walking on a solid surface, but we tread unsteadily on crumbling shale or sliding cliff, as in the disconcerting geology of *Persuasion*. Austen reassures us at one level, for she is attentive to the world outside the self. Yet she profoundly questions the procedures and habits by which characters and readers compose individual and social reality. Her attentiveness and questioning are combined, not separable.<sup>7</sup>

There is nothing much more apt to mislead human beings about the nature of reality and to engender beliefs about the conflict between the inner and the outer realms – the home and the

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<sup>3</sup>Ulka Anjaria, *Realism in the Twentieth-Century Indian Novel: Colonial Difference and Literary Form* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2102) 16.

<sup>4</sup>John Wiltshire, *The Hidden Jane Austen* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014) 121.

<sup>5</sup>Anjaria 16.

<sup>6</sup>Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park* ed. R.W. Chapman, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1934) 461. Further references to this work will be included in parentheses in the text preceded by ‘MP’.

<sup>7</sup>Margaret Doody, *Jane Austen’s Names: Riddles, Persons, Places* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2015) 387.

world – than sexual love and jealousy. This is not to deny the political aspect of either of these books. However, as Supriya Chaudhuri proposes,

In its treatment of love, *The Home and the World* contributes as much to a history of the emotions as to the political history with which it is more usually associated. [...] [T]he novel undoubtedly places a scandal at the heart of both politics and domestic life.<sup>8</sup>

That ‘scandal’ in Tagore’s novel is a private matter, kept within the limits of the household, although its consequences reach beyond the home into the world. In *Mansfield Park*, the scandal is public with consequences (not exclusively negative) that are felt deeply in the domestic sphere. The political aspect is not absent, but it is not explicit as in *The Home and the World*.

While it might perhaps seem more logical to ‘map’ the love triangle plot of Tagore’s novel onto the choice between Henry Crawford and Edmund Bertram as potential husbands for Fanny Price, I believe that the emotional logic of *The Home and the World* corresponds in many more telling ways with another triangle in *Mansfield Park*. It is true that Fanny and Bimala are both brought from their homes at an early age to live in a wealthy household, one as a poor cousin, the other as a ‘girl-wife’, and they both come to love the older mentor figure, whether cousin or husband, whom they meet there. And Henry Crawford does in some ways seem a similarly amoral and opportunistic figure to Sandip: they share cavalier attitudes to the female sex, for example. But Henry, for all his attractions for her cousins Maria and Julia, has virtually no appeal for Fanny, who is constant in her love for Edmund. I propose, then, that it makes more sense to see Fanny as representing ‘home’ – in her steady, enduring love of Edmund, in parallel with Nikhil’s love of Bimala.

It may seem rather a stretch to equate Bimala, the wife who has been in purdah and is encouraged by her husband to emerge into the world, with Edmund, the son of Sir Thomas Bertram, a young man who has studied at Oxford. However, given the differences in the societies and situations of these novels, I believe that parallels can be drawn. Sandip is attractive to Bimala partly because he is of the world rather than the home; Edmund is drawn to Mary Crawford, the bright, clever, amoral woman of the world, partly because she inhabits a social sphere with which he is unfamiliar.

The parallels I am suggesting are of course only suggestive in a very broad sense. Many of the particulars of these two triads of characters do not match. Not least, of course, is the significant difference inherent in the sex of each character being opposite to that of their proposed counterpart. This is especially true of the mentor-like relationship that Nikhil and Edmund have with Bimala and Fanny respectively, which is also partly a function of their differences in age: Edmund is six years Fanny’s senior, and although it is never stated, it is implied that Bimala is somewhat younger than Nikhil. The custom of the household seems to be for brides to be married young, and at one point Bimala is referred to as ‘a slip of a girl-wife’ (21) by her older sister-in-law. Once Edmund is bewitched by Mary, the mentoring

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<sup>8</sup> Supriya Chaudhuri, ‘Dangerous Liaisons: Desire and Limit in *The Home and the World*,’ *Thinking on Thresholds* ed. Subha Mukherji (Anthem Press, 2011) 87-99; 91.

aspect of his relationship with Fanny falls away. She can even be seen trying to give Edmund advice, although to little avail.

At one point in *Mansfield Park*, the narrator writes of Fanny, who is beset by jealousy she believes is illicit and must be kept hidden, ‘Having regulated her thoughts and comforted her feelings by this happy mixture of reason and weakness, she was able, in due time, to go down and resume her usual employments [...] without any apparent want of spirits’ (MP 265). What makes this regulation and comfort necessary is that Fanny has just heard herself described by Edmund as one of ‘the two dearest objects I have on earth’: confirmation of ‘what she had long perceived’; that Mary Crawford was the other. ‘It was a stab; – for it told of his own convictions and views. They were decided. He would marry Miss Crawford’ (MP 264). It will take ‘all [her] heroism of principle’ to ‘be rational, and to deserve the right of judging of Miss Crawford’s character and the privilege of true solicitude for him by a sound intellect and an honest heart’ (MP 265). She believes, with justification, that she is condemned to a life of concealing her inner self not only from the world at large, but even from her closest, if not sole, friend. Nevertheless, she finds after all that nothing is ‘decided’: her ‘rationality’, though strategic at this stage, is not borne out by the plot’s outcome. Fanny’s realism has been learned from an early age through bitter experience and reinforced by the way that her guardians Sir Thomas and Mrs Norris have treated her in the years she has spent at Mansfield Park; in other words, by everything that happens in the novel until the very end, when the narrator/novelist dispenses rewards and punishments in a brief, dazzling and implausible conclusion.

Fanny is on one level merely an eighteen-year-old girl in love with her cousin. But there are many ways in which her life, like that of Bimala, is constrained by established patterns of power in her society. She is a poor cousin, removed from her family home as a young girl and brought to live with her relatives, from a mixture of motives, some of which are benevolent, others not. While Bimala’s transportation to the house of Nikhilesh as a child bride is a function of her sex, Fanny’s fate is more related to her class than her sex: a nephew would have been equally welcome at Mansfield Park. In some ways, it hardly seems too strong to say that the critique of slavery which some critics believe is absent from *Mansfield Park*<sup>9</sup> is embodied in Fanny, the child brought from a poor environment to fulfill a subservient role in a house of power and privilege, who has limited rights over her own person, who internalises her inferiority and who is punished when she claims the right to her own agency. Edward Said writes that Fanny is, in a sense, ‘a kind of indentured servant or, to put the case in extreme terms, [...] a kind of transported commodity,’ but that once she has endured her servitude, she ‘has the promise of future wealth.’ He also describes Sir Thomas as ‘her mentor, the man whose estate she inherits.’<sup>10</sup> None of this can be literal. The promise Said refers to is presumably to be understood as implicit in Austen’s novelistic vision. Fanny is not Sir Thomas’s heir in any substantial sense: her cousin Tom will inherit the estate. Sir Thomas is hardly her mentor: it is Edmund who fulfils that role. She finally prevails only by the most

<sup>9</sup> See for example Hogan, 178.

<sup>10</sup> Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage, 1994) 106.

determined insistence on her right of refusal, rather than rights to any more positive benefits. The positive benefit that she desires – marriage to Edmund – could be seen as the default ending to the comedy genre, rather than something Fanny actively demands or earns. Said, however, is quite aware of the need to ‘read novels attentively’ to ‘get a far more discriminating and subtle view than the baldly “global” and imperial vision I have described thus far.’<sup>11</sup> Likewise, I do not want to over-emphasise the slave analogy, and I agree with Wiltshire’s caution: ‘Fanny Price is not a slave, [...] nor is she a displaced person, refugee or asylum seeker.’<sup>12</sup> However, it is striking that the word ‘slave’ appears twice in *Mansfield Park*, once literally and once figuratively.

On the first occasion the word is used, Sir Thomas has returned from Antigua and drawn the Mansfield Park household back towards its more customary inwardness, banishing the Crawfords and other outsiders and putting an end to the home theatricals which had aroused such heightened emotions. Only Fanny thinks this is an improvement. She tells Edmund, ‘The evenings do not appear long to me. I love to hear my uncle talk of the West Indies. [...] Did not you hear me ask him about the slave trade last night?’ (MP 197-8). But she could not pursue the subject, despite her wish to do so: ‘There was such a dead silence! And while my cousins were sitting by without speaking a word, or seeming at all interested in the subject, I did not like – I thought it would appear as if I wanted to set myself off at their expense’ (MP 198). When Fanny’s subjection within the household extends to her being silenced when bringing up the question of slavery, it seems to me difficult to sustain Hogan’s argument that Austen is engaged in making Sir Thomas’s implication in imperial project ‘“natural”, unquestionable, obvious, and normal as our ordinary environment and thus, in practice, [...] little open to questioning and reconsideration.’<sup>13</sup> Said is of the opinion that the ‘dead silence’ suggests ‘that one world could not be connected with the other since there simply is no common language for both.’<sup>14</sup> My reading, however, is that this shows rather that there is no common language between her and her cousins Maria and Julia. Fanny, tethered as she is to her home in Mansfield Park, is able to expand her view to encompass the broader world in which slaves labour on her uncle’s Antigua plantations, while her cousins, caught up in the ‘worldly’ excitements of the theatricals, and contracting advantageous marriages, have a more limited view.

The second time that slavery is mentioned it is used figuratively, and negatively, of Mary Crawford, in implicit but direct contrast with Fanny. Fanny, having for once exercised her right of refusal and repelled Henry Crawford’s proposal, is desperately though passively hoping to escape a private conversation with his sister Mary by sitting with her aunt, Lady Bertram. However,

Miss Crawford was not the slave of opportunity. She was determined to see Fanny alone, and therefore said to her tolerably soon, in a low voice, ‘I must speak to you for a

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<sup>11</sup> Said, 90-1.

<sup>12</sup>Wiltshire 122.

<sup>13</sup>Hogan 178.

<sup>14</sup> Said 115.

few minutes somewhere;’ words that Fanny felt all over her, in all her pulses, and all her nerves. Denial was impossible. Her habits of ready submission, on the contrary, made her almost instantly rise and lead the way out of the room. She did it with wretched feelings, but it was inevitable. (MP 357)

Mary is *not* a slave – she dominates Fanny’s physical behaviour entirely in this scene. Having concentrated all her resources of opposition on her refusal to marry Henry, Fanny is once more subject to the desires and schemes of others and, although she has recently asserted her right to refuse, she feels that she has no choice but to suppress her inner wish to avoid Mary and behave in accordance with the meek outward face she has cultivated. Fanny, unlike Mary, is constrained not just by opportunity but by her situation in the household, as John Wiltshire points out:

Her apparent passivity is a coping strategy. [...] But when the narrative does enter her consciousness [...] the reader is presented with a selfhood arduously struggling to attain calm and integrity against repeated assaults and incursions. The contrasting modes of her presentation work together, then, to dramatise the consequences of her displacement. By temperament and training self-effacing, she does rarely assert herself: but that – in contrast to her intense inner life – is the point.<sup>15</sup>

The narrator makes a point of showing how Fanny must exercise explicit and sometimes ingenious control over her often turbulent inner self in order to compose her desired exterior: calm, dutiful, helpful, unobtrusive. *Mansfield Park* is, as I have said above, in its most basic form a comedy, while *The Home and the World* is a tragedy. I maintain that this is a matter of emphasis and plot line rather than emotional tenor. Austen always wrote in the comic form, but her novels sometimes come close to tragedy in the same way as Shakespeare’s darker comedies do, with the ‘happy ending’ grafted, with conscious irony, onto grimmer, more realistic material. There are, for example, intimations of tragic or at least thwarted lives among the secondary characters in *Mansfield Park* – Maria Bertram’s disgrace, for example, and even the doomed though genuine love between Edmund and Mary.

The plot of *Mansfield Park* is driven by the erotic urges and jealousies of several characters. It is a long and complex novel. *The Home and the World* is shorter and more concentrated on the three main characters. The narrative is related alternately through the first-person points of view of these three main characters: Bimala, her husband Nikhil, and his friend, the revolutionary Sandip. In *Mansfield Park*, on the other hand, the narrative is all in the third person but often focalised through various characters, Fanny most of all. This means that it is harder to ‘read the minds’ of other characters than in *The Home and the World*, where we have access to the three characters’ thoughts as the action progresses. In *Mansfield Park* we have a narrator guiding our interpretation of events to some extent, though the multiplicity of critical readings of the novel shows that the apparent authority of the authorial voice is more ambiguous than it seems. Austen’s very practice of slipping in and out of the various characters’ points of view, while it presents a ‘realistic’ picture of their thoughts and feelings and encourages the reader to suspend disbelief, at the same time

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<sup>15</sup>Wiltshire 101-102.

presents a practical impossibility and thus emphasises the fictional nature of the narrative, created by a guiding hand of an author who can describe the main character as ‘My Fanny’. Tagore’s fairly lightly-sketched and perhaps deliberately implausible framing of the parts of narrative as diary entries does little to enhance the realism. On the few occasions when Nikhil and Sandip mention that they are writing their accounts of events, it is a token gesture towards a realist convention which has the opposite effect of drawing attention to the narrative as a fiction.

Said notes Austen’s ‘curious alternation of outside and inside’<sup>16</sup> in a passage towards the end of the novel where Sir Thomas has become aware of ‘some thing [...] wanting *within*’ his daughters’ moral education (MP 463). He points out that Fanny has come from ‘without’ Mansfield Park and provides what is needed to supply the deficiency. This is not the only place where Austen talks of the inner and the outer. In one prominent example, Edmund, early in the novel, is asked by Miss Crawford whether Fanny is ‘out’ or not, referring to the custom of formally presenting young ladies into society. Before they are ‘out’, young women are supposed to act modestly and not to attend social events outside the family circle – not entirely unlike being in *purdah*. Edmund replies, but ‘will not undertake to answer the question. My cousin is grown up. She has the age and sense of a woman, but the outs and not outs are beyond me’ (MP 49). Closing down a frivolous discussion between Mary and his elder brother Tom about awkward situations caused by this kind of ambiguity, he bluntly rejects their notion that properly regulated behaviour is dependent on such social conventions:

such girls are ill brought up. [...] They are always acting upon motives of vanity – and there is no more real modesty in their behaviour *before* they appear in public than afterwards. (MP 50)

Bimala similarly critiques the conventions of her society as they affect her relations with her husband Nikhil:

The element of devotion in woman’s love is not like a hackneyed passion quoted from a romantic poem to be piously written down in round hand in a schoolgirl’s copy-book.

But my husband would not give me any opportunity for worship. That was his greatness. They are cowards who claim absolute devotion from their wives as their right; that is a humiliation for both.

[...] My husband used to say, that man and wife are equal in love because of their equal claim on each other. I never argued the point with him, but my heart said that devotion never stands in the way of true equality; it only raises the level of the ground of the meeting. Therefore the joy of the higher equality remains permanent; it never slides down to the vulgar level of triviality.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Said 109.

<sup>17</sup>Rabindranath Tagore, *The Home and the World* trans. Surendranath Tagore (London: Penguin, 1985) 19-20. Further references to this work will be included in parentheses in the text preceded by ‘HW’.

Edmund and Bimala, at this early stage in the story, both look beyond ‘outer’ social conventions to the genuine values they see in Fanny and Nikhil – ‘the age and sense of a woman’ in Fanny’s case, and in Nikhil’s case the respect he accords Bimala as his equal, refusing to accept her worship in the ‘cowardly’ way of other husbands. Nevertheless, despite Bimala’s admiration for her husband’s wish for her to love him in the modern way, she ‘is never able to make her self coincide with her self-image, which is, we realise, in each case a projection on to her of *male* desire’, as Chaudhuri writes.<sup>18</sup>

There is, however, a significant difference in rhetorical position between these two passages. Bimala appears to be writing from a future time:

It comes back to me today how, in the days of our happiness, the fires of envy sprung up all around us. [...] But providence does not allow a run of luck to last forever, unless its debt of honour be fully paid, day by day, through many a long day, and thus made secure. [...] Alas for the boons that slip through unworthy hands! (HW 21)

On a first reading, we can sense the tragic overtones, without yet knowing the details. Reading the novel for a second time, we can better understand the regret with which she is living. Although the first-person accounts of three main characters in *The Home and the World* are given in roughly chronological, albeit overlapping, order, they are not all written from a time beyond the novel as the earlier part of Bimala’s account is. The characters in *Mansfield Park*, however, have no retrospective view beyond the novel’s close. The narrative is written entirely in the third person, although it is often focalised through one of the characters, and most often through Fanny. It is only during these instances of free indirect style, in dialogue, or in letters, that we have their first-person, ‘inner’ views.

Both Bimala and Edmund at first criticise those whom they later come to love. Bimala distrusts Sandip: ‘what annoyed me most was the way that Sandip Babu used to fleece him on the pretext of *Swadeshi* work’ (HW 27). But that was before she had seen him in person:

I had seen Sandip Babu’s photograph before. There was something in his features which I did not quite like. [...] The light in his eyes somehow did not shine true. That was why I did not like it when my husband unquestioningly gave in to all his demands. [...] Any number of such reflections come back to me today, but let them be.

When, however, Sandip Babu began to speak that afternoon, and the hearts of the crowd swayed and surged to his words, as though they would break all bounds, I saw him wonderfully transformed. [...]

I was utterly unconscious of myself. [...]

I returned home that evening radiant with a new pride and joy. The storm within me had shifted my whole being from one centre to another. (HW 32)

Similarly, at first there is something about Mary that Edmund thinks is ‘not quite right’ (MP 63). Edmund can see that Mary does not show proper respect for the uncle with whom she had been living since her mother died when she was a child: Edmund discusses this with Fanny, as is his habit. She is more inclined to accuse Mary of ingratitude, while Edmund

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<sup>18</sup> Chaudhuri 94.



prefers to call it impropriety, and excuse her of the graver charge. However, he is satisfied that Fanny agrees with him: 'I am glad you saw it all as I did', he says (MP 64). It is not long, though, before

there began to be some danger of dissimilarity, for he was in a line of admiration of Miss Crawford, which might lead him where Fanny could not follow. [...] The harp arrived, and rather added to her beauty, wit, and good humour, for she played with the greatest obligingness, with an expression and taste which were peculiarly becoming. [...] Without studying the business [...] or knowing what he was about, Edmund was beginning at the end of a week of such intercourse, to be a good deal in love. (MP 64-5)

There is a parallel scene where Fanny is drawn to Henry despite herself, when he is reading Shakespeare. This wonderful scene, however, just shows the strength of Fanny's resistance: although she is attracted temporarily, she is not tempted. As soon as he stops reading, 'the charm was broken' and 'she was shrinking again into herself' (MP 337).

Once the dramatic events of the narrative have passed, both Edmund and Bimala become disenchanted with these objects of their fascination who have come from the outside world to disrupt the inner realm of the home. They both come to understand the worth of the ones who have waited for them passively, refusing to act, even while understanding their own jealous feelings. Edmund's enlightenment is painful but not fatal, and Fanny is his consolation:

Her mind, disposition, opinions, and habits wanted no half concealment, no self deception on the present, no reliance on future improvement. Even in the midst of his late infatuation, he had acknowledged Fanny's mental superiority. (MP 471)

The inner and the outer come together: Edmund no longer needs to hide his misgivings about Mary from himself; Fanny can now show her feelings for Edmund without the need for stringent self-discipline and dissimulation.

Bimala is less fortunate. The last chapter is related by Bimala in the present tense, beginning: 'Come, come! Now is the time to set sail towards that great confluence, where the river of love meets the sea of worship. [...] What was inflammable has been burnt to ashes; what is left is deathless' (199). Following her reconciliation with her husband Nikhil, he is called away almost immediately on an ill-fated quest to quell the trouble Sandip has fomented, only to be brought back on a palanquin, seriously, probably mortally, wounded. Thus this novel has the tragic ending foreshadowed throughout, while in *Mansfield Park* the tragedy, though still inherent in other narrative threads of the novel, is dismissed to the background and Fanny's quiet triumph is in the foreground: 'My Fanny indeed,' writes the narrator, emphasising the fictional nature of the events and her own role as creator of them, 'at this very time, I have the satisfaction of knowing, must have been happy in spite of every thing.' In spite, that is, of the suffering of all those she loves the most – Sir Thomas, Lady Bertram, and all their children, especially Edmund. This is one of several passages which belie interpretations of Fanny as either a righteous prig or an uncomplicated figure of good.

Nikhil and Bimala are a married couple whose marriage is threatened by Bimala's infatuation with Sandip, while Edmund and Fanny are cousins and temperamentally natural allies in the household of *Mansfield Park* and it is in no sense improper for Edmund to pursue

another woman. Fanny came to the house at the age of ten and they have grown up together. They will become the married couple destined by the comedy-romantic plot, so only in hindsight, in the most generic sense, does the reader understand the wrongness that Edmund's marriage to Mary, and Henry's to Fanny, would represent. Outwardly they have a close but sedate relationship, with Edmund, the elder by six years, 'directing her reading' and 'forming her mind'. However, Fanny keeps her secret well hidden, and he is not aware that her love for him is more passionate than his brotherly affection for her. Accordingly, he confides in her, not realising the pain he is causing.

Between Nikhil and Bimala there is a domestic love, deep and certainly passionate: Bimala says of him, looking back to the days before Sandip divided them,

I have seen what depth of love there was in your eyes when you gazed at me. I have known the secret sigh of pain you suppressed in your love for me. You loved my body as if it were a flower of paradise. You loved my whole nature as if it had been given you by some rare providence. (HW 20)

Quite apart from the futility of any action they could take, Nikhil and Fanny both see clearly what is happening but feel morally obliged not to act. 'If Bimala is not mine, she is not; and no amount of fuming, or fretting, or arguing will serve to prove that she is. If my heart is breaking – let it break' (HW 65), writes Nikhil. As for Fanny:

It was her intention, as she felt it to be her duty, to try to overcome all that was excessive, all that bordered on selfishness in her affection for Edmund. To call or to fancy it a loss, a disappointment, would be a presumption; for which she had not words strong enough to satisfy her own humility. To think of him as Miss Crawford might be justified in thinking, would in her be insanity. (MP 264)

When she receives an anguished letter from Edmund, confiding in her that he cannot give Mary up, and speculating on the best means 'to try for her', Fanny reacts, in internal monologue, 'There is no good in this delay. [...] Why is not it settled? [...] Fix, commit, condemn yourself' (424).

In both their cases, Fanny and Nikhil are shown directing considerable mental and emotional energy inwards to rein in their heartache, and to try to talk themselves out of their more extreme feelings of jealousy. There are also matching scenes where both these characters find solace in looking out at the night sky. Nikhil, in a rare reference to the rhetorical position of the book, as if it were a diary entry, writes:

I had written thus far, and was about to rise to go off bedwards when, through the window before me, I saw the heavy pall of July cloud suddenly part a little, and a big star shine through it. It seemed to say to me: 'Dreamland ties are made, and dreamland ties are broken, but I am here for ever – the everlasting lamp of the bridal night.'  
[...] The unveiled star tells me not to fear. That which is eternal must always be there. (HW 66-7)

Nikhil, thus, is comforted by the star and what it means to him. For Fanny, stargazing is equally romantic but rather more ambiguous. Mary has just been called away to sing with the

other young women, and Fanny and Edmund are standing by the window at Mansfield Park. They look out together to a scene

where all that was solemn and soothing, and lovely, appeared in the brilliancy of an unclouded night, and the contrast of the deep shade of the woods. Fanny spoke her feelings. ‘Here’s harmony!’ said she, ‘Here’s repose! Here’s what may leave all painting and all music behind, and what poetry only can attempt to describe. Here’s what may tranquillize every care, and lift the heart to rapture! When I look out on such a night as this, I feel as if there could be neither wickedness nor sorrow in the world. (MP 113)

But after talking for a few minutes about the stars, complimenting Fanny on her enthusiasm and ‘taste for nature’, and suggesting they go out onto the lawn to see the constellation Cassiopeia, Edmund is lured away into the room to hear the singing, and ‘Fanny sighed alone at the window till scolded away by Mrs Norris’s threats of catching cold’ (MP 113).

These two passages show Nikhil and Fanny both contemplating and drawing moral and spiritual strength from the night sky, seen from inside the house. Although they are looking outwards here, in fact as far outwards as the naked eye can see, the lessons they draw are directed inwards. Fanny fails in the end to find the consolation there that Nikhil does, however temporarily. It is not much later, however, that he finds no solace in nature, and quotes the poet Vidyapati:

It is August, the sky breaks into a passionate rain;  
Alas, empty is my house. (HW 85)

This verse, melancholy and yearning, is repeated three times in this section of ‘Nikhil’s Story’. He ruminates on the way he has magnified Bimala’s importance in his life, ‘that when I lost her, my whole way of life became narrow and confined. [...] That is why I find no gap in my misery, and spread this minute point of my emptiness over all the world’ (HW 90).

Their worldly rivals have no patience with the philosophical contemplation of nature, any more than Fanny’s cousins will participate in a discussion of the slave trade. When Fanny extols the beauties of Mrs Grant’s shrubbery to Mary, her response is ‘careless’ and in quite a different register to Fanny’s romantic ejaculations:

It does very well for a place of this sort. One does not think of extent here – and between ourselves, till I came to Mansfield, I had not imagined a country parson ever aspired to a shrubbery or anything of the kind. [...]

I am something like the famous Doge at the court of Lewis XIV.; and may declare that I see no wonder in this shrubbery equal to seeing myself in it. (209-210)

She cannot see the shrubbery in the way Fanny does, in the context of the wider world of nature and botany. She sees it only as a symbol of social status, and her only interest is what it would say about her own situation in society’s ranks were she to decide to settle there – which, as Fanny understands only too well, would eventually be the result of her marriage to Edmund. Sandip, more forcefully, would subordinate nature to his own desires:

Every man has a natural right to possess, and therefore greed is natural. It is not in the wisdom of nature that we should be content to be deprived. What my mind covets, my surroundings must supply. This is the only true understanding between our inner and outer nature in this world. (HW 45)

These pairs, Nikhil and Bimala, and Fanny and Edmund, are, within the scheme of their respective novels, anchored at home. The gender difference does mean that in a more literal sense Fanny and Bimala are more tied to the interior life (although, perhaps significantly, both originate from outside the home) while Nikhil and Edmund have the freedom of movement accorded to men in their societies. But it is Bimala and Edmund who are tempted by outside forces, represented by Sandip and Mary.

Mary Crawford is no caricature: she is a fully realised character and many readers find her more engaging and sympathetic than Fanny. Sandip is more of a stereotypical villain – as Chaudhuri writes, ‘a bitter parody of *swadeshi* politics and of the nationalist leader as self-serving charlatan.’<sup>19</sup> He is, however, a complex enough character to be taken by surprise by his feelings for Bimala:

Why am I allowing my life to become entangled with Bimala’s? [...]

Not that I have any false shame at Bimala becoming the object of my desire. It is only too clear how she wants me, and so I look on her as quite legitimately mine. [...]

But what is teasing me is that I am getting entangled. Am I not born to rule? [...]

I can see that poor Bimala is struggling like a snared deer. What a piteous alarm there is in her eyes! How she is torn with straining at her bonds! This sight, of course, should gladden the heart of a true hunter. And so I do rejoice; but, then, I am also touched; and therefore I dally, and standing on the brink I am hesitating to pull the noose fast. (HW 81-2)

The two societies in which these novels are set, though different in many respects, are united in their assumption that it is the privilege of the male to initiate sexual involvement, and so there is not an exact parallel with this situation in *Mansfield Park*. Nevertheless, Mary knows her own sexual power, and finds it ‘very vexatious’ when she finds that she prefers Edmund to his older brother Tom, Sir Thomas’s heir. She realises that ‘so far from now meaning to marry the elder, she did not even want to attract him beyond what the simplest claims of conscious beauty required’ (MP 114). There is little doubt that she could have elicited a proposal of marriage from Edmund if she wished. Edmund’s letter to Fanny in Portsmouth makes it clear that when he met Mary in London ‘from the very first she was altered; my first reception was so unlike what I had hoped, that I had almost resolved on leaving London again directly’ (MP 421): her manner to him in London discouraged him from proposing despite his intentions. Mary cannot quite make up her mind to take the irrevocable step which would make her a country parson’s wife, tied to domestic life within the domain of Mansfield and divided from the fashionable world where she feels she belongs. There is another difference in situation here, however. Sandip fails to seduce Bimala because, despite his beliefs about male entitlement, he is moved by her plight and hesitates to force her to

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<sup>19</sup> Chaudhuri 92.

sacrifice herself, whereas Mary's reluctance is motivated by her own preference for London life which, as Fanny rather primly believes, 'was very much at war with all respectable attachments' (MP 433). The 'respectable attachment' implicitly referred to is specifically attachment to Edmund.

As Anita Desai writes of *The Home and the World*, 'it would be unfair to read the book merely as a romantic novel, without informing oneself of the historical facts of the period to which it belongs.'<sup>20</sup> There is much more going on in this novel than the personal history of a wife tempted to stray. However, the love triangle in the novel personifies the struggles which were going on in Bengal at the time, and in which Tagore had been involved.

His disillusionment with the [nationalist] cause and his reply to his critics were embodied in the novel *The Home and the World*, which illustrates the battle he had had to fight in his own mind, and the extent to which he had both won and lost.<sup>21</sup>

In the novel's dramatisation of inner and outer worlds the personal and the political are not separable. Every decision made by either Sandip or Nikhil on a matter of political or ideological principal has consequences, for good or ill, at a personal level, for themselves, for the other members of the household, and for the people whose lives are disrupted by Sandip's careless and destructive radicalism. Sandip, however, gets away, out of trouble, leaving 'almost at a run' (HW 201) while Nikhil is left to venture into the fray and risk his life trying to prevent 'the violence that is being done to the women' of a neighbouring estate (HW 201). Anjaria writes that Nikhil's 'idealism is presented as the extreme, although far less dangerous, antithesis of Sandip's pragmatism' and 'that the two perspectives they represent cannot be synthesized into a more convincing, realist [...] figure.'<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, Bimala feels herself split into two people. 'One of these in me can understand that Sandip is trying to delude me; the other is content to be deluded' (HW 149). This irreconcilable split is what leads to the tragic conclusion of the novel, and Tagore's 'aesthetic ambivalence around its two male characters is [...] the most effective form for what it seeks to describe.'<sup>23</sup>

Conflicting world views also cause the dark and dramatic events of *Mansfield Park*. Edmund is committed to being a genuine and sincere minister of the Anglican church, while Mary is too cynical and worldly to take religion seriously even though she is love with Edmund. Fanny, in turn, believes that she thoroughly disapproves of Henry. The narrator seems to differ:

Could he have been satisfied with the conquest of one amiable woman's affections, could he have found sufficient exultation in overcoming the reluctance, in working himself into the esteem and tenderness of Fanny Price, there would have been every probability of success and felicity for him. His affection had already done something. Her influence over him had already given him some influence over her. Would he have deserved more, there can be no doubt that more would have been obtained, especially when that marriage had taken place, which would have given him the assistance of her

<sup>20</sup> Anita Desai, Introduction to Tagore, 8.

<sup>21</sup> Desai 9.

<sup>22</sup> Anjaria 20.

<sup>23</sup> Angaria 21.

conscience in subduing her first inclination, and brought them very often together. Would he have persevered, and uprightly, Fanny must have been his reward, and a reward very voluntarily bestowed, within a reasonable period from Edmund's marrying Mary. (MP 467)

This passage, as much as anything in *Mansfield Park*, illustrates how little justification there is for seeing Fanny as embodying anything like the novel's overall ethic. It is true that there are many 'could he have's' and 'would he have's' – there is a significant gap between the 'real' Henry and the hypothetical character who might have received the 'reward very voluntarily bestowed.' Fanny knows her own mind; she knows that she could never marry Henry. In the same way, she 'knows' – she 'firmly believe[s]' – that Edmund's 'heart is wedded to [Mary] for ever' (MP 424). In another novel, *Pride and Prejudice* for example, or *Emma*, the discrepancy between what the narrator 'knows' to be the case, and what Fanny 'firmly believes', would have been exploited to its full comic potential. In this novel, the dark irony that begins the final chapter returns in the mere paragraph which bestows Edmund's love on Fanny:

I purposely abstain from dates on this occasion, that every one may be at liberty to fix their own, aware that the cure of unconquerable passions, and the transfer of unchanging attachments, must vary much as to time in different people. (MP 470)

Austen's realism here is both grim and comic, and gives Fanny and Edmund the formulaic 'happy ending' only by a sleight of hand that barely conceals the impossibility of that healing resolution, like the realism that causes the fissure in Tagore's novel and leaves it unresolved. Austen's narrator speculates about Edmund's happiness: 'it must have been a delightful happiness!', she writes. 'But there was a happiness elsewhere which no description can reach' (MP 471). Fanny's feelings are cut off even from her authorial view. Indeed, she will allow no one to 'presume to give the feelings of a young woman on receiving the assurance of that affection of which she has scarcely allowed herself to entertain a hope' (MP 471). This denial of access to the inwardness which has been on view throughout the novel is startling: even earlier in the same chapter, we have read that Fanny, 'I have the satisfaction of knowing, must have been happy' (MP 461). It underlines the implausibility both of the realist illusion which appears to allow readers extended exposure to the inner worlds of the characters, and of the resolution which seals off that exposure at the novel's end and projects us back into the 'reality' of our own lives.

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