

Sanditon and the Woman Figure: A Struggle for Wholeness

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Abstract

The study examined Sanditon, an unfinished novella written by Jane Austen, the English woman writer of the nineteenth century whose ideology was mostly considered to be antediluvian. It investigated the genesis of women's oppression and social position during the Victorian era and argued that there is a discontinuity in the author's focus in this fragmentary novella for rather than the naïve, docile "feminine ideal" that permeate her earlier novels, Sanditon challenges traditional gender roles by presenting independent female characters who symbolise female agency, female desire, autonomy and self-determination. The novella again critiques patriarchal society through a satirical depiction of masculine agency and the exposure of gender-based oppression.

Keywords: Nineteenth Century Ideology, Sex/Gender Distinction, Female Oppression, Female agency, Desire and Autonomy.

Introduction

Jane Austen is often known, studied and interpreted as a writer too plain "plain Jane," domesticated and obsessed with depicting human life "all human life," despite the elegant character depiction in her novels, her precision of language and exquisite narrative strategy (see amongst others, Dicks 1992:39-43 & Reeves 1968:41-3). The writer has been criticised of always portraying female characters, trivial life, and writing about the prosperous people in the society. It is against this background that this study seeks to re-evaluate Austen's *Sanditon*, a fragmentary novella written at the height of her literary career, from a distinct female perspective, a perspective that breaks away from earlier misconceptions that lump her work into historical narratives governed by presuppositions that remain predominantly masculine.

Sanditon's Storyline

Known by Cassandra (Jane Austen's elder sister) as "The Brothers", and by the rest of the family as "The Last Work," *Sanditon* focuses centrally on notions of home, origin and belonging. The story begins in agitation. Mr. and Mrs. Parker, travelling from London to the Coast, are upset and slightly injured in an accident. Immediately however, they recover in a nearby household. In a moment then, the reader is hustled into *Sanditon* itself, which refers to a small village on the Sussex Coast, which the endlessly enthusiastic and entrepreneurial Mr. Parker hopes to see develop into a fashionable resort:

The sure resort of the very best company whose regular, steady, private families of thorough gentility and character, who are a blessing everywhere, excited the industry of the poor and diffuse comfort and improvement among them of every sort (P. 10)

Mr. Parker's efforts in that direction forms a major part of the story, as the writer, in her usual fashion, appears to satirise the spirit of novelty and change which characterised the time, and the hypochondria and vogue for new cures involved in resort life.

On another level, *Sanditon* features among Austen's literary works labelled "minor works," perhaps partly because of their fragmentary nature. However, despite its designation as "minor" the novella contains not only the historical recreation evident in the "major works" but also a literary style that explores both moral and feminist predicaments. The novella describes the social and romantic entanglements of Charlotte Heywood, a sensible and level-headed young woman, the local great lady/ the avaricious lady Denham, and another young woman, Clara Brereton, who was being courted, not entirely honourably by lady Denham's nephew, Edward. Towards the

end of the story, the arrival of the West Indian heiress, whom Lady Denham plans to pair with Edward, complicates the scene even further.

Women in Nineteenth Century English Society

In Western philosophy, women were portrayed as matter, body, fluidity, physicality, "boundarylessness", irrationality and artificiality. Many women in the western world lacked political or economic rights. They are "the other" or the opposite, the mirror image or the shadow of all the positive values male dominated western philosophy privileges and respects, from reason to truth, identity and authenticity. In this sense, a woman is linked either as a daughter or a wife, to the inescapable umbilical cord, "the man". As a daughter, she is owned by the father while as a wife she is the inertial property of the husband. In essence, the patriarchal society views woman as a domesticated being whose rightful place is the home.

In this light, early modern English women were directed to confine their literary aspirations to socially acceptable "feminine" genres like religion, parables and translation of male-authored texts. These areas corresponded to traditional female virtues of chastity and obedience, and the domestic roles that male writers of conduct books exhorted women cultivate. Within the literary hierarchies also, these private genres ranked below the masculine public ones like Epic Poetry, Tragedy and History (see among others, Morgan 1991 & Martin 1997)

The early nineteenth century Europe therefore was a period of double critical standard which had seriously affected the socio-political outlook. While social changes brought about by Humanist theories and Reformation ideologies admittedly had little effect in achieving greater female participation in politics, government and related areas, they however did gradually encourage many women to develop a heightened awareness about their nature and status, and to prompt a few into writing "eloquently creative challenges to gender restrictions" (Thompson, 1950).

Consequent upon that, a good number of literature has been written on the prominence of the female voice to demonstrate the struggle against female domination. Virginia Woolf, a central figure within the English literary tradition extensively engaged with the question of gender and sexuality. Her “Room of One’s Own” (1929) expresses the social and psychic meanings of gendered identity. In the essay, she considers the essence/nature of women, the kind of literature they produce and equally the one written about them. Her long essay, “Three Guineas” (1938) argues for a profound connection between patriarchal forms of culture and the rise of fascism (Moi, 1999:154-5). Again, J.S Mills’ *The Subjection of Women* (1869) serves as a classic rejection of unequal treatment of the sexes.

In a nutshell, during the nineteenth century, when Jane Austen was writing, many female writers were intensively involved with fiction about national and cultural identity and its complex relations to gender. At that time, the best history of a nation “cultural nationalism” involved myth and fantasy, popular customs and sentiments, the exploration of identity as well as the struggle to tell your own story (Eagleton, 2005)

The Sex/Gender Distinction

My point of departure in this essay is to explore how the novella, *Sanditon*, represents our perception of feminist ideology in mid-nineteenth century, especially in a writer so acclaimed simply as a realist, concerned with the depiction of an ideal society. In the novella, Austen deploys characters like Sir Edward Denham, to satirise masculine entitlement and the objectification of women. This goes a long way to expose gender-based oppression. *Sanditon* highlights the limited options and opportunities available to women, especially with regards to marriage and economic independence. According to Toril Moi, a renowned feminist scholar whose radical perspectives in *What is a Woman*, demonstrates her ability to rethink current debates about sex,

gender and the body. Moi believes that critique and change may occur even within fairly traditional social structures of gender. She further rhetorically asks, "What does it take to change dominant gender relations, to undo *la dominance masculine*?" since patriarchal power is viewed as something universal and natural which is somewhat difficult to denaturalize (1999:284).

According to Simone de Beauvoir, another significant figure and progenitor of the feminist theory from whom Moi drew significant inspiration, and whose seminal work, *The Second Sex*, serves as a gospel to modern day feminist:

Throughout history (women) have always been subordinated to men; their dependency is not the result of an event or a change- it was not something that occurred. It is in part because it does not have (*echappe a*) the accidental character of a historical fact that otherness in this case appears as an absolute. A situation created over time can be abolished at some other time, as the Negroes of Haiti and others have proved; but it seems that a natural condition

is beyond the possibility of change. In truth, however, nature is no more immutably given than is historical reality. If woman discovers that she is the inessential which never returns to the essential, it is because she herself fails to take charge of this return (SS XXIV-XXV; DSa 18; TA)

To Beauvoir therefore, there can be no liberation until women themselves cease to reproduce the power mechanisms that confine them to their place, even though in spite of her own heroic efforts to construct a social understanding of the female condition, Beauvoir overestimates the ease with which change may be effected. In line with the foregoing argument, and despite the contribution of women in the

perpetuation of a tradition which imprisons them, feminists have long ago criticised the notion of “male science,” “male theory,” or “male rationality.” They argue that such phenomenon is inextricably linked with traditional sexualised categories of dominance and oppression.

According to the patriarchal imagination, what a woman needs is a man, not philosophy. If for instance, a woman declares that she too, feels the philosophical lack, her desire for knowledge can only be a compensation for her primary sexual frustration. On this logic then, the thinking woman necessarily becomes synonymous with what Moi describes as “the frustrated spinster of patriarchal ideology.” So by positioning woman as a symbol of lack and negativity, Western Philosophy “turns her into the grand of her own existence.” That is to say, by her very inferiority, she guarantees the superiority of philosophy. Indeed, it is the very structure of scientific thought that philosophy presents woman as that which relentlessly undermines man’s rational endeavours. (see Moi, 1999:348, Eagleton, 1990: 93-8 & Rivkin and Ryan eds. 1998:306).

The Subversion of Traditional Gender Roles in *Sanditon*

A careful scrutiny into Austen’s earlier works reveals most of the female characters to be domestically restricted in their preoccupation with the solidity of everyday world, their shyness of absolute crises and ruptures, or their nervousness of the political. In other words, they possess ideal feminine values which complicates their own oppression. In those novels, the female characters tend to re-assert, nay perpetuate, the original subject/object division, nature objectified is female, whereas knowledge is characterised as male.

In *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), Mr. Bennet, who cannot bear the endless nattering of his foolish wife whose business in life was “to get her daughters married” and whose solace was “visiting and news,” almost always finds consolation in his library. Likewise, while commenting on

Mr. Wickham's elopement with Lydia in the same novel, the authorial voice tells us that "poor Jane would willingly have gone through the world without believing that so much wickedness existed in the whole race of mankind, as was collected here in one person," (Chp:33) which clearly refers to the distorted idealism common among the feminine ideal. Similarly, Anne Elliot in *Persuasion* (1818) has no say in where she will live or with whom, but once upon Upper cross, she hopes 'ere long' to become a not unworthy member of the circle. In *Mansfield Park* (1815), most of the characters, especially Fanny, appear natural and well-supported.

Critique of Patriarchal Society

In *Sanditon*, Austen stands to critique patriarchal society through a satirical portrayal of masculine entitlement and the objectification of women. The ludicrous Sir Edward Denham (a handsome fool who expects to make easy conquests by showing off his figure and parroting the language of sensibility) whose great object in life was to be seductive, with such personal advantages as he knew himself to possess, and such talents as he also gives himself credit for, felt that he was formed to be:

A dangerous man, quite in the line of the loveless, the very name of Sir Edward he thought, carried some degree of fascination with it - to be generally gallant and assiduous about the fair, to make fine speeches to every pretty girl, was but inferior part of the character he had to play (P. 49)

Yet, despite his conceited self-recommendation, (he was entitled according to his own view of society, "to approach Miss Heywood or any other young woman with pretensions to beauty, with high compliment and rhapsody, on the slightest acquaintance,") he was properly humbled by Charlotte's irremediable disdain. For in relation to Beauvoir's definitional concept of freedom, Austen's female

characters in *Sanditon*, could be described as autonomous and self-determined. The major part of the narrative revolves around the encounter among the principal female characters and Mr. Edward. Miss Heywood (Charlotte), a reasonably sensible and responsible person who like most heroines in an Austen novel (Elizabeth Bennet, Anne Elliot, Emma Woodhouse) is not in the least tempted either by a man's good breeding or his social status. She assertively shows Edward how insufficient were his pretensions to attract her. Charlotte represents female agency. She undermines the view of the feminine ideal and stands to take charge of her life, make her own personal decisions and therefore defy categorisation

Similarly, in *Sanditon*, Austen attempts assiduously to question the imposition of social power which inevitably leads to the transmission or reproduction of power in other social spheres. While discussing "the arts," during a visit to the Parkers, (the popularity of the Parkers brought them so many visitors, among them Sir Edward Denham and his sisters) Sir Edward tries strenuously to show the superiority of man's feelings over that of a woman. In other words, he schematically attempts to recommend himself to the young ladies through eloquence, even going further to make allusions to great male literary figures like Montgomery, Wordsworth and Campbell, which in itself embodies some underlying politics which associates literary production and gender, even though scholars like John Fawles links all literary creativity with femininity, because there are "Adam-women and Eve-men," yet, the literary enterprise was not considered fit for women (Eagleton, 1990:83)

Sir Edward, in his continued male /self-approbation demonstrates that a high-toned genius cannot in anyway be expected to display the grovellings of a "common mind." Charlotte, on her part, listened with unaffected scorn, to his half-baked literary allusions and calmly but sarcastically replies:

I have read several of Burns poems with great delight, but I am not poetic enough to separate a man's poetry entirely from his character; and poor Burns' known irregularities, greatly interrupt my enjoyment of his lines. I have difficulty in depending on the truth of his feelings as a lover. I have not faith in the sincerity of the affections of a man of his descriptions. He felt and he wrote and he forgot (P. 42)

Therefore, despite his conspicuous self-approbation, there is nothing noble about Sir Edward's character. On the other hand, Lady Denham, an impoverished gentry, described as "the great lady of Sanditon," happens to exert power as a strong influence towards the development of the storyline. She had "been often necessarily mentioned at Willingden," for being Mr. Parker's colleague in speculation, as "Sanditon itself could not be talked of long, without the introduction of Lady Denham" who was a very rich old lady, who had buried two husbands, who knew the value of money" (P. 17).

In relation to the above, the fact that a particular woman "was very much looked up to" in a society where women were predominantly looked down upon is a vigorous reaction to the traditional and conservative view of women in nineteenth century England. Traditionally in European societies, women could neither inherit property nor money as we have seen within the Bennet family in *Pride and Prejudice*, whose estate was entailed to a distant cousin despite the presence of a wife and five daughters. Here, the portrayal of Lady Denham in *Sanditon*, as a woman of great fortune who had survived two husbands, points to the fact that women, as members of a class which is economically oppressed, are beginning to gain economic independence. They are beginning to develop a political and social sense, in contrast to their lack for leisure and their inheritance of a traditional submissiveness. It is thus:

Through gainful employment that woman has traversed most of the distance that separated her from the male... once she has ceased to be a parasite, the system crumbles, between her and the universe, there is no longer any need for a masculine mediator Beauvoir (1949:689).

Again, even after the death of Lady Denham's first husband, and she was to remarry, Sir Harry Denham of Denham Park, only succeeded in removing her and her large income to his own domains but failed to succeed in the views of permanently enriching his family, for she had been careful enough and "too weary to put anything out of her own power" (P. 18). In view of the foregoing discussion, it is evident that in order to produce the necessary social belief in the legitimacy of the existing dominant power structures, one must be able to estimate sterling moral qualities to the same extent, which however, may be difficult to uphold, just like Moi (1999) asserts:

One must be noble to act nobly, but one would cease to be noble if one did not act nobly. In other words, social magic has very real effects. Assigning someone to a group of superior essence, (noblemen as opposed to commoners, men as opposed to women, educated as opposed to uneducated, etc) causes that person to undergo a subjective transformation that contributes to bringing about a real transformation likely to bring him closer to the assigned definition. P305

Female Agency

In Austen's late stories, to which *Sanditon* belongs, there is a shift from the general concern with displacement and disarray, especially as evidenced in her completed novels, to one of settlement and resolution. In *Sanditon*, the writer attempts a striking repositioning of the female roles. Therefore, rather than a concern with the "feminine ideal," she offers insights into the lives and experiences of women in the early

nineteenth century England. In the novella, traditional gender roles are questioned by portraying women who take charge of their lives, making decisions about their own future and well-being. Strong-willed independent female characters, like Charlotte Heywood, challenge traditional gender ascriptions. Charlotte's role in the story suggests that the female lack is not truly a philosophical lack. It is rather the view of male theory which portrays the woman as "unthinking" and "unthinkable," because she is taken to suffer from the wrong lack. According to Hegel, cited in Moi (1999):

Women may be capable of Education, but they are not made for the more advanced sciences, for philosophy and certain forms of artistic productions which require universality. Women may have ideas, taste and elegance, but they do not have the ideal. The difference between men and women is like that between animals and plants; men correspond to animals, while women correspond to plants because their life is a more placid unfolding, the principle of which is the undermined unity of feeling. When women hold the helm of government, the state is at once in jeopardy, because women regulate their actions not by the demand of universality, but by arbitrary inclinations and opinions (P. 356-7).

This points to the idea that a woman is perceived to be an inferior thinker, though not because of her lack, but because of her "lack of a lack". She is lacking in philosophy, which conveniently designates her as irrational. Thus, in a sexist society, women often find themselves in situations where they are obliged to choose between being imprisoned in femininity or having to devoid it.

In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir illustrates that, sexist ideologies and practices produce only the alienating split in women's subjectivity. Her

phenomenological understanding falls outside the parameters of sex/gender distinction because “in that primitive division of labor, the two sexes constituted in a way two classes, and there was equality between these classes” (Beauvoir 1949:85).

In essence, Beauvoir’s fundamental point in *The Second Sex* is the concept of “freedom, alienation and oppression,” rather than the opposition between identity and difference. She sees freedom as “the highest human value” as stated succinctly in the following extract:

The attainment of sexual freedom by the unmarried woman, further is still made difficult by social customs. Adultery committed by a wife has been considered, up to the present time, to be a legal offence, whereas no law forbids a woman free love; nevertheless, if she wishes to take a lover, she must first get married. Even at the present time, many young middle-class women of strict behavior marry ‘so as to be free’ (1949:450).

In a similar manner, Miss Brereton (Clara) is depicted in *Sanditon* as a strong female character that stands to question dominant norms. She is a beautiful cousin of Sir Edward’s stepmother whom he determined to abduct at any cost because her seduction was quite determined on, for she was his rival in Lady Denham’s favour; she was young, lovely and dependent. He had very early seen the necessity of the case and “had now been long trying with cautious assiduity to make an impression on her heart, and to undermine her principles” (. P50), but Clara refused to be the eternal feminine of metaphysical speculation we have seen in Lydia Bennet, who sheepishly eloped with a militia officer in *Pride and Prejudice* or the flirtatious Marriane in *Sense and Sensibility*. She meticulously saw through him by analysing his expressions and anecdotes from everyday life. Clara had not the least intention of being seduced, though she bore with him patiently enough to confirm the sort of attachment which her personal charms had raised. For, she

sensed “a greater degree of discouragement indeed would not have affected Sir Edward” because:

He was armed against the highest pitch of disdain and aversion. If she could not be won by affection, he must carry her off. He knew his business already had many musings on the subject. If he were constrained so to act he must naturally wish to strike out something new, to exceed those who had gone before him and he felt a strong curiosity to ascertain whether the neighbourhood of Timbuctoo might not afford some solitary house adapted Clara’s reception (P. 50)

However, Edward had to think of the expense, he feels that masterly style not well suited to his purse and probably, prudence might have obliged him to prefer the quieter sort of ruin and disgrace for the object of his affections, to the more obvious.

Conclusion

In the final analysis, it is striking that Victorian novels often present emotional feelings and a stereotypical female in a realistic world. However, what we have in *Sanditon* is a Victorian woman in transition, though far from the “strong-willed woman who step out of the ordinary,” of Showalter’s conception, Clara pays little or no attention to Sir Edward’s conceit and self-approbation, quite in contrast to Miss Elizer Bennet who, on seeing Mr. Darcy’s magnificent country seat at Pamberley, instantly changes her views and in a moment begins to like him.

Secondly, far from concentrating on challenges from outside, Austen dwells more on threats to the governing bloc of gentry and aristocracy from within. Sir Edward’s (as representative of the gentry) preference for “the quieter sort of ruin and disgrace for the object of his affections, to the more renowned,” shows the writer’s attempt to depict male villainy. Like Catherine Moreland in *Northanger Abbey*, Edward bases

his dream upon fictional models, which show the relationship between literature and life. This is a recurrent theme indeed in Jane Austen, particularly in her short stories and fragmentary novellas like *Love and Friendship* or *Sanditon*.

In sum, almost all the major female characters in *Sanditon* struggle in one way or the other to become independent. Like Lady Denham, Charlotte succeeds in resisting all the temptations in her relationship with the gallant Sir Edward. Clara desists his self-approbation by showing him how insufficient were his pretensions to please a woman worthy of being pleased. Like his namesake in *Love and Friendship*, who picks up “unmeaning gibberish,” by studying romantic novels, Sir Edward’s determination to be original at any price marks him out through his unorganised literary allusions. In essence, he stands as a symbol of lack, negativity, fluidity and irrationality. While the female characters symbolise re-birth and reorientation, they may even stand for “the new woman,” who knows herself and the intricacies surrounding her existence. In the end, the experiences of the female characters in *Sanditon* can be described as a struggle to relocate the disintegrated whole, in other words, a struggle for wholeness.

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