DECOLONIZING IMPERIALIST DISCOURSE IN JANE AUSTEN’S PERSUASION

A Saidian perspective

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Abstract: In his highly influential work Culture and Imperialism, Edward Said unravels the imperialist undertones in Jane Austen’s Mansfield Park. Throughout the chapter entitled “Jane Austen and the Empire,” Said demonstrates how this seemingly domestic novel of manners, not normally associated with imperialism, is actually densely saturated with colonialist discourse. For Said, the marginalized representation of the colonized territory of Antigua as simply a “colonial garden” for the British imperial patriarch further accentuates the superior sense of colonialist entitlement. Thus, Said’s approach in decolonizing the imperialist discourse in Mansfield Park may be extended to other canonical works not generally considered imperialist in nature. In this article, the researchers utilize Said’s strategies involved in his reading of Mansfield Park to probe the imperialist nuances in Austen’s Persuasion, a novel usually categorized as a romance/novel of manners which depicts two lovers’ second chance at happiness despite all the social obstacles in their way. The researchers attempt to foreground the imperialist rhetoric in this novel, specifically Austen’s tendency to romanticize and glorify the rising British naval society as the champions of the Empire. Furthermore, this article investigates the absent, peripheral representation of colonial terrains as opposed to the privileged, central position of the British Empire in the narrative.

Keywords: Edward Said, Culture and Imperialism, Jane Austen, Persuasion, decolonization, imperialist discourse

Decolonizing imperialist discourse in Jane Austen’s Persuasion: A Saidian perspective

In his seminal book Culture and Imperialism (1993), Edward Said critiques seemingly innocent, canonical literary works to uncover the implicit imperialist
discourses embedded within them. Referring specifically to Austen’s *Mansfield Park* in the chapter entitled “Jane Austen and the Empire,” Said intricately delves into Austen’s veiled imperialistic nuances previously overlooked by critics. According to Said, the world created by Austen in *Mansfield Park* is one in which the British colonies, specifically the plantations of Antigua, exist solely to sustain the luxurious lifestyle of the British upper class. This article draws upon the theories of Edward Said to expose and dismantle the embedded imperialist discourse in *Persuasion* (1818) by Jane Austen. Toward that end, the researchers will adopt an approach similar to that of Said’s reading of *Mansfield Park* (1814) to explore the covert tropes of imperialism within *Persuasion*. We argue that Austen unconsciously absorbs the dominant discourse of her nation and romanticizes imperialistic, nautical exploits and adventures in a similar manner that Orientalists romanticized the exotic East.

Amid rising calls for decolonizing English departments across the world, specifically in the Arab world (Hamdi, 2022), a Saidian reading of canonical works may serve as the means to retain such literary texts within the curriculum rather than excluding them altogether. Citing Mignolo, Hamdi explains that

> ... this knowledge power formula is clear in the West’s representation of Western knowledge as the “zero point epistemology” that would be taught/ingrained not only at Western institutions, but especially at institutions in the Global South.

(2022: 197)

This “Western knowledge,” with all its Orientalist/imperialist undertones, may be transmitted and naturalized via innocuous literary works such as the novels by Jane Austen, specifically since these works have traditionally been established as elevated beacons of thought and models of exquisite writing.

By showcasing the imperialist notions within classical English literary works, the teacher helps students and subsequent readers become aware of the underlying discourse and may go beyond the traditional reading of these works. Therefore, instead of “transmitting canonical English and American literature uncritically and unquestioningly” (Hamdi, 2022: 203) as is predominantly the case, a Saidian reading proves illuminating for both Western and non-Western readers as it offers an eye-opening opportunity to view classical literary works within a fresh scope. Thus, such readings may partially comprise the “literature/culture of resistance” (Hamdi, 2022: 196) necessary as an initial step for previously colonized nations toward “knowing thyself” and achieving intellectual decolonization (Hamdi, 2022: 199).

Another approach in establishing a counter-discourse to the previously dominant Western depiction of the East is to contrast the image of the Orient, more
specifically that of Islam, in the works of a biased and a non-biased author. An example of such a contrast becomes apparent in the article “Umm Zakiyyah’s If I Should Speak and Updike’s Terrorist: Two different views of Islam.” In this article, the authors Al-Ghalith and Al-Shalabi (2021) expose the prejudice and inaccuracies in Updike’s representation of Islam as opposed to the more consistent and fact-based depiction found in Umm Zakiyyah’s novel. By highlighting the counter-argument of writers who are not shackled by the previously dominant discourse of the colonizer, it becomes possible to minimize the hegemonic impact of Western literary works on university students in non-Western countries.

Commenting specifically on the influence of British novels on school curricula in Britain and abroad, Katie Trumpener (2009) remarks that “[t]he study of English literature, began in Scottish universities, [and] was adopted by schools in nineteenth-century British India, as a secular curriculum able to circumvent sectarian tensions … Across the Empire, generations of colonial students were raised on British literature” (451). However, in the period of decolonization, “students and writers began questioning or rejecting British literary novels” (Trumpener, 2009: 451).

By viewing certain substantial canonical works through a Saidian lens, readers may embark upon a process of scholarly decolonization instead of outright rejection. Among novels that were not traditionally viewed as imperialistic in nature are the works of Jane Austen; such works may undergo a Saidian reading, specifically in relation to Said’s analysis of imperialist undertones in Mansfield Park.

Critics on Austen

Critics have implemented various approaches in the analysis of Jane Austen’s works. Some critics have adopted a psychoanalytical approach (e.g., Hanly, 2007; Faflak, 2014; Kudish, 2016), while others (e.g., Walzer, 1995; Murphy, 2008; Dashwood, 2018) have probed the rhetoric of gender and the implications of feminist concepts in Austen’s writings. Other areas of research interest pertinent to Austen studies include spatiality (Posusta, 2014), sensory language (Quinn, 2018), family relations (Sturrock, 2013), and Gothic imagery (Urda, 2017). Moreover, the growing interest in the imperialist inferences of Austen’s works is sturdily linked to Said’s spatial/geographic interpretation of Austen’s Mansfield Park.

Consequently, numerous critics have delved into the imperialistic, political and economic associations of Austen’s novels including Persuasion. In a review of Jocelyn Harris’ A Revolution Beyond Expression: Jane Austen’s Persuasion, Olivia Murphy (2008) explains how “Harris recovers clues that to Austen’s contemporaries may have signaled either optimism or trepidation about the nascent British Empire” (470). Furthermore, Murphy probes Harris’ discussion of Austen’s contrasting portrayal of the romantic, fraternal Lyme and the fashionable Bath in
Persuasion stating that “Harris show[s] how attuned the novelist is to the economics of place … how the wealthy Bath became rich ‘on the back of slave trade’ while much of it ‘remained squalid and poor’” (Murphy, 2008: 470).

Lyme is connected to the navy officers such as Captain Harville and Captain Benwick; hence, Austen provides a favorable depiction of Lyme as opposed to the artificiality of Bath with its unjust social class divisions. Austen pointedly presents a glorious image of the navy and as Penny Gay (2011) points out, “Austen makes use of her close acquaintance with navy culture through her family’s involvement in the naval endeavours of Britain in the Napoleonic Wars” (63). Throughout the novel maritime society, presented as a new meritocracy, with its high morality and principles, is awarded an elevated status, contrary to the haughtiness and pretenses of the self-important aristocracy.

From another angle, Corrine Fowler (2017) explores the colonial connections of British country houses, explaining that recent research “in the field of British imperial history reveal that … Said [in ‘Jane Austen and the Empire’] considerably underestimated country houses’ ties to the empire” (Fowler, 2017: 363). It has come to light that numerous families who “were enriched by colonial profiteering” would often relocate to the countryside (Fowler, 2017: 370). Consequently, the country estates of the Elliots and Musgroves in Persuasion may come under this category since it is never mentioned specifically where either family had acquired their wealth.

Persuasion has most recently gained critics’ attention due to the race-bending method implemented in the current Netflix production of Persuasion which features an all-inclusive cast. According to Amanda-Rae Prescott, the presence of biracial and black characters “in the space of the novel is normalized, and the film does not break the escapism by answering questions of how the Musgroves and Lady Russell have obtained their status in society.” Prescott adds that casting Henry Golding as Mr. Elliot “is a bold experiment in racebent casting in a Regency-set period drama.” However, the vastly varied responses to this all-inclusive casting have revealed “an established link between strict canonical interpretations of Austen and upholding white supremacist structures” (Prescot, 2022). Consequently, the backlash against the multi-racial cast in this production exposes the current-day sense of Western superiority and residual imperialism.

Nevertheless, by exploring the possibilities of transporting Austen’s fiction toward a more multi-racial world, this recent film production of Persuasion, starring Dakota Johnson has directed attention toward Sandition, Austen’s unfinished novel “where Austen herself created Georgiana to be a black heiress” (Prescott, 2022). The fact that Austen tried her hand at a slightly more racially inclusive representation of individuals in her society renders it more feasible to depict the characters in her fiction in more of a multi-cultural oeuvre. Moreover, Austen’s
exploration of self/other ethnic relations may be developed to scrutinize the inter-
actions or lack of between the colonizer and colonized in her works.

**Said and Austen**

In *Culture and Imperialism*, Said shifts his discussion to the cultural effects of
the English novel, arguing that a colonial ideology which gives precedence to
humanistic British values while devaluing colonized cultures can be traced to pre-
imperialist novels normally not considered to exhibit imperialistic notions. Among
the novelists not usually associated with colonial themes is Jane Austen; how-
ever, as Fraiman (1995) argues, Said includes Austen among his list of “cultural
suspects … for chronological reasons” (806). Therefore, “not only the venture-
some *Robinson Crusoe*, but also the stay-at-home novels beginning with Austen
prepared the way for Kipling’s and Conrad’s more overt colonial thematics later
in the century” (Fraiman, 1995: 806).

In the chapter entitled “Jane Austen and the Empire,” Said focuses on the rela-
tionships depicted in *Mansfield Park* between manor home and colonial plantation,
country and city. The manor, Mansfield Park, is sustained by means of Sir Thomas’
plantation in Antigua, where he has gone to restore order among the native planta-
tion workers. According to Trumpener (2009) Said interprets *Mansfield Park* as
“exemplifying the British unconsciousness about empire” (446). The ties between
British domesticity and imperialist exploits are outlined since

\[\text{the abolition of the slave trade threatened British plantation owners; the Napoleonic Wars created new fortunes; new mercantile classes built new communities: *Mansfield Park, Persuasion and Sandition* detail the ongoing, if subterranean effects of these recent upheavals on domestic life, courtship and female self perception.}\]

(Trumpener, 2009: 446)

The connection between domestic spaces and overseas colonies is made explic-
itly clear in Said’s reading of *Mansfield Park*. In fact, Said draws upon Raymond
Williams’ *The Country and the City* in order to conduct a spatial reading of
*Mansfield Park*. For Said, Fanny’s progress by means of a “small-scale movement
in space” back home reflects the “more open colonial movements of Sir Thomas,
her mentor, the man whose estate she inherits” (1993: 89); consequently, the asso-
ciation between domestic and colonial developments is established. Sir Thomas
represents both patriarchal authority in Britain as well as colonial authority abroad.
After Sir Thomas restores order in his “colonial garden,” he comes home to his
estate and re-establishes stability in the manor. In that sense, Sir Thomas
represents “Crusoe setting things in order,” thereby further reinforcing the correlation between “domestic and international authority” (1993: 87).

Moreover, Said refers to the overall lack of detail pertaining to Austen’s references to the Caribbean; such an absence from the colonies demonstrates the British visualization of the colonies not as autonomous nations but as the means for harvesting tropical crops to be consumed back in Britain. Throughout his analysis of Mansfield Park, Said explains how Austen’s work embodies “the hegemonic geography emergent in the pre-imperialist period centered on the category ‘home’” (Fraiman, 1995: 819). Such a marginalized portrayal of colonized territories versus the centralized position of the European colonizer reveals an underlying pre-imperialist discourse that paves the way for the overt imperialism to come.

According to Fowler (2017), Said’s chapter “Jane Austen and Empire” exposes how the writings of “Austen and her contemporaries are wilfully silent about colonial cruelty and indifferent to enslaved people’s resistance to oppression” (2017: 363). Therefore, as Said pointedly remarks, certain explicitly imperialist writers such as Kipling and Conrad “are prepared for by Austen, Thackery, Defoe, Scott and Dickens” (Said, 1993: 114, qtd. in Fowler, 2017: 363).

The strategies adopted by Said in his post-colonial reading of Mansfield Park may be employed to disclose imperialist tropes in other canonical works. In Austen’s Persuasion, for instance, similar imperialist and Orientalist notions may come to the fore via a Saidian reading. The West represented by the British Empire, specifically the British Navy, is afforded a superior status as opposed to the eastern colonies it exploits. The British are represented as the authoritative subject/self while the colonies are marginalized as the subjugated object/other. Consequently, the narrative in Persuasion grants the imperialist subject a central position and voice whereas the colonized object is marginalized and basically absent from the narration of events.

**Covert imperialistic discourse in Persuasion**

In Persuasion, Austen places the white English naval officer in the status of the subject and the colonized territories in the position of the exploited object. In so doing, she creates a reality in which any realm that exists beyond the borders of Britain serves to further enrich its naval officers such as Captain Wentworth so that he may take his position most potently back home in Britain among a rising meritocratic, naval class. Thus, any imperial gains on the part of Captain Wentworth or any other navy officer operate as the means to move up the social ladder. Moreover, the true object of Wentworth’s desire is Anne Elliot who embodies all that is prim and proper within the Regency era. Indeed, Anne is admired by numerous characters for her nobility, propriety and mental capabilities; she represents all the
high ideals expected of a woman in patriarchal Britain. In that sense, Wentworth’s devotion and constancy toward her reflect the Royal Navy’s allegiance and staunch commitment to the Empire. Wentworth toils away for years engaging in dangerous ventures to render himself worthy of Anne Elliot’s hand in marriage. Consequently, the British Navy as depicted in *Persuasion* represents the glorified defenders and champions of the Empire. Seen in this light, Wentworth’s pursuit of Anne Elliot, at some level, parallels the imperialistic quest to uphold Britain’s high ideals and values.

Initially, navy officers are mentioned as an answer to Sir Walter Elliot’s financial plight. He has buried himself in debts so steeply to the point where he must find a tenant for the luxurious Kellynch Hall while he and his family rent an apartment in Bath. Mr. Shepherd suggests that naval officers returning from the war would make “very responsible tenants” (Austen, 1993: 13), and that “many a noble fortune has been made during the war” (Austen, 1993: 13). Navy officers are held in high esteem in this narrative; they have fought nobly in the war and deserve the riches that they have acquired. These riches, in turn, will help the less noble aristocracy, represented here by the irresponsible spendthrift Sir Walter, preserve their wealth and class. Navy officers are portrayed as trustworthy enough to safeguard the valuables of Kellynch Hall during the absence of the Elliots since, according to Mrs. Clay, sailors “are so neat and careful in their ways!” (Austen, 1993: 14)

The navy is further glorified by Anne who states:

> The navy, I think, who have done so much for us, have at least an equal claim with any set of men, for all the comforts and all the privileges which any home can give. Sailors work hard enough for their comforts, we must all allow.

*(Austen, 1993: 14)*

Here Anne inadvertently voices Said’s dichotomy of “the familiar (Europe, the West, ‘us’) and the strange (the Orient, the East, ‘them’)” (Said, 1978: 43); sailors are devoted to safeguarding the interests of the Empire abroad, so they are entitled to be rewarded upon their return by being given access to the comforts of the upper class. Navy officers preserve the lofty ideals of “us” the entitled British subjects while the imperialist invasions serve only as the means to provide comfort for “us” back home. Here the “other” or “them” are not even mentioned as the second half of the dichotomy; the objectified colonies simply exist absent as part of the hard work that sailors perform in order to sustain the luxurious lifestyle of the British aristocracy.

Ironically enough, the aristocratic Sir Walter Elliot arrogantly devalues the navy, claiming that while it has its “utility,” he would not willingly befriend any of its members since it has become “the means of bringing persons of obscure birth into undue distinction” (Austen, 1993: 15). Here Austen pits the aristocracy
against the rising naval, meritocratic class; she implicitly critiques the haughtiness of the upper-class individuals while, at the same time, elevating the moral character of the naval officers.

The first among these navy officers to become an object of interest for the Elliots as a potential tenant is Admiral Croft, “who having acquired a very handsome fortune, was wishing to settle in his own country” (Austen, 1993: 16). The reader later learns that, much to the delight of Sir Walter, Admiral Croft is “of a gentleman’s family” (Austen, 1993: 16); but to the prospective landlord’s consternation, the Admiral has been stationed in the East Indies after participating in “the Trafalgar action” (Austen, 1993: 16) and hence must have a complexion “about as orange as the cuffs and capes of my [Sir Walter’s] livery” (Austen, 1993: 16). Sir Walter’s objections to naval officers due to their inevitably weather-beaten appearances not only arise from his own sense of pompousness, but also echo the imperialist/Orientalist image of the East as a harsh place with its scorching sun, and rough conditions, so that its inhabitants are of inferior appearance and manners in contrast to their European counterparts.

Sir Walter voices his ill opinion of naval officers earlier by alluding to an encounter with Admiral Baldwin whom he describes as “the most deplorable looking personage … his face the color of mahogany, rough and rugged to the last degree, all lines and wrinkles …” (Austen, 1993: 15). Sir Walter continues to make a sweeping generalization about sailors: “I know it is the same with them all: they are all knocked about, and exposed to every climate, and every weather, till they are not fit to be seen” (Austen, 1993: 15). Nonetheless, Mr. Shepherd assures Sir Walter that Admiral Croft, despite his being stationed in the East Indies, is “a very hale, hearty, well-looking man, a little weather-beaten, to be sure, but not much; and quite the gentlemen” (Austen, 1993: 16). By unpacking this small, overlooked exchange, the sense of aristocratic superiority becomes exceedingly evident. Sailors who have not lived very long among “us” in their native Britain, may have acquired certain less appealing traits from living abroad and interacting with “them,” the natives of the colonies and non-European lands into which the sailors have ventured into while “working hard” to preserve the imperial ideals back home. Even the mention of “mahogany” is a direct allusion to the colonies since this type of wood was widely imported from the eastern colonies during the nineteenth century and had become a sign of the rich upper-class home. In fact, references to mahogany are interspersed within Austen’s works. Such a reference may be found in Mansfield Park; accordingly, “historians have written at length about the popularity of wood that was imported from British colonies, such as mahogany and rosewood” (Fowler, 2017: 369–370).

Sir Walter’s superior stance toward the rising naval, meritocratic class comes to the fore most brutally in the brief flashback which depicts the ill-fated romance
between Captain Frederick and Anne Elliot seven years prior to the current events. He expresses severe disapproval of this “very degrading alliance” and “professed resolution of doing nothing for his daughter” (Austen, 1993: 20). This flashback serves to further reinforce Sir Walter’s high and mighty attitude; it also gives the reader the chance to trace Captain Wentworth’s ascension to power and wealth in the navy. After Anne breaks off their engagement due to her father’s objections and Lady Russel’s lack of support, Captain Wentworth begins his path of distinction in the navy:

He had distinguished himself, and early gained the other step in rank – and must now, by successive captures, have made a handsome fortune. She [Anne] had only navy lists and newspapers for her authority, but she could not doubt his being rich.

(Austen, 1993: 20)

The reader is not privy to Captain Wentworth’s actions abroad nor how he had acquired his wealth and status. The “captures” and conquests he participates in simply are mentioned here to explain Wentworth’s newly attained “handsome fortune.” There is no reference to the imperialistic assaults he engaged in or the non-British people he killed or hurt along the way; all that concerns the narrative is that he is now rich and worthy enough to perhaps pursue the seemingly unattainable Anne Elliot once again. All overseas territories act as the instrument with which the British Royal Naval Officer may achieve his own distinction and preserve the lofty ideals of the British upper class no matter how ungrateful some of its members, such as Sir Walter, may be.

The contrast between the nobility and decency of the naval, meritocratic class on the one hand and the misplaced sense of superiority pertaining to the aristocracy on the other is a recurring motif throughout the novel. The narrator states that the Crofts take over Kellynch Hall with “true naval alertness”; in more than one instance positive attributes such as alertness, responsibility, dependability, industriousness, and trustworthiness are associated with the navy. On the contrary, fickleness, irresponsibility, and idleness are connected with the aristocracy. The binary oppositions between the meritocracy and the aristocracy echo those between the Western colonizers and the colonized Easterners. In a scene when Anne contemplates her insignificance within the large scale of things, the narrator alludes to the upper class’s false sense of superiority. Anne wishes that

the other Elliots could have her advantage in seeing how unknown, or unconsidered there, were the affairs which at Kellynch Hall were treated as of such general publicity and pervading interests ... she believed she must now
submit to feel that another lesson, in the art of knowing our nothingness beyond our own circle, was become necessary for her.

(Austen, 1993: 31)

The preceding quote further accentuates the arrogance of the upper class and their self-centeredness. Such an imposed sense of superiority reflects the self-importance of the British Empire. The Elliots have not ventured out of the confines of Kellynch Hall; therefore, they do not have an inkling of life beyond its gates. Similarly, British subjects are oblivious to the navy’s feats overseas, especially the captures and the conquests. As Fraiman (1995) points out, “a reader of Said would recognize the stage is set for imperial conquest, for such people go abroad only to discount the significance of other populations and outlooks” (813). Even though Austen in the quotation above criticizes the self-centered, pompous aristocracy, she does not question imperialism in *Persuasion* but rather “celebrates (as a meritocratic alternative) the British navy that made it possible” (Fraiman, 1995: 814). Actually, Austen even hints that the navy officers are rightfully joining the ranks of the aristocracy, hence the mention of the increasing number of naval officers in fashionable Bath as Admiral Croft explains to Anne during their stay in Bath: “We are always meeting with some old friend or other; the streets are always full of them” (Austen, 1993: 130). Naval officers, with all their merits and superior ethical code are deemed entitled to the comforts of upper-class life.

Nonetheless, one of the less worthy sailors who is actually absent from the narrative is the son of the Musgroves, or as they refer to him, “Poor Richard” (Austen, 1993: 38). Not all men possess the strength of character and determination necessary to succeed in the navy; Richard is certainly not one of its lucky members. He is described by the narrator as a “hopeless son” whom the Musgroves are lucky enough “to lose … before he reached his twentieth year” (Austen, 1993: 38). After spending several years at sea, news of his death finally reaches the Musgroves. At some point, Richard had come under the care of Captain Frederick upon the *Laconia*. As opposed to Captain Wentworth who is described in Richard’s letters as a “fine dashing fellow” (Austen, 1993: 38), Richard’s own weak, unstable character deems him unworthy of the navy. Here the Musgroves’ son who descends from wealth and distinction is designated to be of far inferior standing than the bright, notable Captain Wentworth. Once again the noble meritocracy, represented by naval officers, is given precedence and merit as opposed to the less praiseworthy aristocracy.

In the same episode above, the Musgroves inquire about the life of a navy officer and the reader becomes more informed about Wentworth’s abundance of undertakings abroad. He had sailed upon the *Laconia* to the West Indies where he had acquired a substantial amount of money. He states,
Ah! Those were pleasant days when I had the Laconia! How fast I made money in her. – A friend of mine, and I, had such a lovely cruise together on the Western Islands.

(Austen, 1993: 50)

Foreign territories are alluded to simply as stations wherein the British naval officers may come into a large fortune or within which the sailors may engage in recreational pleasures. Such overseas countries do not exist in this narrative as sovereign territories with their own history, culture and inhabitants; rather they are the objects at the disposal of the subject/naval officers to further reinforce their imperialistic ideals and power.

Captain Frederick, now a highly accomplished officer meets Charles Musgrove’s approval as a potential groom for one of his sisters:

he [Charles] had once heard Captain Wentworth himself say ... he had not made less than twenty thousand pounds by war. Here was a fortune at once; besides which there would be the chance of what might be done in any future war.

(Austen, 1993: 57)

War here, with all its overseas conquests and subjugations, becomes a medium of financial and social advancement for capable navy officers such as Captain Wentworth. The narrative’s focal point is the advantageous actions of the navy officers; all accounts of suffering, agony and destruction caused by war are absent. The narrative of the other, or the inhabitants of the overseas territories subdued in this war or any future war remains silenced, marginalized, and dismissed as non-existent in a similar manner that Antigua is barely mentioned in *Mansfield Park.*

Captain Wentworth’s lofty status is reiterated even by the supercilious Mary Elliot, who retains “a considerable share of the Elliot self-importance” (Austen, 1993: 27), yet she agrees with Charles that Wentworth would be a “capital match” for one of the Musgrove sisters. Wentworth’s prize money allows him to possibly even claim a spot among the upper class and be “made a baronet” (Austen, 1993: 57). He and his future bride may become “Sir Frederick and Lady Wentworth” (Austen, 1993: 58). The newly found wealth of the navy officers grants them access to titles of high distinction which, in turn, permit these officers membership among the British aristocracy. Not only do the foreign conquests play an instrumental role in upholding imperialistic ideals, but such overseas victories help to further expand the aristocracy, much to the dissatisfaction of its arrogant members, to include navy officers of high distinction.
Other navy officers who have benefited from their ventures abroad include Captains Harville and Benwick, whom the Musgroves and Anne Elliot become acquainted with during their stay in Lyme. Both are dear friends of Captain Wentworth, and upon observing their comradery and lifestyles Louisa Musgrove expresses deep admiration for “the character of the navy” (Austen, 1993: 75). She praises

Their friendliness, their brotherliness, their openness, their uprightness; protesting that she was convinced of sailors having more worth and warmth than any other set of men in England; that they only knew how to live, and they deserved to be respected and loved.

(Austen, 1993: 75)

Austen sets out humanizing the sailors and portrays them as sensitive individuals who should be rewarded for the “sacrifices” they have made abroad. Naval officers as depicted here in all their respectability, morality, solidarity, and fraternal ties deserve respect and admiration upon their return home. Captain Benwick, who is staying with the Harvilles, is described as a melancholy, poetic figure who, after the tragic loss of his fiancée, indulges in reading “well-bound volumes” of poetry. Furthermore, Anne describes the pleasing ambience of Captain Harville’s humble lodgings which denotes traces of his career in the navy. Anne observes

some few articles of a rare species of wood, excellently worked up, and with something curious and valuable from all the distant countries Captain Harville had visited ... connected as it all was with his profession, the fruit of its labors, the effects of its influence on his habits, the picture of repose and domestic happiness.

(Austen, 1993: 75)

Here the affable Captain Harville is presented as a peaceful traveler, “visiting” distant lands and “collecting” rarities and valuables to ensure his “domestic happiness” back home. Once again, the officer as active subject has all the riches in the passive objectified foreign lands at his disposal to reach the accumulation of his desires, namely domestic, materialistic and social benefits. The subdued people and territories occupy a peripheral or almost non-existent space in this recounting of events; only the subject naval officer basking in the “fruit of [his] labor,” delighting in his exotic possessions takes place front and center in this narrative.

The notion of overseas fortune and wealth is hinted at somewhat off-handedly in Anne’s encounter with her poor, ill friend Mrs. Smith. After her husband’s death, Mrs. Smith had fallen from rank due to the loss of her husband’s fortune;
this minor character ends up revealing the true dark nature of Anne’s deceitful cousin, Mr. Elliot who is responsible for Mrs. Smith’s current unfortunate circumstances. After Anne’s marriage to the honorable Captain Wentworth, he uses his naval connections to come to Mrs. Smith’s aid. He succeeds in “putting her [Mrs. Smith] in the way of recovering her husband’s property in the West Indies” (Austen, 1993: 198); consequently, she is once again able to enjoy the comforts that her wealth offers. The overseas colonial property, rightfully acquired or not, acts as the means for Mrs. Smith to achieve a luxurious life back home, and it is the upstanding naval officer who is instrumental in retrieving this property for a subject of the Empire.

The rise of the naval meritocracy best manifests itself at the end of the novel when Captain Wentworth, with all the affluence and consideration warranted him as an accomplished navy officer, is approved of as a proper match by Sir Walter for his daughter Anne:

Captain Wentworth, with five and twenty pounds, and as high in his profession as merit and activity could place him, was no longer nobody. He was esteemed quite worthy to address the daughter of a foolish, spendthrift baronet ...

(Austen, 1993: 195)

The only obstacle in the way of their domestic bliss is a potential war; the narrator states:

She [Anne] gloried in being a sailor’s wife, but she would pay the tax of quick alarm for belonging to that profession which is, if possible, more distinguished in its domestic virtues than in its national importance.

(Austen, 1993: 199)

The domesticity of the navy is intricately bound to Britain’s overseas imperialist ventures. It only gains “national importance” by maintaining the superior status of the wealthy aristocracy back home. The narrative strategy in the preceding quotation further encapsulates the imperialist perspective wherein war is viewed simply as the means that may disrupt the harmony of the naval officer’s domestic contentment rather than as a potential for international disaster.

Conclusion

The foregoing analysis of *Persuasion* within a Saidian theoretical framework establishes the link between imperialist subjugation in foreign lands on the one
hand and the luxury and well-being of the British Empire’s ruling class and aristocracy back home on the other. The preceding reading traces the imperialist undertones veiled within the folds of Austen’s seemingly domestic narrative. The glorification and favorable portrayal of the supposedly pristine British Navy becomes increasingly evident once the reader applies Said’s strategies of narrative scrutiny to this novel. The principal plot’s struggles and conflicts related to the tumultuous romance between Anne Elliot and Captain Wentworth is embedded in the romanticization of imperialist enterprises overseas.

By exposing the pre-imperialist strategies utilized within canonical texts, it is hoped that any teacher in an English department of a foreign university, specifically in a formerly colonized country, may take a step further toward decolonizing the curriculum. It is by adopting a deconstructive, Saidian reading to such classical works which are oftentimes included in the syllabus that English departments around the world may undertake the essential formulation of the culture of resistance so crucial to decolonize their curricula of any residual imperialism.

References


