The Theme Of Slavery In Mansfield Park

While brief, the theme of slavery in Dacre's novel is clearly present in it's portrayal of Zofloya, but a novel that illustrates the theme of slavery much more prominantly is Jane Austen's 1814 novel, Mansfield Park. Despite lower and working class characters being presented from afar, whilst the upper classes and the elite are at the very centre of the novel, Austen's repetition on matters concerned with the making of money in fact hide the shocking attitudes in regards to economic status and slavery. It is by this shift in focus onto how such capital is gained that we can begin to understand Austen's representation of the finances behind Mansfield Park.

Austen makes it very clear that Sir Thomas' wealth comes from a plantation where "he found it expedient to go to Antigua himself, for the better arrangement of his affairs" and it is here that the wealth and morals of Fanny Price come into conflict as she was once a poor girl from a family who could barely survive, but is later seen to readily adopt the principles and lifestyle of the upper classes. The irony here is that her own situation places her closer to the lower classes than anything else and so summises that whilst she is to have a home on the estate, it is in fact partaking in financial wrongdoings and it is this that illustrates Fanny as a representation of the backhanded financial workings that uphold the entire estate. The novel is based on the rapidly changing political, economical and societal attidues toward slavery as Michael Steffes explains in "Slavery and Mansfield Park" shows us that "although… England profited, and virtually all used cotton, sugar, and other products of the labor of slaves in their lives daily, anti-slavery sentiment was very wide-spread".

It is Fanny that represents the side of society who were able to act and think with reason and morality and could therefore recognise the wrongdoings of an unethical financial system that enforces slavery in order to gain commerce. In this particular occasion, those who found the prospect of slavery distasteful went on to make small protestations whislt allowing the continuation of a corrupt financial system. Austen further illustrates this in the discussion of the play that is featured in a large part of the first half of the novel and focuses mainly on the elite as "Fanny looked on and listened, not unamused to observe the selfishness". Like many other members of society, Fanny is disgusted by the evil nature of slavery, but also finds herself somewhat humoured by the greed of those actively involved purely just for the sake of business. This use of moral indifference in the younger characters in the novel allows the reader to see the genuine socio-economic divide. Talk of such a topic is rare within the estate and when Fanny raises concerns over said topic "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". This very prominent silence is suggestive of Sir Thomas and his family's attitude toward the act of slavery and George E. Boulukos goes on in "The Politics of Silence: Mansfield Park and the amelioration of Slavery" to say that "the silence is produced by the moral indifference of Fanny's young cousins, not by his shock or discomfort. Austen, then, makes a moral point about Fanny's cousins… that silence about slavery in early nineteenth-century Britain can only be seen as a moral failing". Such moral failing is seen in the continued use of gaining commerce from the morally inexcusable act of slavery and this societal disconnet from such a large issue highlights the flaws in society where the value of cheap goods was valued higher than moral worth.

Much like in many other of Austen’s novels, wealth, finance and commerce all play a significant role in the plot as such topics allow for the representation of the lower classes to be set aside in order to focus mainly on the overindulgence and extravagant nature of the upper classes where such activities are permitted by the employment of slavery as whilst money is able to solve many issues for the upper class families, it also leaves many ethical and moral complications.