

## Jane Austen: Quest for Moral Autonomy

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*The social and moral codes of Jane Austen's time laid a definite pattern for a woman. In spite of the patriarchal nature of society, a major change in the sensibility and sensitivity had begun to take place. Jane Austen was deeply influenced by Mary Wollstonecraft's A Vindication of the Rights of Woman published in 1792, which reflected her ideas on feminine rationality, status of women in society, their education and marriage. Taking the lead from Fanny Burney, Jane Austen sought to revise the traditions of the novel as a means to authenticate stereotyped definitions of women, envisage themselves anew and thereby provide models for change. It is with Jane Austen that the actual feminisation of the English novel begins. Her quiet unassuming nature, persistent hard work and perfection enabled her to raise the form of the novel to a new level. The prevalent notion about Romanticism and Sentimentalism so commonly found in Richardson's works had no impact on Jane Austen. She formulated her own ideas and views and felt that tales should have a moral. She abhorred romanticised characters living in idealized conditions and made them into practical and down-to-earth beings. She felt that the mind must govern the heart. Her heroines like Emma Woodhouse and Catherine Morland exhibit a gradual progression from a state of naivety to rational maturity. While Jane Austen's fiction is thus essentially domestic, revolving around love and marriage, which she considered as a means of self-actualisation, this article will focus on the feminist undercurrents in her novels.*

Jane Austen is traditionally considered to be an unambiguous writer who accepted the order and stability of society confirming in the process the norms of patriarchy. Jane Austen's novels have been dismissed by feminist critics because of their conventional endings. But her real concern is the way the events prepare the female protagonists for the business of living. She wrote at a time when patriarchy was taken for granted. Her women are at the bottom rung of a patriarchal hierarchy with a male master at the top, hawk-like looking for any transgression of authority. Such a system flourished on unfair property laws where women were mere "pawns in the game of expansion and acquisition."<sup>1</sup> Constant references to money and property in Jane Austen's novels manifest her concern with the unfairness of authoritarian property laws. In the absence of a male heir, the widow and the daughters are displaced. Jane Austen links women's vulnerability not so much to female weaknesses as to their lack of economic rights.

The common view of Jane Austen as a novelist of manners undermines a subtle and original

portrayal of her heroines. Modern feminist critics are put off by old –fashioned conventions and the significance given to marriage in Jane Austen’s novels. Marriage for Jane Austen does not mean woman’s subordination. Rather it represents an emotional and intellectual union of two adults leading to real marital bliss. Women’s identity instead of being subsumed is recognized and respected. The social and moral codes of Jane Austen’s time laid a definite pattern for a woman. In spite of the patriarchal nature of society, a major change in the sensibility and sensitivity had begun to take place. Jane Austen was deeply influenced by Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* published in 1792, which reflected her ideas on feminine rationality, status of women in society, their education and marriage. The similarity between Jane Austen and Mary Wollstonecraft has made Margaret Kirkham remark that, they were heirs to “a common tradition of feminist development.”<sup>2</sup> Being sensitive to the controversial social environment around her and also realizing the drawbacks suffered by women in her society, Jane Austen placed more emphasis on female characters in her novels. The accomplishments of women in the eighteenth century were restricted to dancing, playing the piano, painting etc. in which no intellectual pursuits were involved. They were expected to restrain their natural desires and wishes and to excel only in one art – to attract eligible bachelors with fortune and marry them. All of Jane Austen’s young heroines are engaged in debunking this game of love and intrigues.

Jane Austen understood the contradictions in human nature and relationships. The prevalent notion about Romanticism and Sentimentalism so commonly found in Richardson’s works had no impact on her. She formulated her own ideas and views and felt that tales should have a moral. She abhorred romantic characters living in idealized conditions and made them into practical and down-to-earth beings. She felt that the mind must govern the heart. Her heroines like Emma Woodhouse and Catherine Morland exhibit a gradual progression from a state of naivety to rational maturity.

Quite a large majority of critics of English novel, and they are a legion, such as Mary Lascelles, Marvin Mudrick and D.W. Harding, while analyzing Jane Austen’s structural excellence, style, moral concerns and ironic vision tended to shy away from the fact of her femininity. Even women critics like Barbara Hardy and Marilyn Butler preferred not to emphasize her femaleness because she unquestioningly accepted patriarchal values. But there has been a considerable shift in critical opinion after the publication of the influential book by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Mad Woman in the Attic* (1979). The journal *Woman and Literature* (formerly *Mary Wollstonecraft Newsletter*) brought out a special issue on Jane Austen in 1982 (edited by Janet Todd) and in 1983 Margaret Kirkham’s *Jane Austen: Feminism and Fiction*, placed her right in the mainstream of the intellectual tradition of Enlightenment feminism that began in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries with Mary Astell and continued until the French Revolution culminating in the works of Mary Wollstonecraft.<sup>3</sup>

Jane Austen knew well the sorry plight of young women in the late-eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. They had no choice but to live with their families until their marriage. But it was an arduous task to enter the marriage market without sufficient money. Middle-class women were in a bind as they could not undertake any menial work without the fear of loss of their good name and reputation. The

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portals of universities were closed for women. That is why most of the women who had to fend for themselves became governesses. They were at least assured of the basic necessities of food and shelter. Though such women lived with the family their position was scarcely better than that of servants. Teaching in a school or working as a governess were the only options open to decent women. The plight of a governess is the subject of most of the novels written by women in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Mr. Knightley in *Emma* feels bad for Emma's governess Miss Bates, "she has sunk from the comforts she was born to; and if she live to old age, must probably sink more."<sup>4</sup> Knightley's comment stresses dire financial and material straits of Miss Bates.

Like Fanny Burney, Jane Austen was acutely aware of the great ideological debate about the education, place and status of women in society at the end of the eighteenth century. In a very subtle manner, Jane Austen wove these strands into the fabric of her fiction and questioned the gender based gamut of relationships. According to Rousseau, men are the *raison d'etre* of women's life. Rousseau's statement that "woman is framed particularly for the pleasure of man"<sup>5</sup> had drained all meaning from woman's life. Her sole objective was to allure man. This provocative statement finds its rejoinder in Elizabeth Bennet's refusal of Mr. Collins's marriage proposal in *Pride and Prejudice*. Jane Austen, like Mary Wollstonecraft believed in the rationality and moral autonomy of women. *Pride and Prejudice* exposes confrontation between two ideologies of marriage and two conflicting views about women. Mr. Collins cannot believe Elizabeth's rejection of him and interprets it as her "wish of increasing [his] love by suspense according to the usual practice of elegant females"<sup>6</sup> Elizabeth's reply "Do not consider me now as an elegant female intending to plague you, but as a rational creature speaking the truth from her heart,"<sup>7</sup> indicates the dilemma of intelligent women. Jane Austen was aware of the views of thinkers and philosophers who stressed the importance of reason in human behaviour. But in respect of women's education and ideals of feminine behaviour, society followed double standards. All her novels present the deep-seated contradiction between the rational norm in the eighteenth century society and the standards which women were expected to follow.

The question of women's education was one of the burning issues of Jane Austen's time. Catherine Macaulay Graham pleaded for a regular formal education on rational lines. According to her "when the sex has been taught wisdom by education, they will be glad to give up indirect influence for rational privileges."<sup>8</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) argued that women should have proper education so that they would not have to resort to indirect and artful means to gain power over men. She condemned the conduct book writers for being more anxious to fashion "alluring mistresses than affectionate wives and rational mothers."<sup>9</sup> This was in total contrast to the orthodox views held by the likes of the Earl of Chesterfield who saw women as "children of a larger growth"<sup>10</sup> Hannah More too, in the next decade echoed similar views to prove that logic and abstract thought were foreign to women.<sup>11</sup>

While rationality and individuality were the leading concepts, the writers of conduct books were

exhorting women to display their weakness and frailty as their most attractive features to tempt men. Jane Austen understood the irrelevance of such ideas, which were meant not to make women individuals but only to secure husbands for the sake of spurious identity and status. Obviously, Jane Austen took a radical stand as far as the question of women's education was concerned. She broke away from the stereotype frail and weak heroine entirely dependent on man. Elizabeth Bennet is independent, unaffected and intelligent. By walking through the muddy countryside to see her sick sister, she throws to the four winds all codes of female propriety. Catherine Morland, too, symbolizes rejection of the standard notion of the femininity in *Northanger Abbey* which is a scathing satire on Gothic Romance. She preferred rough boys' games to elegant occupation such as watering a rose bush or feeding a canary. "She was moreover noisy and wild, hated confinement and cleanliness, and loved nothing so well in the world as rolling down the green slope at the back of the house."<sup>12</sup> She does not pine and swoon like the heroine of the novels of sensibility, but takes a hearty meal and has sound sleep. She is a picture of physical energy and spontaneity and provides a fitting contrast to affected and cunning Isabella Thorpe, a husband hunter. This shows Jane Austen's stand in favour of female autonomy, eschewing romantic fantasies.

Jane Austen provides contrasts between vitality and sense and debility and sentiment, though in a subtle manner, in *Pride and Prejudice* between Elizabeth Bennet and Miss Bingley, in *Persuasion* between Anne Elliot and Louisa Musgrove and between Elinor Dashwood and Lucy Steele in *Sense and Sensibility*. Elizabeth Bennet reads a book not to attract Darcy and win his approval like Miss Bingley, who pretends to dislike dance as Darcy does not like it. Elizabeth Bennet, Emma Woodhouse and Catherine Morland enjoy robust health as opposed to delicate forerunners like Pamela, Clarissa and other female protagonists prone to fainting fits. Out of these three Jane Austen heroines, only Elizabeth is a complete individual and closest to the feminist ideal of an independent woman. She does not need a man to complete her. Jane Austen lays great stress on physical health and makes it an imperative of emotional strength. Even modern feminists will not fail to appreciate Jane Austen for creating heroines with their own individuality who do not exist only for men's pleasure.

Jane Austen anticipated feminism by condemning sexual and moral double standards. Three of her heroines, Anne Elliot in *Persuasion*, Elinor Dashwood *Sense and Sensibility* and Fanny Price in *Mansfield Park* challenge the patriarchal order. And as Mary Evans points out, it is "an explicitly feminist assertion of the rights of women to self-determination."<sup>13</sup> A recurrent theme of Jane Austen's novel is the heroine's resistance to the patriarchal social mores which curb her individuality. Jane Austen's concern is woman as an individual and her inter-action with other individuals.

For many contemporary feminists Jane Austen's novels have neither interest nor place in feminist tradition as she accepts hetero-sexual marriage. But as Margaret Kirkham has cogently argued:

Jane Austen's heroines are not self-conscious feminists, yet they are all exemplary of the first claim of Enlightenment feminism: that women share the same moral nature as men, ought to

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share the same moral status, and exercise the same responsibility for their own conduct.<sup>14</sup>

Jane Austen's contribution to feminism is in making her heroines strive for moral autonomy. Being a realist, she was aware of the hazards on the way. Like Fanny Burney, Jane Austen is not concerned with abstractions. She relates women's aspirations to sexual politics of micro-economics and laws governing property and inheritance.

Jane Austen's very first novel *Sense and Sensibility* poignantly portrays the displacement of Mrs Dashwood and her three daughters Elinor, Marianne and Margaret from their home, Norland Park after the death of Mr Henry Dashwood. Like Fanny Burney, she had scant regard for the whims of the old men in making their bequest. In the behaviour of John Dashwood towards his step mother and sisters, she evokes the power of women to guide and manipulate men. Though women are not lawful possessors of estate, they wield a considerable power in its management. Death of the patriarch invariably led to impoverishment and homelessness. The agonising experience of Mrs Henry Dashwood and her daughters is the main reason of Jane Austen's laying it thick on property, money and marriage.

The title of the novel *Sense and Sensibility* has been commonly analysed to reduce the two sisters from complete human beings to abstract traits. A complete and unbiased reading of the novel unravels not anti-thesis but the over-lapping of various attributes. Elinor is not Lady Sensible nor is Marianne senseless Sensibility. Elinor and Marianne are the best of friends and share common interests and a kind and amiable disposition. Jane Austen extols neither sense nor sensibility but advocates a blend of the two. Elinor's spirited defence of Edward and Col. Brandon should be of particular interest to feminists in its belittling of the macho image in favour of the sensitive man. Women can not live in isolation. Even emancipated women have to inter-act with men. Only a sensitive man can understand and respond to the aspirations of a woman. Significantly, all the 'good' men who ultimately marry Jane Austen's heroines lack the polish and captivating manner of suave dilettantes like Willoughby. Jane Austen's shattering of the macho-image is a great step forward. She is at her ironical best in the portrayal of Willoughby and Marianne and scathingly lambastes the romantic syndrome of knight in armour and damsel in distress.

In dwelling on Elinor's censure of Willoughby's "propensity... of saying too much what he thought on every occasion, without attention to persons or circumstances"<sup>15</sup> Jane Austen examines the issue of intimacy and reserve. All her novels resonate with the significance of 'inner space' for the development of an individual's personality. This inner space can be guaranteed only through reserve. But reserve for Jane Austen is distinct from self-centredness and does not preclude responsiveness.

It enables Elinor to withstand bereavement, sorrow, adversity, humiliation, her sister's illness, disappointment in love and even fulfillment in love. Elinor is able to keep up the *façade* of politeness with her brother, even when she is annoyed or hurt. She can put up with grave provocation as is evident from her interaction with Lucy. But Elinor is neither a hypocrite nor a dissembler, only an

amiable and pleasant person. Nowhere in the novel does she try to be self-righteous.

Elinor's fortitude is in contrast to impulsive Marianne who believes in giving full vent to her grief. Her 'potent' sensibility considers composure a disgrace. Marianne's development involves chastening of her romanticism and she is forced to take in reality. This change in her is brought about when she is laid up in bed. Her fever symbolizes her catharsis of self-enlightenment resulting in her acceptance of Col. Brandon. Jane Austen abhorred the idea of perfection and considered moral platitudes untenable. Men in Jane Austen's novels are not presented as predators seducing their helpless victims. Women's entanglements are the result of their choice, exercise of their free will. One of Jane Austen's noteworthy contributions to women's cause is in vesting her heroines with active principle by making them responsible for their actions.

*Pride and Prejudice*, perhaps the most popular of her novels, exhibits definite traces of what we call feminism. Elizabeth Bennet, 'the wittiest and most spirited heroine' of the novel anticipates modern emancipated woman. While most of the other characters are all cast in a mould and their lives move in a small circle, Elizabeth abundantly displays an independence of mind and a capacity for independent thought. A young girl of refinement and cultivated intelligence as she is, she finds it difficult to conform to the standards of behaviour prescribed by the society which she holds in contempt. Unlike her sister Jane and others, Elizabeth possesses the remarkable trait of assertiveness. Equipped with intellectual superiority and a capacity for judgement she refuses to be constrained by stagnant conventions and conformism. She has her own dignity and is not prepared to give it up just for security sans love. Elizabeth knows that to be mistress of Pemberley would be something but she exhibits her great spiritual and moral courage in saying 'no' to the marriage proposal made by Darcy.

Elizabeth is endowed with sound commonsense which helps her face any situation with confidence and courage. Her sense of self-respect and self-confidence does not keep her blind to the facts of the situation. She sheds the prejudice which earlier makes her misconstrue every word and every action of Darcy. On the receipt of Darcy's letter begins the process of self-awakening. She realizes the truth of his explanation and feels ashamed of having been 'wretchedly blind!' She is filled with revulsion at her own lack of fairness and cries out: "How despicably have I acted!... I who prided myself on my discernment! – I, who have valued myself on my abilities!... How humiliating is this discovery..."<sup>16</sup> This is a moment of truth for Elizabeth. She is confronted with the truth of her own follies and prejudices. As she comes to learn more and more about the positive side of Darcy, she feels proud of him and thinks that she will never be able to show the full measure of her gratitude to him. This transformation in her attitude is a sign of Elizabeth's mature thinking which harmonises with those who assert the rights of women.

Elizabeth gives a clear indication of her mental strength when she faces Lady Catherine with unruffled dignity revealing that she is a spirited and independent young girl who cannot be brow beaten. Even after Elizabeth has revised her opinion of Darcy and is full of appreciation for the man,

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she does not go to the other extreme of eulogizing him. She comes to feel that theirs is a “union that must have been to the advantage of both.”<sup>17</sup> With her tremendous self-confidence, admirable composure of mind, and her innate talent she is able to bring about a complete change in the attitude of Darcy. And her prejudice against him gets shed.

The novel *Pride and Prejudice* upholds woman’s dignity. The opening sentence, “It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife”<sup>18</sup> itself underlines man’s need of a wife. Elizabeth is not overawed by the presence of Lady Catherine or Darcy. Elizabeth’s vivacious wit forces Darcy to take more than due notice of her. Though noticing the absence of conventional beauty, Darcy is arrested by lively manners and beautiful expression. Female charm is re-defined in Elizabeth whose bantering fascinates Darcy. Teasing is a fore-play in Jane Austen’s terminology. Women’s accomplishments do not consist in fine arts, embroidery etc. Darcy’s emphasis is on reading. He is fascinated by Elizabeth’s fine eyes. Stress on eyes is significant because eyes are an index of one’s mind. Mary Evans adduces two reasons for interpreting Jane Austen as a feminist besides her support for upholding English Morality which decries the sexual and moral double standards:

First, Austen values the part that women play in domestic and family life, and second, she portrays women as acting and capable of acting independently of men and patriarchal interests. Austen’s morality then is one which does not endorse worldly self-interest, public and fashionable standards, material self-enhancement, or entrepreneurial greed.<sup>19</sup>

Women in Jane Austen’s novels have moral autonomy and are capable of deciding for themselves without referring to any paternal mentor. As Fanny points out in *Mansfield Park*: “We have all a better guide in ourselves, if we would attend to it, than any person can be.”<sup>20</sup> Assertion of moral autonomy on the part of Fanny is quite significant considering her dubious status of a dependent in *Mansfield Park*. She is sans beauty that could off set her lack of dowry. Above all, she has been brought up in Mansfield Park where all thoughts are supposed to be referred to Sir Thomas Bertram.

In *Mansfield Park*, Jane Austen a la feminists questions the very basis of patriarchy – family and inheritance. The Bertram family turns out to be not so fine after all. Banishment of Maria from Mansfield Park and acknowledgement of Fanny Price as its mistress is an affirmation of personal identity and authenticity. An individual, man or woman, can transcend the constraints of sex, class, formal education by means of merit and integrity. Fanny asserts her moral autonomy by rejecting Henry Crawford, thereby daring to incur Sir Bertram’s displeasure, resulting in her temporary banishment from Mansfield Park. Her three month long absence brings in its train cataclysms in Mansfield Park that result in complete restructuring of hierarchy. Disenchanted with Julia and Maria, Lady Bertram can find comfort only in Fanny: “Dear Fanny! Now I shall be comfortable.”<sup>21</sup>

Fanny's journey from a grudging and patronizing adoption to this warm welcome to Mansfield Park constitutes the action of the novel. Introduction of Crawfords is aimed at highlighting Fanny's merit cloaked in ordinariness. Crawfords – Henry and Mary represent glitter and glee with gold missing in their core. Jane Austen deplores not so much the vivacious vulgarity of Henry and Mary as their insensitiveness, selfishness and blatant vanity.

As opposed to self-effacing, unassuming but firm Fanny, Emma is refreshingly lively and vibrant. She is the only heroine in Jane Austen's novels to be the 'mistress of the mansion.' Possession of property empowers Emma which she misuses in match – making. Jane Austen firmly believed that property has to be managed with propriety. Emma lacks maturity and education required for a mature perspective and proper management of property. Her behaviour is child- like and the mantle of counselling falls upon Mr Knightley. Emma's vivacity is akin to that of Henry Crawford but she is without guile. Her boundless energy and exuberance are always mis-directed because of want of any gainful employment. She is Mary Crawford *sans* her disingenuousness. Emma's major shortcoming is her wilfulness. Emma's failure of perspicacity, though ludicrous and ironical, does not detract from her goodness. It rather adds to our enjoyment of her delightful misconceptions. She is so single-minded in her plans for Harriet Smith's marriage that she fails to notice Elton's attentions directed at her.

*Emma* is the glorification of an irrepressible female. Twenty – one year old Emma enjoys 'best blessings of existence,' beauty, intellect, material resources, comfortable home and happy disposition. She has had the best of nature and nurture. Jane Austen points out the inherent disadvantages of such an advantageous position in Emma's overbearing and imperious manner. Time and again in her novels, Jane Austen emphatically points out the urgency of women giving up their feminine vices of unnecessary meddling in the affairs of others. If women are to make their way up, they have to put an end to their tribal imaginings and fantasies. Jane Austen is on the look out for an ideal woman by portraying different prototypes and testing them in varied situations. She seems to be tentatively experimenting with various permutations and combinations of traits in her quest for an ideal woman. Jane Austen's stress on reserve is her recognition of 'inner space' essential for the growth of an individuals' personality.

Emma's development in the novel involves cutting down her imperiousness to a tolerable level. In keeping with Emma's bloated ego, the novel is named after her. In fact, this is the only novel to be named after its heroine and, in this sense, finally the heroine seems to have come of age. The very title of the novel suggests the predominance of a heroine who happens to decide not only for herself but for others as well. Blessed with family name and riches she falls a prey to egotistical tendencies and disregard for the feelings of others. But to gain self-knowledge and human understanding she has to constrain her ego and admit her follies of mis-judgement. Her romantic and assertive self has to learn

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to rein its imagination. The naïve but strong heroine sheds her delusions one by one to gain clarity and knowledge. Jane Austen firmly believes that it is not one's being a man or woman that determines one's superiority and inferiority, but it is what one makes of one's circumstances and opportunities. The real strength of character lies within. While upholding the import of material environs, Jane Austen recognizes the material advantages and their role in human relationships. For the wealthy, folly is not always folly. In *Emma*, her follies make her look delightful.

Emma is existentially authentic for she believes what she is doing and refuses to be influenced by others. She wants to love by proxy as she cherishes her independence and has decided not to enter into the intimacy of marriage. This existential experience is of great importance in the evolution of woman's emancipation. Emma's education is complete only when she becomes truthful enough to admit her love for Knightley. Elegant Emma becomes a complete woman with the dawn of rationality, a trait not earlier associated with women. In this respect, Jane Austen seems to anticipate modern feminism with its emphasis on reason not emotion.

Jane Austen's emphasis on rationality is continued in *Northanger Abbey* which is a satire on *Silly Novels* by male as well as female writers. Jane Austen is extremely critical of fantasy as a means of escape. *Northanger Abbey* is a critique on Gothic romances which influence the reader by triggering his or her imagination to such heights that one is sundered from the reality principle. In the journey of life one has to tread on solid ground rather than fly on the wings of fancy. Jane Austen's concern with ordinary lives of ordinary women is a deliberate attempt to espouse realism and denigrate romanticism. In Jane Austen's time women had no access to formal education. In moneyed ménages, pedagogy was a concern of governesses. But Catherine Morland, like Elizabeth and Elinor, is taught at home – accounts and writing by her father and French by her mother. Till she is fifteen years old, Catherine is wild, noisy and boyish in her taste for cricket, baseball and riding. She disdains feminine accomplishments like music and drawing. But this sprightly hoyden undergoes a complete metamorphosis after her selective reading of Pope, Gray, Thomson, Shakespeare and becomes such stuff that heroines are made of. Jane Austen's choice of excerpts from these authors underlines the importance of comprehensive education under expert guidance, by pointing out the dangers of haphazard and lop-sided education. Catherine's sensitive mind feeds on literature and ignores books of information. Jane Austen deplores Catherine's sensibility which is avid only for adventure and not knowledge.

Jane Austen time and again harps on the ignorance of the female mind. Catherine's chaperon, Mrs Allen does not escape the author's reproof for her 'trifling turn of mind.' Their routine at Bath encapsulates the meaninglessness of their visit. Jane Austen while absorbing many of Fanny Burney's fine points parodies *Evelina: A Young lady's Entrance into the World* where Evelina was cynosure of

all eyes. Catherine marches up and down the Upper Rooms with Mrs Allen without anyone noticing her. Jane Austen praises *Cecilia*, *Camilla*, *Belinda* as works, in which the greatest powers of the mind are displayed, in which the most thorough knowledge of human nature, the happiest delineation of its varieties, the liveliest effusions of wit and humour are conveyed to the world in the best chosen language.<sup>22</sup>

But Jane Austen is highly critical of Gothic literature, where, the substance of its papers so often consisting in the statement of improbable circumstances, unnatural characters, and topics of conversion, which no longer concern anyone living; and their language, too, frequently so coarse as to give no very favourable idea of the age that could endure it.<sup>23</sup>

Jane Austen in *Northanger Abbey* besides satirizing Gothic popular fiction is equally severe with duplicitous social mores. Catherine's innocence and directness is thrown into relief by Isabella's guile and equivocations. Henry Tilney's traditional Victorian concept of women and marriage is articulated in his comparison of matrimony and dancing. According to Henry, both in matrimony and dancing, "man has the advantage of choice, woman only the power of refusal."<sup>24</sup> Henry is awed by the directness and simplicity of Catherine. He is particularly charmed by the forthrightness of demure and diffident Catherine who does not care for polite affected lady-like manners. Her excited and concerned apology – "Oh! Mr Tilney, I have been quite wild to speak to you,"<sup>25</sup> – disarms him. Their rapport is spontaneous. Catherine, fed on books, is herself an open book for Henry Tilney. For Catherine, Mrs Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* and Gothic tales are her reference guides. Her conversation is cloyed with reference to books. The scene where Catherine's reference to a new publication containing murder, rioting and all horrible acts is construed by Miss Eleanor Tilney as factual, illustrates women's want of "observation discernment, judgment, fire, genius and wit."<sup>26</sup> The scene is of seminal importance, as it points to the hazards of blending the worlds of fiction and reality. *Northanger Abbey* is thus emblematic of Catherine's delusions. Her journey to Abbey will result in her enlightenment.

Jane Austen in her last novel *Persuasion* overtly enters the arena of sexual politics by making Anne reject, irrevocably any reference to books to prove women's famed fickleness.

Perhaps I shall – Yes, yes, if you please, no reference to examples in books. Men have had every advantage of us in telling their own story. Education has been theirs in so much higher a degree; the pen has been in their hands. I will not allow books to prove anything.<sup>27</sup>

Anne's retort to Captain Harville has been cited often by feminist theorists to substantiate their case against male hegemony in the field of letters. Anne tries to understand the masculine point of view with imagination, maturity and sagacity and attributes their opposing perceptions to their conditioned bias.

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Female 'fickleness' or inconstancy' is symbolic of 'feminine mystique' which Jane Austen explodes in her novels. In *Persuasion*, the very title highlights a meek, obedient, malleable and tractable feminine stereotype. But this trait of being open to persuasion implies woman's lack of firmness and fabled female prevarication. Jane Austen's last novel is a dialectic of duty and self-affirmation, conformism and moral autonomy. The novel introduces the sea-farers who imbue it with the whiff of naval breeze. Land locked locale is thrown open to the endless vistas of Admiral and Mrs Croft, Captain Harville and Captain Wentworth. Widely travelled Mrs Croft is used by Jane Austen to off-set intellectual stagnation of most of the women who remain confined to the hearth. A woman is bound by her domestic chores whereas a man is committed to his functional and social roles. Such segregation of functions is bound to develop different characteristics. Anne asserts that it is her Fate rather than her merit.

Jane Austen's delineation of women characters reflects her faith in the mental and moral strength of women. Man should try to shed his pre-conceived notions that women are frail, pretentious and frivolous. Jane Austen indirectly implies that man should free his mind of the past, revise his script of a woman and inter-act with clarity of mind and heart. The false notions of pride, self esteem and prejudices strike discordant notes in man-woman relationship. Captain Wentworth deplores his pride, mad resentment and his jealousy, which had prevented his regaining Anne's hand much earlier. He recognizes his own self as his greatest enemy. Jane Austen wants to bring about a change in men's perception by making them realize, the folly of obsession with pride, self-esteem and possessiveness. Jane Austen's acerbity is at its best in exposing the snobbery of the aristocracy in men like Sir Walter Elliot.

The quest for moral autonomy, central to the *bildung* of Jane Austen's heroines, is carried on in the other novels under the auspices of a lover-cum-mentor Henry Tilney, Colonel Brandon, Mr. Knightley. Notwithstanding the re-assuring presence of their guardians, Catherine Morland, Marianne Dashwood and Emma learn the hard way, through experience. Consequently, Jane Austen does away with the role of a male mentor in *Persuasion*. Jane Austen has all along been against suppression. In *Mansfield Park*, she had portrayed its reverse effects on Julia and Mary. Sir Thomas's propensity to repress was the outcome of his selfish wish to contain and control his world. Realizing the suffering caused by unfulfilled needs, sub-conscious fears and self-abnegation, Jane Austen portrayed the negative effects of excessive emotional self-restraint.

The contrasting behaviour of Elizabeth and Anne underlines Jane Austen's faith in an individual's ability to mould his circumstances. Virtue or vice is presented as neither congenital nor a matter of sex or class. Anne is able to cope with her sorrow because of her rational disposition. Her equanimity is not born of female fortitude, but out of her analytic ability. Jane Austen does not present Anne as desensitized, but a sensibly sensitive woman endowed with understanding and a good temper. After

a gap of seven years, Anne's 'flushed cheeks' at the thought of Wentworth in Kellynch Hall betray her disturbed feelings.

Jane Austen analyses the stereotype feminine trait of being open to persuasion, by implying woman's lack of firmness, a direct challenge to her moral autonomy. But Jane Austen is not against persuasion *per se*, as Anne avers, "a persuadable temper might sometimes be as much in favour of happiness, as a very resolute character."<sup>28</sup> However she deplores Elizabeth Elliot's brand of "internal persuasions,"<sup>29</sup> which are nothing but pre-conceived and set prejudices. The novel is a diatribe against sentimentality with Mrs Smith playing a pivotal role. Her realistic humanism precludes cynicism. She can be described as Anne's friend and guide. Her sanguine approach to life, a lively interest in others, and being endowed with the choicest gift of Heaven, of finding gainful employment, help Mrs Smith to remain cheerful in her vicissitudes. Jane Austen considers idleness as the bane of woman's life thereby heralding the modern working woman. Her work is notable for the questions it raises about moral autonomy, rationalism, decision making, active principle and self – respect of women at large.

In Jane Austen's novels we are aware of the dice loaded against women, yet the scenario does not seem bleak. Spirited and vibrant female protagonists like Elizabeth, Emma and Elinor are presented as capable of striding alongside their male counterparts. Carolyn G Heilbrun recognizes Jane Austen's innovative perspective and remarks:

Her quiet miracle was to be able to represent the lineaments of society by an art in which men and women move in an ambience of equality: they are equally responsible, both morally and socially, for their actions, nor are the qualities of humanity which mark the admirable characters in Jane Austen's world distinguished by sex.<sup>30</sup>

While Jane Austen recognizes the inegalitarian nature of society in her times, with its concomitant concentration of power in males, she is able to imbue her novels with an aura of equality. Equality is the basis for all relationships, and marriage being the most intimate form of relationship cannot be meaningful without it.

Jane Austen's emphasis on intellectual equality as the basis for marriage is an oblique disparagement of male preference for beauty. Just as Fanny Burney had decried men's penchant for beautiful dull women, so that men could subordinate them, Jane Austen is at pains to make her heroines intellectually equal to their male counter-parts. Her stress is on merit, rationality, elegance and moral autonomy. It is this that sets her apart from both her contemporaries and predecessors and makes her a feminist before her times.

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