Chapter III

Women and Education

The claim that women of the middle and upper classes should be taught to think may not now seem particularly revolutionary, but, ... it opened the possibility of social change far beyond the schoolroom of the country house, and the drawing-rooms of the well-to-do. If it were true that natural endowment with powers of mind in women constituted a proper claim to the right to think and to judge, what was to be said of the basis of authority in marriage and the family? In an age that made Reason a God, and turned God into The Rational Being, it was widely accepted that authority rested on rational judgement.

The relation between women’s education vis-à-vis their dependence on their men folk, financially, morally, legally, socially, in short in every aspect of their existence in society that often rendered them so selflessly selfish, is of great significance in understanding their response and ability to wield power and authority. A closer look into the matter reveals that their dependence can primarily be attributed to three factors – firstly, a lack of proper education for women, secondly, their lack of financial rights and independence and thirdly, the absence of legal protection regarding education, finances and other areas that could have ensured women some measure of equality with men. Neither the laws of the land nor the customs of the age provided protection to women as equal citizens. Thus, though their lives were protected they could not live life to the full as the men did because of the constraint and restrictions imposed on them. When they got married they and all that they possessed became the property of their
husbands. Given this situation, it is necessary to discuss the kind of education that women received in Austen's time.

Our study of the various female characters all seem to follow a pattern which have governed their behaviour down the ages for generations. The majority of them are shown to be unworthy of power and authority and undeserving of respect. This seems to be largely owing to the lack of role models in the form of mothers or aunts who could have set an example for them. The younger generation of women in turn themselves became the agents for transmitting such inadequate training to their daughters and charges. The continuation of this vicious circle can be attributed to the fact that women were deprived of the right kind of education. They lived in a society that put a great deal of importance on men's education, while in the case of women the emphasis was more on their accomplishments in the feminine arts rather than on formal education. Because of this lop-sided emphasis on education the women were left in a position where their formal education was left incomplete and therefore, they could not develop into 'rational' beings.

Well-to-do ladies from rich, ranked and supposedly cultured families, like Lady Catherine, Lady Bertram, Lady Susan, Maria and Julia Bertram, Mary Crawford, Emma Woodhouse, Georgina Darcy, etc. are all shown to lack a sense of proper judgment because of which they commit mistakes
which adversely affect their own lives as well as those of their charges. But one has to remember that they have received the best of upbringing and education that was allowed to women in their age. This leaves a lot of room for doubt regarding the kind of education and nurturing that was imparted to the formative minds. Austen raises certain questions about female education through the behaviour of her characters and never fails to remind us that no amount of fortune or rank can ever be an adequate compensation for the lack of proper education leading to intellectual and moral development.

In judging the characters one has not only to remember the inadequate education that they received but also the male-dominated restricted environment in which they grow up. In certain cases their shortcomings and achievements can be attributed to their innate nature. For example, Lady Catherine and Lady Denham are shown as incapable of properly exercising their power and authority and they are totally indifferent to such considerations. In Lady Bertram’s daughter like in most other daughters in Austen this deficiency is apparent too because they like their mothers are the products of the same defective system and have been brought up in the absence of a role model, which otherwise could have had some right influence. Yet there are a few women among Austen’s heroines, who stand out not because they are the products of some faultless education and great
upbringing, but because of their superior moral and intellectual capacity and innate qualities of head and heart.

A classic example is the very human character and Austen’s most charismatic and attractive heroine Elizabeth Bennet. With neither a mother nor a father who can set any example, and in the absence of a right kind of upbringing, she nonetheless stands out because of her superior intellectual and moral strength. True, she makes a lot of mistakes at the beginning in her judgment of others, but what is important is that she learns and grows from her experiences and as the novel progresses “... becomes the central intelligence ...”². At the end she becomes a more responsible person, and unlike her parents or Lady Catherine skillfully manages the power and authority that she comes to exercise as Darcy’s wife and the mistress of Pemberley.

In Austen’s eighteenth century England, education to women was primarily provided at home as part of their upbringing, unlike the gentlemen of the well-to-do families who were sent to Oxford and Cambridge like Edmund Bertram, Edward Ferrars, Henry Tilney, Darcy even the utterly foolish Mr. Collins and wicked Wickham. Thus, in Emma we are informed that Mr. and Mrs. Weston’s little daughter Anna will -

... have his [her father’s] fireside enlivened by the sports and the nonsense, the freaks and the fancies of a child never banished from home;
... (E, 419)
meaning that she would never be sent away to a boarding school, as a son
would normally be.

Anne Elliot, however, was not only brought up under the care of a
governess but also went to a school, for when in Bath we are informed that
she

... called on her former governess, and had heard from her of there being
an old school-fellow in Bath ... (P, 144).

Further “Anne’s dislike of Bath” can be attributed from

... arising first from the circumstance of her having been three years at
school there, after her mother’s death ... (P, 20).

We are also told that the Musgrove girls Louisa and Henrietta had been
away in a “school” (P, 87) which coincided with the period when Anne
turned down Charles Musgrove’s proposal of marriage.

But these schools instead of developing their personality and making
them capable of facing the world – as Oxford and Cambridge did for the
men – were more in line with the finishing schools, teaching them instead
fancy refinements of being a woman rather than making them independent
and self-reliant. With such inadequate education they were still vulnerable
and subject to exploitation in the marriage market. Since they lacked the
means to earn their bread, they had to marry for support, as Charlotte Lucas
does in marrying the idiotic clergyman Mr. Collins. The position of these
young marriageable women can bear comparison to men choosing job
options. But unlike men, their employment in a married life instead of
liberating them – the way employment did for men – only aided in further restricting them. In Austen’s society women were deprived of the right to earn their own livelihood and the only job open to literate women of decent families was of a governess, an employment generally looked down upon by society. In *The Watsons* when one sister says,

‘... To be so bent on Marriage – to pursue a Man merely for the sake of situation ... Poverty is a great Evil, but to a woman of Education and feeling it ought not, it cannot be the greatest. – I would rather be Teacher at a school (and I can think of nothing worse) than marry a Man I did not like.’ – ‘I would rather do any thing than be Teacher at a school’ – said her sister. ‘I have been at school, Emma, and know what a life they lead; you never have. ... I think I could like any good humoured Man with a comfortable Income’. (*W* in *NA* vol. 278)

Austen in *Emma* compares the job of a governess as equivalent to intellectual slavery. In a conversation that takes place between Jane Fairfax and Mrs. Elton, the former opines,

‘... I am not at all afraid of being unemployed long. There are places in town, offices, where enquiry would soon produce something – Offices for the sale – not quite of human flesh – but of human intellect.’

‘Oh! My dear, human flesh! You quite shock me; if you mean a fling at the slave-trade,...’

Jane clarifies:

‘I did not mean, I was not thinking of the slave-trade ... governess trade was all I had in view; widely different certainly as to the guilt of those who carry it on; but as to the greater misery of the victims, I do not know where it lies.’ (*E*, 300-1)

Significantly, *Emma* presents a glimpse of a different educational institution in Mrs. Goddard’s school, where a poor orphan girl like Harriet Smith had been fortunate enough to be placed by “somebody” (*E*, 19). It is
worth noting the author’s comment on schools and education that distinguishes a good one from a bad one. Talking of Mrs. Goddard’s school, Austen says that it was not like—

... any thing which professed, in long sentences of refined nonsense, to combine liberal acquirements with elegant morality upon new principles and new systems and where young ladies for enormous pay might be screwed out of health and into vanity—but [Mrs. Goddard’s was] a real, honest, old-fashioned Boarding-school, where a reasonable quantity of accomplishments were sold at a reasonable price. Mrs. Goddard’s school was of high repute and very deservedly... she gave the children plenty of wholesome food, let them run about a great deal in the summer, and in winter dressed their chilblains with her own hands. (E, 18).

The author praises such an education—which any woman of sense ought to value—in an age which idolized frailty in women and preferred to see them either as an angel or a monster, but not as a human being.

Often wealthy young ladies, like Emma Woodhouse and the girls of Mansfield were exclusively brought up under the care of governesses. But since governesses can differ in personality and can be influenced by the nature of their employer’s household, their relationship with the students can vary accordingly. The Bertram girls had a very formal relationship with their governess, and she hardly finds mention in the narrative; Emma’s on the other hand was a warm and loving one. Austen informs that Emma,

... had been supplied by an excellent woman as governess, who had fallen a little short of a mother in affection. (E, 3)

The author also tells us that Miss Taylor has been—

... less as a governess than a friend, very fond... particularly of Emma. Between them it was more the intimacy of sisters. Even before Miss Taylor had ceased to hold the nominal office of governess, the mildness...
of her temper had hardly allowed her to impose any restraint; and the shadow of authority being now long passed away, they had been living together as friend and friend very mutually attached, and Emma doing just what she liked; ... (E, 3).

Nonetheless, there are still others like Elizabeth Bennet and her four sisters, who did not have the advantage of a governess. The Bennet girls received most of their education at home from their parents, but as is generally the case, mothers are believed to play a greater role in the education of their daughters than the fathers. The intellectual superiority of Elizabeth and Jane over their other siblings cannot be actually attributed to any special instructions from their parents; though Mr. Bennet instilled the love of reading books in his favourite daughter Elizabeth. Given Mr. Bennet's financial and social position, and his acute awareness of his wife's inferior qualities, it is rather surprising that he had not employed a governess for his five daughters, but left them all to the care of his wife who he knew was pathetically incapable of the task. It was expected of people of rank and fortune, and of the class of Mr. Bennet to employ a governess for the education of their daughters. His failure to do so perhaps indicates a father's lack of interest in the education of his daughters.

Keeping this usual norm in mind, it is not surprising to read Lady Catherine's reaction on her discovering that the Bennet daughters have grown up without a governess. At Rosings, Elizabeth surprises Lady Catherine when she declares,
"We never had any governess."

"No governess! How was that possible? Five daughters brought up at home without a governess! – I never heard of such a thing. Your mother must have been quite a slave to your education."

Elizabeth could not help smiling, as she assured her that had not been the case.

"Then, who taught you? Who attended you? Without a governess you must have been neglected." *(PP, 147)*

Lady Catherine’s astonished reaction is natural because governesses seem to play an important role in society as testified by the presence of so many of them as heroines in the literature of the times. Elizabeth’s smile on the other hand, is ironic because she is well aware of the kind of education that her mother was capable of providing, if it can be called an education at all.

Lady Catherine, full of interference in the affairs of others and over-imposing in her opinions, on whatever the topic might be, herself cuts a sorry figure as a mother. Thus, where she is described as, “… a tall, large woman, with strongly-marked features, which might once have been handsome …” *(PP, 144)*, her daughter presents a contrast. “She is quite a little creature. Who could have thought she could be so thin and small!” *(PP, 142)* and to Elizabeth, “She looks sickly and cross.” *(PP, 142)* But physical appearances matter little for even persons of small frames can possess strong, indefatigable spirit, as Mrs. Ferrars and Fanny Price do. But it is not so between Lady Catherine and Miss Anne De Bourgh, for the mother-daughter duo could not have been more dissimilar in appearance and in personality. Lady Catherine’s,
... air was not conciliating, nor was her manner of receiving them, such as to make her visitors forget their inferior rank ... whatever she said, was spoken in so authoritative a tone, as marked her self-importance ... (PP, 142),

which stood in great contrast to her frail, sickly and extremely shy daughter who appears absolutely terrified.

Elizabeth herself was not unaware of the great contrast between them and she naturally reacted with considerable surprise, as

... she turned her eyes on the daughter, she could almost have joined in Maria's astonishment, at her being so thin, and so small. There was neither in figure nor face, any likeness between the ladies. Miss De Bourgh was pale and sickly; her features though not plain, were insignificant; and she spoke very little, except in a low voice, to Mrs. Jenkinson [her governess] ... (PP, 145).

Again where the mother talked a great deal,

... delivering her opinion on every subject in so decisive a manner as proved that she was not used to have her judgment controverted ... (PP, 146),

Miss De Bourgh hardly spoke to others and, "said not a word to her [Elizabeth] all dinner time" (PP, 145). Her extremely introverted and shy nature is owing to the over-dominating presence of the mother, and perhaps it would not be wrong to conclude that this had also adversely affected her physic and health. Her cold and authoritative administration of all aspects of her daughter's life and her over-bearing personality has this unhealthy effect on her child's growth. In her it is amply proven that authoritative management of a daughter's life cannot be identified with nurturing love. Lady Catherine's influence on her daughter is a complex one. While on the
one hand she reduces the daughter into a voiceless non-entity, on the other hand the daughter imbibes the mother’s pride born out of the consciousness of her status and fortune. In a society where a daughter’s education was often left to the mother, this is an example where the mother’s inadequate education and unsavoury personality traits are passed on and perpetuated in the younger generation.

Lady Susan and her daughter Frederica are also portrayed in a similar situation. Lady Susan is lively, vivacious, attractive, shrewd and manipulative, whereas Frederica is pale, thin and delicate with...

... restrained Manners, the same timid Look in the presence of her Mother as heretofore, assured ... of her situation’s being uncomfortable, ... (LS in NA vol., 270) [Italics mine]

It is a fortunate turn of circumstances, her mother choosing to marry a rich foolish man that saves her from her oppressing domination. Though full of outward concern for her daughter, she is too selfish to think of anyone besides herself, which explains the neglect with which Frederica is treated throughout, and conveniently forgotten after her second marriage.

The surviving mothers show that they are prone to either neglecting their children or of spoiling them with improper indulgences but fail to provide them with any enlightenment or proper guidance. Austen specifically focuses on those mothers who fail in nurturing their daughters
properly. In *Mansfield Park*, one perhaps hears the voice of the author through Mary Crawford, when she says,

‘Mothers certainly have not yet got quite the right way of managing their daughters. I do not know where the error lies.’ (*MP*, 40)

But Jane Austen knew quite well where exactly the “error” primarily lay, that is, in the very defective education for women. Only unlike Mary Wollstonecraft she did not choose to be a vocal critic of the system, but used her art to voice her criticism in a more circumspect manner.

Ironically, *Northanger Abbey* which is primarily concerned with the theme of female education has a mother assuming the dual role of educating, as well as bringing up her ten children. As opposed to Lady Catherine and Lady Susan, Mrs. Morland is a good mother. Although she is not accorded much space in the narrative, she displays some splendid qualities in the very opening pages which set her apart from the other less endowed mothers like Mrs. Bennet or Lady Catherine. The opening paragraph itself points out that Catherine’s

... mother was a woman of useful plain sense, with a good temper, and, what is more remarkable, with a good constitution ... (*NA*, 1).

Unlike Mrs. Bennet of an “uncertain temper” (*PP*, 3), who appears to be perfectly healthy and robust but constantly seeks compassion for “my poor nerves” (*PP*, 3), for “When she was discontented she fancied herself nervous.” (*PP*, 3); Mrs. Morland even after giving birth to ten children, “... lived on ... to see them growing up around her, and to enjoy excellent health
herself.” (NA, 1) The author’s mockery of Mrs. Bennet carries indictment against the often wrong education provided by mothers and fathers to their daughters, where they were encouraged to be bodily frail – at times even resulting in damaging their constitution. For such were then the mistaken notions about female attributes, that female physical weakness was considered as a means that could enhance a girl’s sexual attractiveness. Austen negates such a view through Mrs. Morland.

This “very good woman” (NA, 3) Mrs. Morland, who despite wishing everything well for her children, had

... but her time ... so much occupied in lying-in and teaching the little ones, that her elder daughters were inevitably left to shift for themselves ...

Thus, Catherine did not have a governess, her father being only a clergyman. She did not even get the engrossing attention of her mother. Instead she was herself involved in educating her younger siblings much to her affliction and boredom. In short she was partly educated by her parents and partly self-taught, till the point when the narrative begins, from where on her process of education is taken over by the hero. Only the instructions that Henry imparts to her through opinions, suggestions and sometimes even holding her up to ridicule, can make her education complete in the sense that patriarchy wants women to be. Austen’s satire here is directed against patriarchy itself, for how can one forget the domineering mindset of General Tilney who unjustly banishes Catherine and proves that even the father
figures of patriarchy lack proper education. The author through her male characters, their behaviour and treatment of their wives and daughters implicitly questions the worth of formal male education also, if it ensures only their right to exercise power and authority. Through this Austen exposes a basic flaw within the prevailing education system.

Because of the greater emphasis put on men’s education the expectations of such a society was that the formally educated men would be better informed and would be able to instruct the ignorant, ill-informed and poorly educated womenfolk. But Austen goes on to show that Henry Tilney can be as ill-informed as Catherine. Woolf too had commented on this,

They too, the patriarchs, the professors, had endless difficulties, terrible drawbacks to contend with. Their education had been in some ways as faulty as my own. It had bred in them defects as great. True, they had money and power, but only at the cost of harbouring in their breasts an eagle, a vulture ... 3

Austen’s irony and sarcasm is evident in the way she challenges Henry’s comprehension, who had always been vain and arrogant about men’s superiority over women when it comes to knowledge, education, history and personality in general. This appears in quite a few instances. The most scathing exposure of his inadequacy is about Henry’s understanding of his own father as contrasted to Catherine’s views of General Tilney. She had wrongly believed that the General had secretly murdered his wife or had locked her up in an attic for years. Henry chastises her for using her fertile imagination on his father,
‘What have you been judging from? Remember the country and the age in which we live. Remember that we are English, that we are Christians … Does our education prepare us for such atrocities? Do our laws connive at them?’ (NA, 197-98) [Italics mine.]

True, the General does not live up to her gothic fantasy which is a result of reading too many popular gothic novels, nonetheless, the General’s behaviour reveals him as a thoroughly wicked person, which Catherine had rightly believed him to be. The condition of the General’s wife, during their years of marriage was tantamount to an imprisonment – in a more complete sense than being physically locked up in an attic. But the truth remains that General Tilney is allowed by the laws of England and the manners of the age to exert near absolute power over his wife and daughter, and he does so as an irrational tyrant.4

Austen makes allowances for Catherine when she states that

… in suspecting General Tilney of either murdering or shutting up his wife, she had scarcely sinned against his character, or magnified his cruelty. (NA, 201)

When compared to the General’s behaviour, her Gothic fantasy appears a very forgivable mistake. Austen adds a twist in the tale when Henry had to admit that Catherine was not totally wrong in her perception, thereby implying that she too, no matter how ignorant, can be right at times. Austen is suggesting that occasionally Henry (no matter how grudgingly) might have something to learn from her – in which case, it is not him, but she who will take up the role of a teacher. However, Kirkham’s above mentioned comment holds good for all fathers and husbands, as the fate of the wives
and daughters were greatly dependent on their discretion, which usually appears to be more in the wrong than right.

Even thinkers like Rousseau had recommended that girls should be obedient to their mothers, despite his knowledge and understanding that the mothers might be wrong, because the habit of obedience was so important in a wife. For the mother, along with religion, also teaches her daughter that upon marriage she must follow the instruction of her husband. Austen through her parent figures is precisely attacking such an education.

Being ‘educated’ whether under a governess or a mother or at school must be distinguished from being ‘literate’, for the former encompasses a broader meaning. While to be ‘literate’ would only mean to be able to read and write, to be educated implies to be a good human being and a responsible member of the society. It also tries to inculcate higher intellectual and ethical qualities like respect for genuine goodness in oneself and others. It teaches the worth of goodness and warmth of heart over material pursuits after money and position. Proper education endows one with a capacity to understand oneself and the world better. Acquiring such an education is not easy but is possible if the person in question is gifted with intellectual and moral qualities. This is best exemplified by Mrs. Bennett’s father who in spite of being a lawyer failed to safeguard his daughter’s interest regarding the entail. He could have nullified the entail
when she married Mr. Bennet, but he seemed to be lacking in any genuine concern for his daughter’s future.

A feminist critic like Margaret Kirkham argues that Austen’s views on female education were the same as shared by the nascent feminist tradition of the times and those aired by Mary Wollstonecraft in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. These views expressed strong opposition to the kind of education that was provided to women. In *The Vindication* she strongly held:

... women who, not led by degrees to proper studies, and not permitted to choose for themselves, have indeed been overgrown children ...  

As opposed to this, thinkers and writers like Rousseau, Dr. Fordyce, James Hervey, Dr. Gregory and August von Kotzebue had felt that men and women should not be educated in the same manner, and that of the latter should be subordinate to the education of the former. For them women were to be treated more as objects of pity and contempt. The spirit of the age as regards to a woman’s education can be best summed up by what an influential and well-respected man of the time Rev. John Sprint had to say about it.

But she that is married careth for the things of this world, how she may please her husband ...  

Any intelligent and rational woman would react to it as Austen did, for this comment reduces woman to the status of her husband’s slave which negates the rational, moral, intellectual, social or political aspects of her
personality. Austen's contempt for such discrimination in matters of education is further evident in *Mansfield Park*, in the response of the hero and the anti-hero, that is Edmund Bertram and Henry Crawford respectively, in a discussion about Shakespeare. Henry speaks of him as "... part of an Englishman's constitution ...", (*MP*, 338) Edmund avoids a terminology which excludes women and replies, "His celebrated passages are quoted by everybody ..." (*MP*, 338). Henry shows through his language an attitude of mind which excludes women from the liberty which belongs to those who speak Shakespeare's tongue, Edmund does not. In *Sense and Sensibility*, Austen brings forth the void created in the lives of women due to an inadequate education when she sarcastically comments:

When the ladies withdrew to the drawing-room after dinner, this poverty was particularly evident, for the gentlemen had supplied the discourse with some variety - the variety of politics, inclosing land, and breaking horses - but then it was all over; and one subject only engaged the ladies till coffee came in, which was the comparative heights of Harry Dashwood, and Lady Middleton's second son William, ... (*SS*, 172)

Looking at the various women in Austen's novels, the author's contempt for the kind of education that reduced women to her husband's most obedient servant cannot be more evident. Ironically, these women failed even at being perfect servants or good wives to their husbands, which in turn affected patriarchy adversely. Austen gives all her attention to women in the role of daughters, wives and mothers because it is precisely in these roles that the majority of them play their part in society. Significantly,
she shows that the education imparted to them does not equip them to acquit
themselves creditably in these roles. Their education teaches them to be idle
and unself-critical which makes them poor mothers. Wollstonecraft too, had
expressed similar sentiments when she says,

One cause of this barren blooming I attribute to a false system of
education, ... written by men who, considering females rather as women
than as human creatures, have been more anxious to make them alluring
mistresses than affectionate wives and rational mothers ... [women] are
only anxious to inspire love, when they ought to cherish a nobler
ambition, and by their abilities and virtues exact respect. 7

Austen through her satiric treatment of both men and women ridiculed the
image of such patriarchs who adhered to these beliefs. Thus, she did not
create any exceptional father figures to be worshipped as heroes nor did she
advocate any kind of idol worship of the husbands.

The adverse effect on patriarchy through a woman’s faulty education
is best exemplified in Lady Bertram. Thus, owing to

... a little ill-health, and a great deal of indolence, [she] gave up the house
in town, ... leaving Sir Thomas to attend his duty in Parliament, with
whatever increase or diminution of comfort might arise from her absence.
(MP, 15)

It is not for nothing that critics and readers have time and again considered
her to be a cipher. Throughout Mansfield Park we see her paying scant
attention to her domestic responsibilities and displaying an indifference
towards bringing up her four children and niece. Weak in intellectual
authority, feeble in personality and extremely unenthusiastic by nature,
Lady Bertram is rather so fond of ease and leisure, that she lets her sister
Mrs. Norris take up those duties which ought to have been carried out by herself. But Mrs. Norris too with her tyrannical manners towards Fanny and her over indulgence for the Bertram children, proves herself miserably incapable of running Mansfield. However, we cannot overlook that Lady Bertram is Sir Thomas’s choice for a wife, a baronet who is a slave-owner abroad. Austen by exposing the nature of his wife in England draws an analogy between the slaves in the colonies and women, especially married women, at home. Women like slaves were denied status as an independent being. The expressions ‘capture’ and ‘captivation’ as applied to marriage and sexual relationships are shown to be related to the language of law and property as well. The opening sentence of this novel, in which the captivation of an English baronet by a Miss Ward reinforces this,

About thirty years ago, Miss Maria Ward of Huntingdon, with only seven thousand pounds, had the good luck to captivate Sir Thomas Bertram, of Mansfield Park, in the county of Northampton, and to be thereby raised to the rank of a baronet’s lady, with all the comforts and consequences of an handsome house and large income. (MP, 1) [Italics mine]

But these luxuries come with marriage to a person who holds,

‘... that independence of spirit, which prevails so much in modern times, even in young women, and which in young women is offensive and disgusting beyond all common offence.’ (MP, 318)

These words of Sir Thomas against freedom of expression were directed at Fanny, on her refusal to accept Henry Crawford as a husband, nonetheless, reveals Sir Thomas’s strong disdain for those members of the fair sex who show any inclination for making judgments for themselves, stand by it and
behave as rational beings. So Sir Thomas chooses a wife who is beautiful but weak-willed whom he pampers within the luxurious confines of Mansfield, and who in turn loves to be pampered.

Sir Thomas faces the consequences of such a choice for he lives to see his children disadvantaged through the ill effects of an unequal marriage, in which his wife lacks the ability to educate her daughters. Austen’s mocking portrayal of Lady Bertram shows her disgust for such good-for-nothing trophy wives. Thus, Lady Bertram, “... a woman of very tranquil feelings, and a temper remarkably easy and indolent” (MP, 2), is also portrayed as an equally bad mother and wife, but more or less well-suited to Sir Thomas’s requirement of a wife.

To the education of her daughters, Lady Bertram paid not the smallest attention. She had not time for such cares. She was a woman who spent her days in sitting nicely dressed on a sofa, doing some long piece of needlework, of little use and no beauty, thinking more of her pug than her children, but very indulgent to the latter, when it did not put herself to inconvenience, guided in every thing important by Sir Thomas, and in smaller concerns by her sister. (MP, 14-15)

Having chosen such a wife, it is surprising as to why a person as intelligent as “Sir Thomas did not know what was wanting” (MP, 14), in the upbringing of his children. A “truly anxious father” (MP, 14), and an officious aunt, the author suggests might not be enough when it comes to the balanced education of young minds, just as for Emma the absence of a mother who could have guided her is most palpably felt, although she is
lucky not to have such an aunt or as frightening a father, like those in Mansfield to watch over her every step.

Lady Bertram gives Fanny only one advice that is to marry Henry Crawford.

‘And you must be aware, Fanny, that it is every young woman’s duty to accept such a very exceptional offer as this.’ (MP, 268-69)

The protagonist thus reacts:

This was almost the only rule of conduct, the only piece of advice, which Fanny had ever received from her aunt in the course of eight years and a half. It silences her. She felt how unprofitable contention would be. (MP, 269) [Italics mine]

Austen had perhaps deliberately chosen the phrase “rule of conduct”, which was in much circulation then. It is worth noting that it was the period when maximum number of conduct books on the ideal code of conduct for women were written. All of them preached the same message that the sole objective of a woman’s life is to please men.

Austen’s novels abound in mothers who with inadequate education fail to set the right standard for their next generations. Thus, Lady Bertram fails with Maria and Julia, Mrs. Bennet misleads Lydia, Mrs. Dashwood misguides Marianne, Lady Catherine nurtures a flawed Anne and so on. Mrs. Price, Mrs. Dashwood and Mrs. Bennet are as immature and silly as their youngest daughters and are in no position to guide young women into maturity, whereas others like Mrs. Bates, Lady Bertram and Mrs. Musgrove because of their ignorance, indolence and folly instead become a burden on their children. Still there are aunts like Mrs. Norris, Mrs. Jennings and the
Parker sisters who are no better because of their officiousness, undue indulgence and smothering love. Again there are young mothers like Lady Middleton and Fanny Dashwood who though indifferent to the need of their sons, can only transform them into bothersome, noisy, unruly boys through indulgence.

Mrs. Dashwood the mother figure of *Sense and Sensibility*, is nowhere near as awful as Mrs. Norris, nor lacking in interest or understanding for her daughters like Lady Bertram, or as inept in managing her household like Mrs. Price, or as childish as Mrs. Bennet. Yet she fails to teach her daughter how to distinguish between evil and good, and exercise restraint over one’s emotions, passions and sensibilities. Further, Mrs. Dashwood does not possess practical wisdom or prudence to protect the financial interests of her children, and secure their future after the demise of her husband. All that she is good at, is in sulking and nursing her hurt ego as when she is dislodged from the position of privilege at Norland Park by her step daughter-in-law.

Elinor who “... possessed a strength of understanding, and coolness of judgment ...” (SS, 3) clearly saw through her mother’s faults. Yet she shows enough delicacy not to hurt her sentiments, while ensuring within the means available to her as the eldest daughter to protect her siblings and her
mother's interest. Thus, when Mrs. Dashwood's daughter-in-law is rude and disrespectful towards her and her family,

... she would have quitted the house forever, had not the entreaty of her eldest daughter induced her first to reflect on the propriety of going, ...
(SS, 3)

Mrs. Dashwood's primary fault is that like her second daughter Marianne, she is too much influenced by heart than by head, by sensibility than by sense. Only under Elinor's influence, who "... though only nineteen ..." (SS, 3) possessed superior moral and intellectual authority and was therefore qualified to be, "the counsellor of her mother" (SS, 3) that

... enabled her frequently to counter-act, to the advantage of them all, that eagerness of mind in Mrs. Dashwood which must generally have led to imprudence. (SS, 3)

Elinor initially fails in extending her sensible influence beyond her mother to her younger sister Marianne who was very much like Mrs. Dashwood. Elinor is rightly full of "concern" (SS, 4), at

... the excess of her sister's sensibilities; but by Mrs. Dashwood it was valued and cherished. They encouraged each other ... (SS, 4)

But by being just a sister without a mother's authority Elinor can only watch with sadness the pain, heartache and Marianne's near fatal illness which could otherwise have been avoided had the mother been properly educated. However, Elinor is not an exception because other daughters like Fanny Price, Elizabeth Bennet or Anne Elliot face similar predicaments.
However, Mrs. Dashwood is partly redeemed because of her genuine concern for the welfare of her children and it is Mrs. Ferrars who is the worst mother figure in Sense and Sensibility. She has been described as:

... without beauty, and naturally without expression; but a lucky contraction of the brow had rescued her countenance from the disgrace of insipidity, by giving it the strong characters of pride and ill nature. (SS, 171)

She teaches her daughter to be thoroughly mean and greedy, while her sons she controls dictatorially – even in their choice of a wife - without any concern for their happiness.

The behaviour of women - young or old, rich or poor which is presented more in a bad light than good, reflects the author’s views on the important issues of female education and their impact on the question of marriage, authority and family affairs. Austen’s concern with the theme of female education has been rightly endorsed by Margaret Krikham. She points out,

... we can see that Austen’s subject-matter is the central subject matter of rational, or Enlightenment, feminism ... and the representation of women in literature [Austen’s] is strikingly similar to that shown by Mary Wollstonecraft in A Vindication of the Rights of Woman.

Wollstonecraft’s views on female education, which were considered radical, revolutionary and against the set patriarchal standards of the then society are too well-known to require further elaboration here. The difference in style and manner of Wollstonecraft from Austen is pointed out by this critic:
The received images of Wollstonecraft and Austen are so different that it may still seem far-fetched to suggest that they were both feminist moralists of the same school.\(^9\)

However, Austen being a master of style might not have found it difficult to conceal a subject-matter which bears some striking resemblance with this feminist champion. Austen's style had very effectively served its purpose by concealing her motives successfully for many years. Kirkham further states:

> We see that Austen was an anti-Romantic, in an age which, so far as literature is concerned, we characterise as 'Romantic', and do not ask why Austen follows Wollstonecraft in pointed hostility to the new impulse.\(^{10}\)

In spite of the surface differences Austen appears to go against the trend of romanticizing literature.

Terry Castle in his "Introduction" to *Northanger Abbey* too mentions of this sameness in differences between Austen and Wollstonecraft,

> We have no direct evidence that Austen had read Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* – no reference in surviving letters, no explicit comments in any of her novels. Yet to judge by Austen’s powerful meditation on the problem of female enlightenment in *Northanger Abbey*, it is almost impossible to believe that Wollstonecraft’s impassioned feminine treatise, first published to scandalized outcry in 1792, was unknown to her.\(^{11}\)

In her treatise she decried the way women were taught to be dependent on men, and thereby, failed to develop their powers of judgment and understanding and were often foolish and ignorant. She therefore, called for a revolution in female attitude and asked women to come out of their childishness and act sensibly and demanded that men treat them as rational humans with an equal power of understanding as men.
Given Austen's preoccupation with issues related to women we can surmise that she did not restrict her works to a moral interest of a purely personal nature that was unconnected with the general changes and awareness of her times. Women's education among others was being hotly discussed and Austen could not have kept herself detached from it. During the eighteenth century,

Among the new topics, the moral nature and status of women was one of the most important. Among the new authors were women. Among the new readers women were numerous and influential, both as purchasers of books and as subscribers to circulating libraries. The women of Enlightenment be it Mary Astell or Mary Wollstonecraft were not concerned merely with the political equality of women, but about the inferior status accorded to them as moral and spiritual beings – something that even Austen was concerned about. It is worth noting that women had been excluded from the new Constitution in France, and Wollstonecraft in the 'Dedication' of her treatise makes a plea to Talleyrand to get this changed. However, before the Great Wollstonecraft Scandal of 1798, there was a prominent distinction between those who advocated political rights for women and those who merely advocated that they be educated like rational beings. These women writers including Austen, the 'daughters of gentlemen' as Virginia Woolf called them were in their own way making claims for the rights of women. Austen did it but in a language
which was neither racy nor virulent in its criticism of male prejudice, but
with a lot of subtlety and concealment.

Nonetheless she proved through her less worthy females that they
were neither deserving of respect nor could be regarded as rational beings
until they changed themselves. She endeavoured to show that this change
can be achieved only through the right kind of education. Her human
characters like Elizabeth Bennet, Emma Woodhouse and Catherine Morland
are projected as signifying her rejection of the inferior role of passive
obedience for women claiming for them moral equality with men. Lionel
Trilling had also agreed that Emma “... has a moral life as a man has a
moral life, ...”. True, Austen’s mature heroines make mistakes like Emma
does for which they are ridiculed, yet from the beginning they are conceived
as amongst the most enlightened minds in the narratives. That they make
mistakes and find themselves in difficulties is partly because of the curbs
and restrictions imposed upon them by their society. In such a society
intelligent young women do not have the license to act according to their
abilities.

Emma Woodhouse with her good heart but an equally good yet faulty
head is very much at the centre of moral concerns in the novel. She is
however, contrasted with Jane Fairfax, and it is Austen’s command of
narrative technique that enables her to distance Jane from the reader’s
attention and sympathy without censuring her. The contrast between Jane
and Emma – between the head and heart - and their difficult relationship
goes back to *The Watsons*. Austen’s interest in contrasting pairs of heroines,
the one representing ‘Sense’, the other ‘Sensibility’, which of the two is
more important and how to achieve a judicious balance between them has
been a recurring concern. The art of achieving this ideal evidently rests upon
upbringing and training. After revising *Sense and Sensibility*, she perhaps
became aware of the dangers of this dichotomy as likely to dehumanize both
heroines. But she did not altogether abandon this issue. Even before that in
*Lady Susan*, she presented Frederica as a foil against her mother who is
described as the “Mistress of Deceit” (*LS* in *NA vol.*, 245) Instead, she
sought in the revised *Pride and Prejudice, Mansfield Park* and *Emma* to
modify it. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth is given both a good head and a
warm heart; Jane in whom heart is stronger than head is relegated to the
periphery though without being censured. In *Mansfield Park*, Fanny’s
incongruously strong head surmounting an all too vulnerable heart is treated
delicately, with Mary Crawford’s head and heart shown as culpably corrupt.
In *Emma* she again distances Jane and endeavours throughout to teach her
protagonist how to achieve a more appropriate balance between the two.

Although Austen with her mastery over the narrative form presents
the attainment as if it were effortless, and that it was perfectly natural for
young women to behave so, in the world of reality it could not have been so, for women definitely were not treated as equals or partners in life. However, Emma as well as other heroines act as independent moral agents because that was how Austen had intended them to behave. They are exceptions in that they are endowed with the power of reason. That they set a worthy example even though they are recipient of the same kind of education as the other peripheral characters, is because they are endowed with the important qualities of head and heart and not because they had made the best of what has been taught to them. But eventually Austen’s female protagonists bow to the authority of ‘reason’ be it the patriarch as a husband or the father.

Austen’s protagonists like Elizabeth, Emma, Catherine, Marianne, and even Fanny, Elinor and Anne learn from their experiences whereas their inferior counterparts fail. In them Austen gives us heroines who are capable of learning morals through experience and prove capable of exercising their own judgment. Eventually not only does the angel heroines, but the humanly faulty ones too come to occupy a position of central moral intelligence in the novels. They reveal that women are competent enough to penetrate into the depth of a subject matter, but it is their limited knowledge that seriously curtails their ability to do so.

Jane Austen traces the cause of inequality between men and women to the inadequate education provided to women of her times. Northanger
Abbey which has as its central theme - female education, is a novel dominated by the negative consequences of such an education. For instance, when Catherine questions Henry on politics in the famous conversation in Beechen Cliff, it shows the patronizing attitude of the men because they believe that those are subjects beyond a woman’s comprehension.

Delighted with her progress, and fearful of wearying her with too much wisdom at once, Henry suffered the subject to decline, ... he shortly found himself arrived at politics; and from politics, it was an easy step to silence. (NA, 87)

Politics, naturally was assumed to be beyond the understanding of a woman’s limited intellectual abilities. Given the strong stand that the author takes against patriarchy, not only in the person of General Tilney but also against the very system of female education and the attitude of men towards women - including that of the hero himself, it comes as little surprise that though this is one of her earlier novels written in 1797-98 and sold to Crosby & Co. in 1803, it was not printed till after her death. Only in 1817 Northanger Abbey was posthumously published with Austen’s last complete novel Persuasion, as Crosby & Co. had already returned the manuscript to the author, expressing their inability to print it. For after all here Austen as opposed to her gothic counterparts shows that it is an inadequate education and financial dependence rather than the walls of the house or an abbey that most effectively imprisons women.
Mansfield Park too expresses Austen’s disenchantment with women’s education. Here too patriarchy imposes restraints on the thoughts and deliberately limits the knowledge of women. This is most glaringly evident during Fanny’s enquiry to Sir Thomas about the slave trade and his plantation in Antigua that is run by slave labour. On being accused by Edmund of remaining “too silent in the evening circle” (*MP*, 159) Fanny defends herself thus, “Did not you hear me ask him [Sir Thomas] about the slave trade last night?” (*MP*, 159) Edmund further adds, “I did – and was in hopes the question would be followed up by others …” (*MP*, 159), to which Fanny answers, “And I longed to do it – but there was such a dead silence!” (*MP*, 159)

Such an attitude towards women, Austen as also Wollstonecraft believed, restricted their ability to think, resulting in their limited knowledge of the outside world. Austen has been criticized by writers and critics over and over again for the limited scope of her novels because in them the outside world of men finds no mention. This male dominated society by restricting the role of women and in conceiving them as beings whose prime objective was to look after men’s happiness, has reduced their significance in the social scheme of things and which adversely affected their thoughts and imagination. Middle class women in particular more than their counterparts from the upper classes were kept away from major schools and
universities and most of them received only a nominal education. However, they were avid readers of novels and major patrons of the circulating libraries. Such an education primarily emphasized on the so-called 'ladylike accomplishments' and provided only a restricted glimpse of the real world of men. That Jane Austen exposed such a social and mental set-up and its consequences on women can be construed as a criticism on female education of her times through her fiction, just as other critics like Wollstonecraft were asking the same questions in their own ways.

That Austen believed women were endowed with an equal measure of moral superiority as men is evident through heroines like Anne, Elinor, Marianne, Elizabeth and Emma, whom she gives sound heads as well as warm sensitive hearts. However, she was aware of the eighteenth century social conventions and was constantly on guard to maintain her propriety as a woman writer. Though she professed similar views on female education with Wollstonecraft she never transgressed the bounds of decorum and the tenor of her narratives always remained subtle even at the most critical moments. Austen was also well aware that it was this inadequate education coupled with lack of financial rights that rendered women dependent on men and made their position vulnerable. In a way their restricted education prevented them from realizing their full potential in becoming equal to men because in the first place they had to depend on men for financial support in
acquiring a more complete education that could have made them self-reliant.

In this vicious circle, where there were many prosperous colleges and universities in England for men, it was only in the latter half of the nineteenth century (1886) that two colleges for women were finally established. Virginia Woolf's sarcastic remark on this that "... there have been at least two colleges for women in existence in England since the year 1886; ..." delivered during a lecture (1929) is a bitter commentary on the lack of facilities for even educated women and the blatant discriminations practiced against them in the highest seats of learning.
Notes

1 Kirkham 4.

2 Kirkham 91.

3 Woolf 33.

4 Kirkham 89.


6 Kirkham 8.

7 Wollstonecraft 179.

8 Kirkham X.

9 Kirkham X.

10 Kirkham XVI.


12 Kirkham 3.


14 Woolf 93.