Chapter V

An Apology for Patriarchy

The most transient visitor ... could not fail to be aware ... that England is under the rule of a patriarchy.¹

Virginia Woolf had declared this as late as 1929. Years later Sylvia Plath in her characteristic way articulated her fear towards her father thus,

For thirty years, poor and white,
Barely daring to breathe or Achoo.

Daddy, I have had to kill you.
You died before I had time - ...

I never could talk to you.
The tongue stuck in my jaw. ...

I have always been scared of you, ...²

The discussions so far have sufficiently revealed Jane Austen’s ambivalent attitude towards patriarchs and the patriarchal society with its various ramifications. Her characterization of General Tilney, Sir Walter Elliot, Sir Thomas Bertram along with their successors Captain Tilney, Mr. Elliot and Tom respectively amongst others, further goes on to suggest that she did not have much expectations from patriarchy even in the future. Her last complete novel *Persuasion* liberates the heroine from the land-based patriarchal society for a new world. All her mature novels are highly critical in their evaluation of this system. The behaviour, manners and attitude of many a male guardian along with their heirs, and the effect that their
principles, ideals and beliefs have produced is quite unflattering—suggesting as if the author is being apologetic for patriarchy.

After all, the novelist was well aware that one of the main criteria on which patriarchy has survived throughout the ages is by means of effective domination. Studies by many anthropologists and natural historians have pointed out that even before societies—as we know them today had started forming—both the genders were at par, enjoying equality in a manner that is unthinkable today. Though the roles played by both the genders were different even then, still that did not make one inferior to the other. But then something happened to distort this harmony and men came to occupy a superior position over women and, thus the latter became ‘the second gender’. This was achieved by various means, of which suppression perhaps is foremost, which primarily ensured that men continue to enjoy the dominant position of power and control. Austen might not have been aware of the history per se, but surely she perceived the suppression of women around her, which finds reflection in her narratives. A brief discussion of patriarchy at this point is essential, before understanding Austen’s view of the system and its perpetrators.

Patriarchy means male domination and the loss of space for women, according to feminist scholars. They further say that history today, as we know it, is a distortion of matriarchal values which have been cleverly
replaced by patriarchy - a culture that is inherently linked to capitalism and the destruction of nature. Patriarchy is a system of domination in which war always becomes the main principle of social organization, the formulation of economic policies and the striving for technology. So successful has patriarchy been in its domination that matriarchy with which the earliest societies had begun is marginalized, almost obliterated. The instances of extant matriarchal societies can literally be counted on the tip of our fingers. But at what point and exactly how did matriarchy become subsumed by patriarchy, is still a matter of controversy. Importantly, the male-dominated society is associated with the culture of violence and economic disparity. Simone de Beauvoir opined that the male’s identification with nature is symbolized by his ability to hunt and kill, whereas, for women her identification with nature has been as a symbol of immanence which is connected with the natural life-giving process which perpetuates the species. However, in the history of mankind, superiority or authority belongs not with those that bring life but with those which can kill and has the power to take away life.

Feminist researchers also contend that the social order in matriarchal societies is based on intelligent principles cultivated over thousands of years of human experience. It encourages well-balanced societies that practice reciprocal equality in which every individual irrespective of sex and age is
treated with respect. This theory is supported by the very nature of matriarchy which means 'centred around the mother' and the mother as the life giver and preserver cannot be violent, destructive or non-egalitarian. However, the same cannot be said about patriarchy, or the society centred around the father, which as opposed to matriarchy, cannot claim to be based on the ideals of a non-violent social order in which all living creatures are respected.

Since force, subordination and suppression are the mechanisms by which patriarchy works, the party which has the upper hand is in control. Patriarchy is inextricably connected with the concept of power and authority vested in men, which they exercise over women through subordination and suppression. Such authority also presupposes that women are the property of men. The Western patriarchal society which often displayed misogynistic tendencies was able to bring about the subjugation of women to their will through both physical and psychological tactics. In "A Room of One's Own" Woolf says,

> In fact, as Professor Trevelyan points out, she [women] was locked up, beaten and flung about the room.  

Along with these physical means their upbringing instilled in their minds the idea that all men are superior to women. There may have been women like Austen's female protagonists who did not subscribe to the principle of male
superiority but they continued to be docile to men out of fear of the consequences if they went against them.

Female thinkers and writers of the eighteenth century like Wollstonecraft and Austen (the latter in an implicit way) thought of challenging these conventions. Intelligent women – like Austen’s heroines - were gradually learning to come out of their cloistered confines because somewhere deep down they had an invincible sense of their own authority and autonomy gained from their experiences but which they were then themselves unable to comprehend fully. Writers like Austen who could ‘comprehend’ and yet did not try to provoke patriarchy openly, however did speak of these things in her novels through the art of evasion and concealment. For Austen the one language at her disposal which she mastered was the language of double talk. In this she became adept, perhaps more than any other female writer in England or America. It is thus that she presented to the public in an acceptable manner even dangerous visions of women in a way which obscured but could not obliterate their most subversive impulses. This was not an act of challenge against patriarchy but a survival strategy born out of fear.

So carefully has this evasion and concealment been done by Austen and other female writers that some critics believe that men authors are nowhere as elaborate as them. That Austen expressed her thoughts under the
legitimized cover of parodic strategies made her works ambiguous in nature and difficult to understand her exact meaning. Given the very patriarchal literary tradition, no doubt she and her counterparts had important things to hide and had tried to veil their criticism and managed to write within the bounds set by patriarchy. Feminist scholars like Patricia Meyer Spacks, Margaret Kirkham, Elaine Showalter, Carolyn Heilburn and Catherine Stimpson have tried to reach the truth behind the concealment in women writers and find meaning out of the seemingly empty spaces in their narratives.

The relegation of women to the domestic sphere was the most effective tactic of patriarchy to exercise control over women. Following this patriarchal norm Austen limited her literary topics to the domestic confines of three or four families belonging to the countryside. But even then she was able to effectively criticize patriarchy. It was through rebellious escapes from houses and institutions supported by it, from where women propelled by their claustrophobic rage ran away or eloped. They sought an escape from their deadened world into one of activity and freedom. When Maria Bertram seeks to go beyond the locked gates in her would-be husband’s grand estate Sotherton, she too perhaps expresses the anxiety of women in such confined environments. But such dangerous and rebellious feelings can never be tolerated within patriarchy and for her defiance she is punished.
All the houses and estates in Austen are conspicuous by their lack of details which symbolize the emptiness in the lives of the women who are destined to live within them. Further Austen portrays most of her protagonists as sub-consciously looking for an escape from their paternal houses which are always uncomfortable because they offer them no private space. This general discontent is voiced by Anne when she says,

'We live at home, quiet, confined and our feelings prey upon us. You [men] are forced on exertion. You have always a profession, pursuits, business of some sort or other, to take you back into the world immediately, …' (P, 219) [Italics mine]

In *Persuasion*, Anne’s father’s house is defined not by any other feature but Sir Walter’s numerous mirrors where she is faced with the monotonous ambience of her father’s estate. Although mistress of her father’s house Emma suffers from intellectual loneliness enclosed within locked doors and windows and blazing fires. All the heroines consciously or unconsciously want to reach beyond their father’s house to the world outside. Maria Bertram is “… prepared for matrimony by a hatred of home, restraint, and tranquility …” (*MP*, 70). Fanny leaves Mansfield to occupy the smaller parsonage at Thornton Lacey and Emma after her father’s demise will eventually move over to Donwell Abbey. Catherine too will occupy Henry’s parsonage at Woodston away from the claustrophobic environment of her parental home and the confining Abbey of the monsterish General. Although women from their mothers’ lives did perceive how debilitating
marriage can be - as does most of Austen’s female protagonists as well as some of her secondary female characters - they still want husbands in order to escape from home. Besides, the subconscious fear of becoming like their mothers, financial dependence adds one more motive to flee the parental house. Therefore, in a patriarchal world women are shown as competing with one another for male protection.

The public image of patriarchy was one of benevolence and protective guardianship of their womenfolk. But by presenting the cases of so many women in her novels whose conscious or sub-conscious impulse is to escape the confines of paternal houses, Austen explodes the myth and exposes the ugly truth about patriarchy. Some of her novels portray more than one instance of elopement which are deliberately shown to be rash and foolish acts because Austen was aware that any endorsement of such acts would not be taken kindly by patriarchal society. Nevertheless, such instances speak for Austen’s indictment of patriarchy which is very cleverly couched in subtlety and indirection.

The author had realized that there is no possibility of escape from the patriarchal enclosure, which has betrayed nature through a culture that refuses equality to women. The irony is that women cannot escape these conventions and must adhere to them which ultimately denigrate them. Women were fated to inhabit the male-defined confines, be it in matters of
conduct, speech, thought, way of dressing, etc., as their mothers and before them their mother's mother had been doing for centuries, which inevitably was bound to alter their vision of life and living. Tight-lacing, fasting, vinegar-drinking and other cosmetic or dietary excesses were encouraged. For women to be frail, sickly and ill, as it were became an ideal to be aspired for, an essential objective for their training in femininity. It formed a part of the physical regimen which made women ill and weak, that in turn was admired by the men, for the weaker they were the more complete their suppression will be. If anything firmness within patriarchy can only precipitate downfall as it does literally for Louisa Musgrove and figuratively for Mary Crawford. Women like Louisa are expected not to jump from the stiles (suggestive of masculine activity and energy) but to read love poetry quietly in the parlour with a suitor sensitive to her condition. Louisa's near fatal fall and illness reinforce Anne's belief that female assertion must be fatal and diminishing, just as Marianne Dashwood's is shown to be.

In Mansfield Park the distinction between a weak and timid Fanny and a healthy and outspoken Mary is most marked, based on which they are accorded different treatments within patriarchy. Mary's physical fitness is not seen as a sign of good health but as a masculine attribute. "I am very strong. Nothing ever fatigues me ..." (MP, 55), Mary frankly admits this supposedly unfeminine quality. Unlike Fanny, this "rather small, strongly
made” lady takes up riding out of sheer “inclination to learn to ride” (MP, 53). Mary’s passion affects Fanny’s already fragile health as she is deprived of the much-needed exercise, since Mary borrows her horse. Even Edmund points out, “She [Mary] rides only for pleasure, you [Fanny] for health …” (MP, 56). As the narrative progresses, Mary is shown to be evil and monstrous, primarily because she is assertive, brutally outspoken and willful in her way of living – qualities abhorred by her society in a woman. Mary and Fanny can be equally selfish, yet the difference between them is that the latter keeps her selfish feelings to herself and does not allow this impulse to determine her outward actions. Thus, outwardly she is an angel for patriarchy. Mary is the reverse. In this story Fanny and Mary are shown as variations of the angel and monster character respectively, since they exhibit some differences from a complete angel or monster character.

The ill-effect of patriarchy can also be seen in Austen’s characterization of the angel, monster and human characters among the women, because these characters are shown to behave in the way that they do, in direct proportion to patriarchal approbation that they wish to attain. For example, Fanny is shown to have gained the approval and love of the patriarch as a reward for her submissive and dedicated behaviour. “Fanny was indeed the daughter that he [Sir Thomas] wanted …” (MP, 385) and, “… dearer by all his own importance with her than any one else at
Mansfield, ...” (MP, 384). Mary on the other hand has little prospect of love or domestic bliss because she does not behave in the same manner. In another instance in the novel, the punishment on the Bertram sisters is seem to be in direct proportion to their degree of willfulness and selfishness. That, Julia escaped better than Maria was owing, in some measure, to a favourable difference of disposition and circumstance ... (MP, 380).

Austen’s vacillation between the twin images of the angel and monster suggests her own sense of ambivalence as a member and a female writer in the male-dominated society. The anxiety she felt as a female author in such a profession is evident in her handling of the angel and monster characters. The creation of the perfect angel would amount to an unequivocal endorsement of patriarchy which Austen could not have done without perjuring herself. On the other hand, to allow the monster characters to go unpunished would be a direct assault on the power and authority of patriarchy. In several examples we see the author’s anxiety at work, like Anne the most perfect angel character in the end breaks away from patriarchy by embracing the naval society. Lady Susan though she is placed in the monster category and Austen’s language in describing her is not of approval yet she is portrayed as a charming and attractive woman.

Even writers like Emily Dickinson, Mary Shelley, the Bronte sisters, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Mary Elizabeth Coleridge and also modern writers like Virginia Woolf and Sylvia Plath, are found to be alternately
defining themselves as the angel woman or the monster woman. The continued presence of the angel and monster women in much of women’s literature is because few writers have succeeded in breaking away from the deep-seated imprints of patriarchy.

General Tilney of *Northanger Abbey* is presented as the worst patriarchal figure in Austen’s novels. Through elaborate double talk and other techniques of concealment Austen nevertheless, transforms this work into perhaps her strongest indictment of patriarchy. On the surface it is an amusing and inoffensive novel. But when this was published posthumously the harsh portrayal of patriarchy disturbed the readers and reviewers. In partial subversion of gothic conventions Austen presents General Tilney as handsome, polite and a polished man of the world, unlike the gothic villain. This façade however, hides his villainous traits like cruelty towards Catherine, his children, his wife and his subordinates. Like all patriarchs his self-assurance is based on the fact that he has the ultimate power and authority because of his being a male and also as the possessor of family wealth. On his first being introduced to Catherine he is shown as being very pleasant to her because he thinks that she is fabulously rich. She was

… received by him with such ready, such solicitous politeness … to such anxious attention was the general’s civility carried … *(NA, 79)*

that it surprised Henry and Eleanor. Also
The general attended her himself to the street-door, saying everything gallant ... and making her one of the most graceful bows she had ever beheld, when they parted. (NA, 79)

But once the truth is known his villainous traits and cruelty come to the fore.

Austen remarks about Catherine's unjust treatment,

The General had had nothing to accuse her of, ... She was guilty only of being less rich than he had supposed her to be. Under a mistaken persuasion of her possessions and claims, he had courted her acquaintance in Bath, solicited her company at Northanger, and designed her for his daughter in law. On discovering his error, to turn her from the house seemed the best. (NA, 198-99)

This remark shows how Austen in spite of her protestations to the contrary, was not always successful in hiding her criticism of patriarchy. She sometimes even tried to disown such a reading of her novel by professing ignorance of her own intentions. In the “Advertisement” to the novel she expresses confusion as to why this work finished in 1803 –

... disposed of to a bookseller, it was even advertised, and why the business proceeded no farther, the author has never been able to learn. That any bookseller should think it worth while to purchase what he did not think it worth while to publish seems extraordinary. (“Advertisement”, NA)

Northanger Abbey remains the most political of all the novels in which her indictment of patriarchy finds the strongest expression.

The position of an unloved woman or an uncared-for wife can be truly pathetic as is evident under the General's patriarchy. This is shown through Eleanor and her mother, the late Mrs. Tilney, about whom the author says very little, but through this little the author simultaneously leaves a lot unsaid about the life of the deceased wife. We can perhaps
surmise that like her late mother-in-law, Catherine Morland too might comprehend the powerlessness of women and the various forms in which they are exploited. It is this kind of treatment or rather mistreatment that leads to their psychological vulnerability in various situations. This is as much the secret of the Abbey as also a part of the secret behind the graceful and elegant surfaces of English society. The gullible Catherine soon realizes from her experience in the Abbey that most women resemble Eleanor Tilney in that they are only “… a nominal mistress of” the house and their “real power is nothing …” (NA, 182). Austen’s other heroines too realize this through their various individual experiences.

In *Emma*, Mr. Woodhouse the heroine’s father is another selfish patriarch who wields his power and authority over the women folk without any compunction. He is also a hypochondriac and uses his imaginary illnesses to ensure the unstinted devotion and obedience of his daughter Emma. He manipulates her to such an extent that she is made to believe that marriage for her is out of the question. At the same time Mr. Woodhouse lavishes his love and attention on Emma with praises like “Dear Emma bears every thing so well” (*E*, 9), “And you have never any odd humours, my dear.” (*E*, 6) She is so over-whelmed by his love and appreciation of her that she feels “Marriage … would be incompatible with what she owed her father.” (*E*, 416). While extolling Emma’s virtues as a devoted daughter,
Austen is also pointing out the psychological hold that the father has on his daughter and the slavish relationship between them. Such a subjugation of his daughter by Mr. Woodhouse finds an echo in the words of Wollstonecraft:

... the early habit of relying almost implicitly on the opinion of a respected parent is not easily shook, even when the matured reason convinces the child that his parent is not the wisest man in the world. This weakness ... of obeying a parent only on account of his being a parent, shackles the mind, and prepares it for a slavish submission to any power but reason.  

Emma in being portrayed by Austen as a gullible and willing slave to her father's manipulation can not only be read as a weakness in her character but also as Austen's indirect way of exposing Mr. Woodhouse's extreme selfishness. Also in her excessive devotion to her father, she fails in fulfilling her responsibility outside her home and family, towards the society and towards other women.

In spite of being endowed with power and authority as the first citizen of Highbury, Mr. Woodhouse's emotional dependence on Emma is un-manly and speaks for a deep-seated sense of insecurity. This makes him an unfit father or guardian incapable of sustaining his daughter either intellectually, psychologically or morally. As such, on the whole, he is a bad influence on Emma. Her mistakes can therefore, be said to be the result of her staying at home in an environment which makes it difficult to think for herself. Mr. Woodhouse is another example through whom Austen
questions the moral authority of patriarchy in which such men misuse the power and authority vested in them. He is portrayed as

... having been a valetudinarian all his life, without activity of mind or body, he was a much older man in his ways than in his years; and though everywhere beloved for the friendliness of his heart and his amiable temper, his talents could not have recommended him at any time ... (E, 5).

It is not any genuine concern for his daughter’s happiness or fatherly responsibilities that precipitates Emma’s marriage as it ought to have been. Rather it is his own sense of insecurity, Mr. Woodhouse’s anxieties about a local poultry thief that hastens the wedding. For the indictment of Mr. Woodhouse’s personality that starts from the very beginning of the novel – in his criticism of Mrs. Weston’s marriage – completes a circle with Emma’s. It shows his inability to judge anything sensibly and emphasizes his selfishness. It is only proper that the paramount position – the role of a guardian – is taken up by someone able, like Mr. Knightley.

Given the partiality and prejudice with which patriarchy have treated and stifled women down the ages, it is but natural that a woman of Austen’s understanding and perception would give us flawed patriarchs in all her novels, who make demands for obedience and respect no matter how fallible, foolish or in the wrong they may be. Sir Thomas Bertram of Mansfield Park is another representative of such defective patriarchy. Austen shows how his dictatorial mismanagement of Mansfield results in
terrible consequences. He is portrayed as an authoritarian who cannot brook
the slightest sign of opposition and had once said to Fanny:

... 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)

The atmosphere in his household therefore, is the gloomiest among all of
Austen's novels. In depicting his solemnity and portentousness, and
ultimately proving him to be wrong in almost all his assumptions,
principles, and general beliefs, Austen once again highlights the inadequacy
of the patriarchs. Even as a father he has a benumbing effect on his children.
Only through pain and mortification and through the misfortune that his
children bring on him, he learns that he had failed not only as a father, but
also as a member of the patriarchy in not being able to impart proper
guidance.

Sir Thomas's above quoted utterance reduces Fanny to silence and
tears and through this Austen articulates women's suppression. Perhaps,
ever before was female silence so clearly made to speak as it is in the East
Room. Sir Thomas, well-meaning but blind, benevolent but dictatorial,
moralizes in a lengthy speech about her "wilfulness of temper" and
"ingratitude" (MP, 318). In the end he learns how wrong his assumptions
have been and from his bitter experiences undergoes some change of heart
in the end. Money and materialistic bonding which had once mattered much
to him is now relegated and he learns to value family ties and genuine qualities of head and heart as more important. Thus, earlier where he had insisted on maintaining the distinction between his daughters and his poor niece, in the conclusion this very man is

Attempting to ‘bind by the strongest securities all that remained to him of domestic felicity’, he comes to give ‘joyful consent’ to the marriage of ‘the two young friends’, whom he once believed could never marry, since the distinction between even a second son of a baronet and the unproportioned Miss Price must be too great. 5

*Mansfield Park,* in which the domestic government of an English estate is exposed as based on fallacious principles, makes the education of Sir Thomas Bertram, Bart, MP, rather than of Miss Fanny Price, one of its central ironic themes. Here it is not the heroine but the patriarch who learns from his mistakes. Through Sir Thomas’s emphasis on submissiveness in women the novel very much questions the moral status of women within Mansfield, and England in general. After all, the English patriarch is the owner of Antiguan plantations and of the slaves who work there. Following his return back home, we are informed that Fanny questioned him about the slave trade which went unanswered. Neither are we told what was his niece’s question was nor what answer he provided her with.

It is worth mentioning that *The Abolition of the African Slave Trade* which was published in 1808, Clarkson while delineating the history of the anti-slavery movement mentions a particularly famous legal judgment, which established that slavery was illegal in England. This was the
Mansfield Judgment given by the Lord Chief Justice of England in 1772 whereby Lord Mansfield favoured abolition. The topic of abolition which was hotly debated then was considered as a wicked traffic for it virtually denied men the status of a moral being, by substituting the law of reason by the law of force. It was the Mansfield Judgment that banned the practice and restored the rational creature to his moral rights. Paradoxically Austen by choosing to adopt such a title and by making Sir Thomas a slave-owner abroad, and the unstated question of Fanny, draws an implicit contrast and comparison between her moral status in Mansfield and, women of England in general with that of the Antiguan slaves. This itself reveals Austen’s view of patriarchy.

Nonetheless, Sir Thomas despite his defects is benevolent and kind-hearted which is why Maria Bertram does not end up as another Eliza Brandon. Maria is refused a shelter at her paternal home, a move that was strongly supported by her own father, and by all her relatives in Mansfield including her mother, except Mrs. Norris. He ensured that

As a daughter ... she should be protected by him, and secured in every comfort, and supported by every encouragement to do right ... but farther than that he would not go ... (MP, 379),

on ethical grounds and bound by societal proprieties. Austen in keeping with her own propriety comments detachedly on the role of the father and absolves him partly:
Maria had destroyed her own character, and he would not by a vain attempt to restore what never could be restored ... (MP, 379).

In *Pride and Prejudice* Mr. Bennet is perceived to be lazy who spends all his time in the library, immersed in a sort of self-indulgence and makes witty comments at the expense of others. Although intelligent enough to see the fault in his wife and his daughters (except Elizabeth) who are constantly the butt of his ridicule, he does not use his intelligence towards positive ends in grooming his wife or his daughters. Though not dominating as Sir Thomas, or foppish like Sir Walter, or greedy and manipulative like General Tilney, he bears some resemblance with Mr. Woodhouse in his love for his favourite daughter Elizabeth. His neglect for his family is unpardonable, especially since he alone is in a position to educate them as his wife clearly fails. This proves his selfishness.

*Persuasion* is about a foolish, vain patriarch who is neither benevolent nor authoritarian, but too selfish to think of anyone else besides himself. Sir Walter is treated more harshly than any other Austen patriarch. Except Elizabeth, Sir Walter does not have any affection for his other children. His vanity and love of the luxurious life coupled with his foolishness eventually lead to depletion of his considerable wealth.

The novel opens with the *Baronetage* which is “the book of books” *(P, 13)*:

Sir Walter Elliot, of Kellynch-hall, in Somersetshire, was a man who, for his own amusement, never took up any book but the *Baronetage*; there he
found occupation for an idle hour, and consolation in a distressed one; there his faculties were roused into admiration and respect, by contemplating the limited remnant of the earliest patents; there any unwelcome sensations, arising from domestic affairs, changed naturally into pity and contempt, as he turned over the almost endless creations of the last century—and there, if every other leaf were powerless, he could read his own history with an interest which never failed—this was the page at which the favourite volume always opened:

‘ELLiot OF KELLYNCH-HALL.’

‘Walter Elliot, born ... (P, 9)

The *Baronetage* symbolizes male authority, patriarchal history in general and also of the family history of the Elliots:

‘Heir presumptive, William Walter Elliot, Esq., great grandson of the second Sir Walter.’ (P, 10)

The first chapters of *Persuasion* relentlessly exposes the unworthiness of Sir Walter Elliot to govern himself, and therefore to govern anyone else.

... Sir Walter ... in forgetting her age, [that eldest daughter is twenty-nine] or, at least, be deemed only half a fool, for thinking himself and Elizabeth as blooming as ever, amidst the wreck of the good looks of everybody else; for he could plainly see how old all the rest of the family and acquaintance were growing. Anne haggard, Mary coarse, every face in the neighbourhood worsting; and the rapid increase of the crow’s foot about Lady Russell’s temples had long been a distress to him. (P, 12)

He can perceive only these trivial things but fails to see the deteriorating condition of either his estate or his fortune which ought to have been a real cause of concern for him. Incapable of fulfilling his fatherly responsibility, Austen dismisses Sir Walter’s claims to filial respect and transfers the same to Lady Russell, who takes up the position of a friend and surrogate mother after the death of Lady Elliot.
Such is the man upon whom the laws and customs of England confer the control and protection of wives and daughters. Through him Austen suggests the dearth of good men, especially among the baronetcy who constitute the upper rung of the patriarchal society. In Sir Walter we see a patriarch who strangely exhibits the traits of a smart society woman of uncertain age—a character much despised in eighteenth and nineteenth century literature.

Vanity was the beginning and the end of Sir Walter Elliot’s character; vanity of person and of situation. ... Few women could think more of their personal appearance than he did ... He considered the blessing of beauty as inferior only to the blessing of a baronetcy; (P, 4)

In *Pride and Prejudice* the imperfect but sympathetic father Mr. Bennet is partly redeemed because of his warm affection for Elizabeth. Sir Thomas is ridiculed in *Mansfield Park* but in the end still retains power and authority as a benevolent patriarch. Despite all his faults, Mr. Woodhouse in *Emma* enjoys the affection of all.

In contrast to these patriarchs whose flaws are relieved by such redeeming features, Sir Walter remains vain and selfish all throughout. For example, because of the numerous mirrors installed in his house to reflect his vain image, his daughter Anne looses her own self-image. Anne is the ghost of her own dead self—pale, sickly, thin, quiet, submissive, living not for oneself but for others. Austen demonstrates through Anne that this woman who has not become anybody is haunted by everybody. One reason
as to why she has deteriorated into a ghostly insubstantiality is that she is a dependent female in a world symbolized by her vain and selfish aristocratic father, who inhabits the mirrored dressing room of Kellynch Hall and is fascinated with the *Baronetage*. In the process, Anne also discovers why her mother lived an invisible and unloved life within Sir Walter’s house, though she had a better claim to status as his wife. Such is the debilitating effect that a self-centered patriarch like Sir Walter can have on women under his protection.

Jane Austen’s exposure of such flawed patriarchy gets reflected even in the younger generation. For example, Henry Tilney is very much his father’s son as is revealed in his attitude towards women.

‘Everybody allows that the talent of writing agreeable letters is peculiarly female ... the usual style of letter-writing among women is faultless, except in three particulars ... A general deficiency of subject, a total inattention to stops, and a very frequent ignorance of grammar.’ *(NA, 13)*

Typically he thinks highly of himself for he says,

‘I have no patience with such of my sex as disdain to let themselves sometimes down to the comprehension of yours [women].’ *(NA, 88)*

and continues

‘Perhaps the abilities of women are neither sound nor acute—neither vigorous nor keen. Perhaps they want observation, discernment, judgment, fire, genius and wit ...’ *(NA, 88).*

This goes on to prove that like the older generation of patriarchs Henry Tilney does not believe in the equality of the sexes. Just as the General
controls and watches over his children, Henry too like his father's true son teaches and lectures Catherine with an air of authority and command.

But Catherine being ignorant and gullible accepts Henry's views wholeheartedly and believes in what he says, irrespective of whether they are derogatory towards her gender or not.

It was no effort to Catherine to believe that Henry Tilney could never be wrong. (NA, 89)

But by accepting Henry's opinions and judgment for granted she invariably clouds her perception and reconstructs her understanding of things. In the process she is victimized as the process of her depersonalization sets in. Ironically she is awed by the fact that he has read "hundreds and hundreds" of novels (NA, 83) and his room at Northanger is littered with books, guns and great coats. Her open admiration of Henry is for his supposed literary knowledge which boosts his ego considerably. Austen criticizes Henry's snobbery in particular and of men in society in general affected by this misplaced adoration by women like Catherine when she says,

"... I will only add in justice to men, that though to the larger and more trivial part of the sex, imbecility in females is a great enhancement of their personal charms, there is a portion of them [men] too reasonable and too well informed themselves to desire any thing more in woman than ignorance." (NA, 86)

Being able to establish his intellectual superiority in this manner, Henry Tilney seems to add another dimension to his power and authority as a future patriarch. As for his relationship with Catherine his "... affection
originated in nothing better than gratitude … of her partiality for him …” (NA, 198). Henry’s charming vivacity notwithstanding, his attitude raises doubts about Catherine’s happiness as his wife.

There is yet another type of male protagonist like Frank Churchill who is adept at manipulating the affections of women through his show of respect and consideration for them. Such prevarications help them to maintain control over the women through their emotional vulnerability. Though secretly engaged to Jane, he encourages Emma by flattering her and in the process manages to turn the girls against each other. This shows how Emma Woodhouse and Jane Fairfax fail to understand the devious nature of men when it comes to their exercising control over women. Gradually with experience Emma ultimately realizes that her position is not much different from Jane’s – in that both are powerless, be it at the hands of the cunning Frank or the selfishly manipulative Mr. Woodhouse. In concealing his engagement to Jane Fairfax which will jeopardize his inheritance if revealed and in appearing to court Emma, Frank Churchill is merely using both these women to ensure his fortune. Austen also censures him for making Jane an object of pity, bordering on contempt. The effect of Frank’s duplicity is such that she exposes herself to criticism through her complicity with him. Both Emma and Jane commit the mistake of abetting Frank Churchill consciously or unconsciously in this speculative love-game but their
complicity is somewhat condoned whereas, Frank’s deliberate exploitation of power over them is portrayed as contemptible.

_Mansfield Park_ also points out certain flaws of patriarchy which are not peculiar to it alone, but are present in the other novels too. In this instance patriarchal law which favours the eldest son irrespective of his worth or merits is being questioned. In pursuance of this law Sir Thomas’s Mansfield will have to make the scapegrace Tom the heir and not the more deserving and judicious Edmund, who is destined to obscurity in the role of a country clergyman. His parsonage will be at Mansfield thus making him his brother’s first servant and dependant. That Tom is unfit for this superior position is amply demonstrated by his drinking and reckless living which result in his almost fatal illness. Also he is partly responsible for Maria’s ruin because it was his idea of a play that allows his sister and Henry to develop a dangerous level of intimacy. Though invested with power in his father’s absence he is completely oblivious of the effects of his actions.

As he points out to his brother Edmund, Tom is acutely conscious of the greater claim to their father’s property. But he lacks any sense of responsibility regarding it that he will eventually inherit. He is to be blamed for Sir Thomas having to leave England for Antigua, as it is his expensive lifestyle that considerably depletes the resources of Mansfield, thus compelling the aging patriarch to do whatever lies within his means to
restore it. The depletion of resources also means the reduction of Edmund’s share of inheritance which is anyway much less than his own share which will include the title, estate as well as cash. The younger son Edmund though quite clearly better qualified by natural gifts of prudence, sensitivity towards other people, and would have made a better patriarch is aware of the disadvantages of his birth as a second son.

When Mary Crawford, with whom Edmund was for some time in love, says that he ought to go into Parliament instead of the Church, he replies:

’I believe I must wait till there is an especial assembly for the representation of younger sons who have little to live on ...’ (MP, 214).

On the other hand, despite his deficiencies Tom will also become a Member of Parliament like his father Sir Thomas. Another unworthy young patriarch Rushworth who is immensely rich will also enter into the House if Sir Thomas is able to find him a borough.

Henry Crawford an only son, an heir to wealth, estate and family name is another example of undeserving young patriarchs. He is intelligent, manipulative and of loose morals whose actions lead a family to humiliation and shame and forever ruin the life of a young woman. He is portrayed as more undeserving than Tom or Rushworth to occupy a position of power and authority. In his relationships with women he is deviously unscrupulous. He flirts simultaneously with Maria who is already engaged
along with her sister Julia. This suggests that he has no respect for women and their feelings. He is persuasive, aggressive and totally ruthless when it comes to attaining victory over them. His pursuit of women is motivated only by pleasure without any intention of marriage. Although he elopes with Mrs. Maria Rushworth, he never intended to make an honest woman of her by eventually marrying her. This ruins her life but there is little or no condemnation of his moral depravity.

Henry like his sister possesses the same seductive allure, but he can "... do nothing without a mixture of evil ..." (*MP*, 307). Being brought up under a corrupt and evil uncle (who brings his mistress into the house after his wife’s demise) and his unloved but affectionate wife, Henry turns out to be insecure and unhappy. As the author says, he

... ruined by early independence and bad domestic example, indulged in the freaks of a cold-blooded vanity a little too long. (*MP*, 381)

Though he is seen as an unsavoury character one cannot overlook the fact that this young patriarch is the product of the flawed patriarchal system which fails to groom the heirs in a proper manner.

Henry is the product of such a system where he grew up without a role model. Therefore, his lifestyle can be viewed as his attempt to create a distinctive life of his own. Self-divided, indulging in passions, alienated from authority by his conscious choice and decision, yet full of ambition and seeking revenge for past injuries, this false young man’s character
borders on the Satanic, as it were. He might go on to survive this way, and even find a lover or wife – as his counterparts in the other novels do – yet he can never be the choice of Fanny, just as his counterparts will never be the choice of other Austen heroines. Austen’s indictment of such lives as their’s, bereft of ethics and virtues rests on the fact that Henry commits acts like running away with a married woman and seducing others.

Interestingly, only Fanny and Mary can see through Henry – that he is outrageously flirtatious with both the Bertram sisters giving rise to terrible jealousy between them. His own sister thinks thus of him,

‘He is the most horrible flirt that can be imagined. If your Miss Bertrams do not like to have their hearts broke, let them avoid Henry.’ (MP, 33)

In a lighter vein Henry comments on marriage as ‘Heaven’s last best gift ...’ and holds that ‘An engaged woman is always more agreeable than a disengaged.’ (MP, 34-35) This reveals his cynicism. Just as Fanny sees through the actor Henry Crawford to be a role-player and a hypocrite, Edmund finally recognizes Mary’s playfulness as her refusal to submit to the expectations of her culture, a revolt that is both attractive and immoral. It might gain her the freedom to become whatever she likes, but simultaneously implies that she will be denied a good husband, and the higher status that only marriage can confer on her.

In stark contrast to other young patriarchs Sir Edward Denham of Sanditon is a pathetic caricature. As opposed to Tom Bertram, Henry
Crawford or Frank Churchill he is spiritless. Most of the time he lives in a world of fantasy where he imagines himself to be a character like Lovelace.

With a perversity of Judgement, which must be attributed to his not having by Nature a very strong head, the Graces, the Spirit, the Sagacity, & the Perseverance, … (S in NA Vol., 358)

His inherent ineptness is further complicated by his lack of money. He also displays a certain amount of meanness and villainy which are used by Austen to debunk his fantastic ambitions of being a hero like Lovelace. Like the other young patriarchs Sir Edward too is most unsuited to be at the helm of affairs in the role of a patriarch. While critical of works like Richardson, gothic novels and sentimental poets, the author points out that the fault essentially lies with the characters.

But the character who stands apart from all of Austen’s male characters for his mindless verbosity is Mr. Collins. A clergyman by profession, with high impressions about himself Mr. Collins’s words and actions reveal his lack of intelligence and he is shown as incapable of exercising his power and authority as a man, a husband or a clergyman.

When the eloped pair Lydia and Wickham are accepted by the Bennets, Mr. Collins says -
‘... I must not, however, neglect the duties of my station, or refrain from declaring my amazement, at hearing that you received the young couple into your house as soon as they were married. It is an encouragement of vice; and had I been the rector of Longbourn, I should very strenuously have opposed it. You ought certainly to forgive them as a christian, but never to admit them in your sight, or allow their names to be mentioned in your hearing.’ (PP, 323)

Mr. Bennet recognizes the contradiction in the statement, “That is his notion of christian forgiveness! ...” (PP, 323), which is tantamount to his saying that Mr. Collins cannot think clearly. His character is drawn on similar lines to one of Austen’s brothers Henry Austen who too was a clergyman, very talkative and about whom “... Jane herself has warned us ...”

Given such perspectives on patriarchs one tends to agree with Margaret Kirkham’s comment on the author, her novels and her characters:

In her own novels Austen criticizes the belief that women’s problems are to be solved by benevolent patriarchs. She does this by showing patriarchal figures as at best defective, like Mr. Bennet, and at worst vicious, like General Tilney. Her heroines, especially the later ones, solve their own problems before making marriages with men who see themselves in a fraternal, rather than a patriarchal relationship as husbands, no doubt she was influenced in this by her understanding of feminist argument, as it was to be found in polemical writing like A Vindication of the Rights of Woman, ...

The discussion of the patriarchs both young and old amply exemplifies how they have been the agents for perpetuating a flawed patriarchy consciously or unconsciously. Thus, Sir Thomas affects Tom’s behaviour, the Admiral had very negative influences on Henry Crawford, General Tilney inculcates superiority of men in the mind of Henry and Sir Walter will eventually be succeeded by the totally undeserving Mr. Elliot.
However, in delineating characters like Sir Thomas, Mr. Bennet and Mr. Woodhouse, Austen has attempted to maintain a middle stand by endowing them with some redeeming features. She undoubtedly is critical of them, but her criticism is within the limits acceptable to the patriarchal society, as she is constantly aware of her position as a female writer and her sense of propriety. But there are unredeemable characters like General Tilney and Sir Walter who represent the kind of patriarchy most abhorrent to her. It is worth noting that both *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion* were published posthumously. Again it is in keeping with her middle stand that Austen ensures that her female protagonist will not spend their lives with men like the General or Sir Walter. Instead they will have as their spouses men like the Darcys, Knightleys and Wentworths and it is with them that they will exercise power, authority and influence, no matter how limited it is. These patriarchs though only a handful in number are intelligent, perceptive and are amenable to change because they become aware of their defects. No doubt they are the few exceptions to the rule but through their portrayal Austen seems to be trying to blunt the edge of her general criticism against patriarchy.

In her treatment of patriarchy Austen has focused on the misuse of immense power and the consequent ill-effects on the family and the society. In order to remove such an acute imbalance of power and authority the
author advocates a kind of power sharing between her male and female protagonists. Too much of power and authority for either sex can have negative consequences. Therefore, it is only to be expected that Austen’s heroines like Elizabeth, Anne and Emma are provided with the opportunity to exercise power and authority together with their husbands.
Notes

1 Woolf 29.


3 Woolf 37.

4 Wollstonecraft 267-68.

5 Kirkham 112.

6 Chapman 94.

7 Kirkham 32.