Introduction

By God, if wommen hadde written stories,
As clerkes han withinne hir oratories,
They wolde han writen of men more wikednesse
Than all the mark of Adam may redresse.¹

This comment by the astute Wife of Bath, can be compared with Jane Austen’s protagonist Anne Elliot’s response to Captain Harville in Bath when she tells him that

“Men have had every advantage of us in telling their own story.” (P, 221)

Gilbert and Gubar also echo this view when they say,

When he [Chaucer] gave the Wife of Bath a tale of her own, he portrayed her projecting her subversive vision of patriarchal institutions into the story of a furious hag who demands supreme power over her own life and that of her husband: only when she gains his complete acceptance of her authority does this witch transform herself into a modest and docile beauty.²

Critical appraisal of Jane Austen’s novels has been enormous and comprehensive. But the views have been divergent and have ranged from anti-feminist or conservative criticism to feminist interpretations. However, in the current trend governing Austenian criticism, her status as a ‘feminist’ has been a matter of some controversy.

Gilbert and Gubar, Margaret Kirkham, Claudia Johnson, Maaja Stewart and Mary Poovey belong to the feminist group, arguing that Austen entertained pro-feminist views and that her female characters enjoy power, authority and strength. The characters that have been deliberately deprived
of them carry some message which the author had chosen to highlight. Johnson sees Austen as a feminist who disguised her true feelings and thoughts because of the limitations which society then imposed on women. Gilbert and Gubar advocated such a view about Austen as well as about other women writers like Emily Dickinson, Charlotte Bronte, Emily Bronte, Mary Shelley and others. Claudia Johnson states that Austen’s novels clearly show –

... a consciousness of how the private is political and a sensitivity to the problem women writers encounter living and writing in a male-dominated culture. 

The purpose of [her] study ... [Johnson says is] ... to reconceptualize the stylistic and thematic coherence of Austen’s fiction by demonstrating how it emerges, draws, and departs from a largely feminine tradition of political novels ... 

On the other hand, the conservative school argues that Austen was not a feminist and that she never meant her heroines or female characters to be too powerful or domineering. This approach is represented by Marilyn Butler, whose objective,

... is to show that her manner as a novelist is broadly that of the conservative Christian moralist of the 1790’s; that she continues to write as a Christian, with minor modifications only to accord with the prevailing manner ... 

She divides Austen’s heroines into those who are “Right” in terms of “conservative orthodoxy” like Fanny and Anne and “Heroines who are Wrong” in the “... more spiritual-looking errors of pride and presumption ...” like Elizabeth and Emma. In 1975 Marilyn Butler argued a new case:
Austen’s acceptance of the ‘orthodox’ views of the English moralists was not neutral; it was a sign of her commitment to Burke and political reaction.

Margaret Kirkham vehemently opposes Butler and holds her views to be mistaken because they fail to take account of the extent to which Wollstonecraft in *Vindication*, and the whole line of English feminism from Astell to Austen, relies upon eighteenth century argument about ethics and uses it to promote the idea that women are accountable beings of the same kind as men. Kirkham further says,

Marilyn Butler’s *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* remains a most stimulating and informative contextual study, but her conception of the war does not make sufficient allowance for the many and varied battles which made it up.

She goes on to opine that F. R. Leavis’s placing Austen as inaugurator of the great tradition of nineteenth century fiction of moral (social) concern also needs further consideration, for there are marked differences between her and those considered by Leavis as her successors. Her moral interest as a feminist was not shared by George Eliot, Henry James or Conrad. Her view of English society was not influenced by Carlyle since she was dead before he had begun to exercise an influence. She points out that

The underlying argument of the Austen novels — and they are novels in which argument matters — is entirely in accord with this. It looks old-fashioned now, but it should be noted that Austen is often most radical, as a feminist, where she sounds most out-dated (and most like Mary Wollstonecraft)
Between the two extreme views on Austen as pro-feminist or anti-feminist, critics like Alistair M Duckworth and Tony Tanner argue that she was not completely a feminist or an anti-feminist, but a skeptical progressive and a social critic who is pessimistic about the possibilities of social improvement. Duckworth in the 'Preface' states that he has,

... sought to identify in her ... novels an authentic commitment to a social morality and a continuous awareness and exposure of attitudes destructive of social continuity ...\(^9\)

Tanner too, regards Austen as a socially conscious writer who was very aware of the issues faced by women then.

As I hope will be apparent by the end of this book, ... Jane Austen does both expose and criticise the ideological assumptions which ground her society.\(^10\)

Amongst the other prominent critics, Lionel Trilling believes that Austen is humanely sympathetic in her treatment of human beings, while Marvin Mudrick holds that Austen was not so humanely inclined and was even inhumane towards some of her characters like Maria Bertram and Mary Crawford of *Mansfield Park*. Trilling’s criticism makes Austen more optimistic about social change and harmony, whereas, Mudrick makes her more pessimistic. But in Austen’s works Gilbert and Gubar saw how,

Austen demystifies the literature she has read neither because she believes it misrepresents reality, as Mary Lascelles argues, nor out of obsessive fear of emotional contact, as Marvin Mudrick claims, nor because she is writing Tory propaganda as Marilyn Butler speculates, but because she seeks to illustrate how such fictions are the alien creations of writers who contribute to the enfeebling of women.\(^11\)
In these broad categories of Austenian criticism, critics like Gilbert and Gubar, Kirkham, Johnson, Butler, Mudrick, Judith Lowder Newton, Duckworth, Tanner amongst others—no matter what their stand have been—have directly or indirectly examined the issue of power and authority in Austen’s novels and some of them have made use of the terms ‘power’ and ‘authority’ too. My reading of Austen has made me aware that her views on women’s relationship with power and authority was never static but changed and matured with years as is seen in the development from Pride and Prejudice through Emma to Persuasion. This research will outline these changes, whom she considered worthy to wield power and authority, and how at times these were mishandled. It will also analyze the all important effect of education and finances on the acquisition and exercise of power and authority. The attempt will be to show that she primarily advocated the need for limited and restricted authority for both sexes based on the intelligence and ability of women to handle it, rather than of excessive power for either. Without necessarily approving of the fact, the novels however, show men wielding greater power than women and also the fact that both the sexes are capable of grossly misusing it. The thesis will also examine how Austen’s heroines come to exercise limited authority with their husbands though its degree may vary from marriage to marriage, thus
illustrating the point that women even in patriarchal society did possess the ability to wield power and authority.

It is this urge to exercise power and authority that turns human beings into likeable or disgusting characters. Austen’s female characters have been categorized under ‘angel’, ‘monster’ or ‘human’ depending on their need to control their lives and that of others, their desire to exercise masculine power and authority and the way they ultimately handle it (terms adopted from Gilbert and Gubar). It is on the intricacy of power relationship and depending on their ability to use or abuse it that they have been so classified. The motive behind the author’s own requirement to delineate such characters will also been explored, and how some of them hint at certain hidden aspects of their creator’s psyche and her thought process.

In this thesis on power relationships between the sexes in Austen, reference has been made to different kinds of power and authority and how Austen expresses her anxiety over the imbalance inherent in these relationships. Here ‘authority’ means the right to command and control significantly other people’s lives as well as one’s own. This authority is vested in a member or members of the family or community and is dependent on certain factors such as his position in the family and society, his occupation, economic status and intelligence. ‘Power’ is used in a complementary sense with ‘authority’ and means to control and influence
others. ‘Authority’ is a more social term than ‘power’ for it is granted or attributed to an individual by others, whereas, power is potency which can be acquired with or without the agreement of others, like the power of money or of physical strength. Authority or power is determined by the same factors, which in turn determines the type of authority exercised by different persons. Thus, we have intellectual, moral, legal, customary, economic, paternal, social, and patriarchal authority. These powers are mentioned in the essays of Tanner, Johnson and Newton. For instance, Newton in her essay deals primarily with economic authority and she tries to establish how women like Elizabeth Bennet are not powerless because they lack economic authority.

The strongest form of authority that an individual can acquire is legal authority, for law and not convention backs it. A stronger form of social authority, it usually resides with males or widows in its stronger form and only in severely limited form with women, children and other dependents. Legal authority being a force in itself can function without intellectual or moral authority. Consequently it is easily misused. Paternal, patriarchal and economic authorities have to be backed by legal authority. Thus, on the strength of legal authority, Lady Catherine can abuse her power and authority in *Pride and Prejudice* and General Tilney misuses his patriarchal and paternal authorities grossly in *Northanger Abbey*. 
The society in the novels is patriarchal: power held by men is transferred through men. Paternal authority is somewhat similar because here authority resides with the male and the father, but it differs in that it can be exercised only by a father or father-figure and not otherwise. These two authorities without economic authority and some intellectual authority can be significantly ineffectual. Patriarchal and paternal authorities are based on inheritance and belong only to men, unlike intellectual and moral authorities, which depend on the intelligence and sense of morality in either gender. Ineffectual in themselves they have to be backed by economic or social authority. Moreover, they are interdependent on each other for the influence and exercise of one without the other can lead to abuse of authority. But together moral and intellectual authorities can significantly challenge economic, parental, social and some legal authority. Thus, Elizabeth Bennet and Fanny Price can successfully resist economic pressures, parental and social authorities both within and without the family and thereby exercise the right to choose their husbands.

Women can acquire authority in general significantly through the use of intellectual and moral authority as Elizabeth and Fanny do in *Pride and Prejudice* and *Mansfield Park* respectively as also other heroines of Austen, except Catherine Morland. Likewise men and women without intelligence and morality can have their authorities diminished as do Collins, Wickham
or Mrs. Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice* and most other secondary characters in the various novels.

Economic authority can be exercised by few and primarily by males, widows or heiresses. It means controlling one’s wealth and especially of one’s dependents. Widows can exercise economic power, while women whether married or unmarried may exercise little economic authority themselves because they did not have any legal authority over their money or property. Economic authority can sometimes override social, paternal, intellectual and moral authority and even influence legal authority. Another factor that significantly influences the wielding of economic as well as other forms of authority is education. However, within the patriarchal set-up women are deprived of proper education and are therefore easily led to adhere to the age-old culture of subordination to the males in their society. This disadvantage of women will be discussed in an individual chapter. Similarly the notion of economic power and authority and the disparity between men and women will also be discussed in another chapter.

Membership in a particular society automatically bestows a kind of authority on a person, though the degree may vary according to circumstances. For example, a father will possess more social authority than a son and married women more than the unmarried ones as does Lydia Wickham over Elizabeth Bennet and Mary Musgrove over Anne Elliot in
Pride and Prejudice and Persuasion respectively. Such an authority is sanctioned by custom rather than by law. Though not a source of power in itself social or customary authority is akin to paternal authority and can often be affected by other forms of authority.

The thesis examines the use and abuse of the various authorities and their effect on the characters in inter-personal relationships. The attempt will be to show that the novels suggest the need for limited authority which results in a resolution of the tension between different powers, as when Fanny’s moral authority moderates Sir Thomas’s legal and economic powers when she refuses to marry Henry Crawford. Austen, however, takes care to point out that this may not always be possible for a less intelligent person. Thus, it is shown that neither the Bennets nor the Grants can share limited authority because they are intellectually incompatible. Despite this the novels maintain a balance by assigning authority among intelligent people. Because of this balance tyrannical power in any single person is kept under control. Also the initially powerless heroines are given a measure of control over their own lives. Thus, Sir Thomas in Mansfield Park is made relatively less powerful and a more benevolent figure of authority at the end and Lady Catherine’s power too at the end of Pride and Prejudice is significantly restricted. In the end Austen gives Elizabeth, Emma, Fanny,
Elinor and Anne much more control over their own lives than they had at the beginning.

The various novels have demonstrated that despite the economic, societal and various other forms of impositions, protagonists from Elizabeth to Anne have always possessed authority – which is to be differentiated from power. However, devoid of attributes like financial independence which contributes to power, they possessed an authority without power. They possessed authority of a moral kind derived from native intelligence and their strong sense of justice and ethical behaviour. By endowing her heroines with moral authority, Austen places them on a higher plane than the other characters. This in a way seems to compensate them for their lack of other sources of power. The plot of the narratives is so structured that some of these heroines or survivors are portrayed as superior human beings, even superior to most men because of their moral authority.

To endow some of her heroines with superiority over most men, was in itself a daring step, unthinkable of in eighteenth century England. This naturally necessitates along with her position as a one of the earliest female novelists to write about these issues with utmost caution and sensitivity. Her concern and unconventional views over power and authority and other feminist topics were hence expressed in an indirect manner. Austen’s deep awareness of the restrictions to which women were subject to and the
delicate position of a woman writer made her write with great propriety and often resorting to irony as a means to express her views. This emerges as the hallmark of her style throughout her narratives.

Besides being an artistic device, irony for Jane Austen became a vehicle of personal defence, which protected her from the wrath of the society and at the same time enabled her to say what was unsayable in public. After Northanger Abbey, whose publication was suppressed by publishing houses, for her open criticism of sexist bias in literary works and in reviewers; Austen learnt to camouflage her real feelings in such a manner. She henceforth chose to tell the truth through riddling irony that were either eluded or misinterpreted, except for a few ingenious readers who could read between the lines. Paradoxically she soon acquired a literary reputation among those who either did not understand, or did not think it wise to show too much understanding of the moral riddles posed in her works.

This same anxiety resulted in her emphasis on propriety bordering on prudishness is also evident from the way she lived her life. From the concealed manner in which she wrote in her drawing room covering her work with a piece of lace at the slightest intrusion, her appearance and the way she spoke and carried herself, was deliberately so cultivated that she was never suspected of being an author. People found her to be fair, elegant
and handsome but certainly not an author, except for her closest acquaintances who knew about her pre-occupations as a novelist. Her personal obscurity was deliberate and "... more complete than that of any other famous writer ..." 12

To those who knew about her pre-occupation – not an occupation – she was quick to add that it was not an attempt at literature but just an accomplishment by a lady. Too aware of the trouble in which she would find herself in, if she tried to assume the airs of a littérature or an author, Austen perpetuated this idea among her acquaintances. Indeed, feminists like Mary Wollstonecraft had to face the wrath of patriarchs, for being a rebel and in transgressing the limitations that were imposed on the female writer. If anything, Austen publicly held her own works to be too light, bright and sparkling to be considered as serious literature. In spite of these public protestations Austen was very much an author with a mind of her own, and one is inclined to agree with Margaret Kirkham when she says:

The lady novelist might publish anonymously, might declare her aversion to the glare of public notice, might assure the world of her lack of learned qualification and her dislike of "masculine" women, but if she went ahead all the same and published, her actions belied her words. ... for at this period to become an author was, in itself, a feminist act. 13

Women writers in eighteenth century England wrote under very oppressive conditions. The submissive and docile ones - who never thought of themselves as capable of any good like Maria Edgeworth and Jane Austen, were actually the ones respected by their society and their sex,
because they did not project themselves as literary women. Whereas, those who tried to establish their image as a literary woman and as an intellectual, like Mary Wollstonecraft (Horace Walpole referred to her as a ‘hyena in petticoats’) were abhorred not only by the males but even by their own gender. Women were considered as ‘Cyphers’, and literary women in particular were ‘Cyphers’ in a greater degree, they were eunuchs, because they had to be unsexed, stripped off their gender since they assumed a calling that had traditionally belonged to men.

Austen was well aware of this derogatory attitude and was herself critical of her contemporary fellow authors and thinkers. True, she made no outward observation on the treatment meted out to female writers, yet we have her comments on writers and writings in general both open and disguised in her novels; some of which will be cited in the course of this dissertation. For instance, the names and works of Sir Walter Scott and Lord Byron occur in *Persuasion*; Wordsworth, Burns, Richardson, again Scott and perhaps even Dr. Johnson without directly mentioning his name are referred to in *Sanditon*. Though she is critical of some of these works she nonetheless absolves herself by stating that it is the people who are at fault for letting themselves be wrongly influenced by them. Thus, in *Persuasion* it is Benwick who suffers from a weak mind and in *Sanditon*, Sir Edward suffers from “… a perversity of Judgement … [for] not having by Nature a
very strong head” (S in NA vol., 358). She detachedly reflects through her protagonist Anne,

... it was the misfortune of poetry, to be seldom safely enjoyed by those who enjoyed it completely; and the strong feelings which alone could estimate it truly, were the very feelings which ought to taste it but sparingly. (P, 98)

Although Austen does mention the works of her contemporary female writers, poets and novelists, she is conspicuously silent about the radical Mary Wollstonecraft, her treatise or her novels – with or without admiration. Indeed, we cannot but be suspicious that Austen was consciously avoiding making any mention of Wollstonecraft in her works. It is worth noting that Austen’s novels were first published in the aftermath of the anti-feminist reaction which followed Mary Wollstonecraft’s death and the scandalous revelation of her libertine lifestyle - a time when open discussion on feminist ideals was almost impossible. Despite the lack of direct evidence that she had read any of Wollstonecraft’s works, it will be pointed out in the dissertation that there are clear instances that she had been considerably influenced by her feminine ideas which have been obliquely hinted in her narratives.

Jane Austen was born in December 1775 and was thus sixteen when the Vindication was published. She grew up and became a novelist in the following decade when the Feminist Controversy, in which fiction played an important part, was at its height. Many critics have noticed that feminist feeling and feminist ideas are easily apparent in her novels, yet the full importance of the Controversy, as exercising an influence upon the development of her work and its publication, has not been made apparent, nor has it been taken sufficiently into account in considering the way Jane Austen was presented to the public after her early death.14
Given the position of the female writer it was not for nothing that Austen's family went out of the way to protect her. Her brother Henry Austen went to great lengths to emphasize that Austen's literary accomplishments were more accidental than deliberate and this was perhaps done to fulfill the requirements of her age, although it was her literary distinction which had presumably earned her the honour of a cathedral burial. He stresses on the lack of incidence in her life and her preference for a retired, domestic existence.

He knew that given the prejudice of the time, his sister's personal reputation might not escape embarrassing comment were the full force of her irony to be understood. No matter how blameless her life, a woman known to have avoided marriage and to have held independent views of a feminist kind might not be kindly or respectfully treated.

After elaborately praising her on her "... perfect placidity of temper ..." ("Notice" in P vol., 4-5), on her qualities of forgiveness, kindness, impeccable manners and a "... temper ... as polished as her wit ..." ("Notice" in P vol., 4-5), Henry Austen arrives at the important statement that,

She became an authoress entirely from taste and inclination. Neither the hope of fame nor profit mixed with her early motives. ... so much did she shrink from notoriety, that no accumulation of fame would have induced her, had she lived, to affix her name to any productions of her pen. In the bosom of her own family she talked of them [works] freely, ... But in public she turned away from any allusion to the character of an authoress. ("Notice" in P vol., 4-5)

We have Austen's own acknowledgement of her preference to limit the scope of her works and her self-conscious question, about it,
How could I possibly join them on to a little bit of ivory, two inches wide, on which I work with a brush so fine as to produce little effect after much labour? ("Postscript" in *P* vol., 6).

This speaks most forcefully of her awareness of this confinement to which a woman author was restricted in her society. To go beyond these limitations would not be tolerated. She no doubt made the most of this little bit of ivory and worked on it to the point of perfection. Working within the confines of the conventions of domestic comedy, she nonetheless succeeded in enlarging its scope so that they carried philosophical, socio-cultural and political resonance far beyond its surface meaning. While restricting herself to such curbs she exhibits the problems and dilemmas of her sex, in the most detached manner possible, without any partiality or prejudice towards either sex, admitting that outside the two inches of ivory lies the unchartered domain of the male writer. That despite this knowledge, Austen could write with such impartiality – without fury and rancor against men, but always maintaining a calm and poised tone is the hallmark of her intellect, genius, and sophistication.

Traditionally painting on ivory was considered to be a lady-like occupation. Significantly Austen established herself securely and comfortably within this self-imposed restriction and effectively portrayed the vulnerability (to the wider world) and confinement imposed on her sex within that limited space of two inches. Although she sought to retreat
inside this cocoon which she had woven so lovingly and caringly, yet this same cocoon failed to protect her from external attacks. Indeed, the earliest of criticisms against her were precisely because she sought to shut herself from the world at large and hide herself in her burrow.

Fellow-writers from Sir Walter Scott to Charlotte Bronte', Edward Fitzgerald, Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Edgar Allan Poe, Mark Twain to Emerson and D.H. Lawrence, have all criticized her works for going no further than the parlour, the confines of tame meadows and cottages and beyond the lives of three or four families. They have deplored the lack of passion, of fresh air, of open fields, revolutionary ideas and rebellious thoughts. However, the judgment against Austen’s so-called trifling reaches its culmination, in the fact, that Mark Twain did not even bother to spell her name correctly. In a letter to Howells, her staunchest American defender, he notes her as ‘Jane Austin’ whom he had found totally unreadable. Both Emerson and Mark Twain had preferred suicide rather than a natural death for her – so contemptuous they were of her writings. Today, after the extensive research, discussion and debate that has gone into her works, and now that they have been acknowledged as endearing and enduring classics we see that these critics had failed to read the story within the story. However, there were some

... perceptive nineteenth-century critics of Austen – Whately, G.H. Lewes, Richard Simpson – found themselves comparing her with
Shakespeare as a humourist and as a faithful portrayer of human nature. And it was her great achievement that she brought the central argument and subject matter of English feminists from Astell to Wollstonecraft under the humane influence of Shakespearian comedy …

Even modern writers like Angus Wilson have accused Austen of a characteristically English, middle-class, philistinism.

Significantly Virginia Woolf underscored the fact that

Jane Austen wrote like that [without a room of her own] to the end of her days.

while throughout making a point in her seminal essay *A Room of One’s Own* that:

... a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction; …

The difficult problem of how the woman literary artist ought to see herself as novelist and literary critic, and as feminist, re-emerged in the early twentieth century with Virginia Woolf and her own Modernist conception of the literary artist. She made Austen her chief exemplar of the individual female talent. In *A Room of One’s Own*, which rightly takes the status of a classic literary essay for feminist criticism, Virginia Woolf sees Austen as the exceptional example of the female artist with androgynous mind. Some feminist critics believe that while it is not a wrong stand per se, but in doing so it simultaneously ignores everything which connects Austen with the feminist thinking of the Enlightenment. Woolf states,

What genius, what integrity it must have required in face of all that criticism, in the midst of that purely patriarchal society, to hold fast to the thing as they saw it without shrinking. Only Jane Austen did it and Emily
Bronte. ... They wrote as women write, not as men write. Of all the thousand women who wrote novels then, they alone entirely ignored the perpetual admonition of the eternal pedagogue—write this, think that. 19

Woolf's treatment of Austen is completely unpatronising, and she sees Austen as a major novelist comparing her with Shakespeare.

I read a page or two [of Pride and Prejudice] to see; but I could not find any signs that her circumstances had harmed her work in the slightest. That, perhaps, was the chief miracle about it. Here was a woman about the year 1800 writing without hate, without bitterness, without fear, without protest, without preaching. That was how Shakespeare wrote, I thought, looking at Antony and Cleopatra; and when people compare Shakespeare and Jane Austen, they may mean that the minds of both had consumed all impediments; and for that reason we do not know Jane Austen and we do not know Shakespeare, and for that reason Jane Austen pervades every word that she wrote, and so does Shakespeare. 20

Going back to the condescending attitude, it was also shared by Rudyard Kipling and Henry James. For a better understanding of the status of the female writer and the psychology of her male counterpart, it needs be mentioned that none other than Henry James, whom Kipling has called the "lawful issue" of Austen, had considered her genius as coincidental. Kipling himself was irreverential and ridiculed Austen for her over-emphasis on propriety and elegance. To quote from Kipling's "The Janeites", Jane Austen 'did leave lawful issue in the shape o' one son; an' 'his name was 'Enery James'" 21. Here he is referring to Austen's influence on Henry James which finds obvious reflection in his novels. Interesting to note that Henry James while appreciating her works simultaneously considered her authorship more as a happy coincidence rather than as a sign of her genius.
That Henry James of all others, who owes so much to this literary predecessor, should treat her works as nothing more than as an eighteenth century woman's fanciful engagement to while away her hours, points at his own sense of discomfort and anxiety about this legacy from a woman writer. It

... radiates James's anxiety at his own indebtedness to this "little" female precursor who, to his embarrassment, taught him so much of his presumably masterful art ... 22

Henry James despite his indebtedness was condescending towards Austen and reluctant to give any artistic merit to her literary productions. Indeed, male authors like him preferred to stick to this belief owing to their sense of male superiority. This attempt at underestimating the contribution of women writers, and even of one to whom he had been indebted, is indicative of the attitude of male writers for generations.

These writers pointed out the paucity of subject matter and the narrowing of scope in Austen's novels since those were the times of the French Revolution. The ideals, 'Liberty, Equality and Fraternity' left indelible marks on the literature of the times and were instrumental in ushering in the Romantic Age in English Literature. In contrast Austen's stories of three or four well-to-do families in the countryside were untouched by these changes, as she had intentionally refrained herself from venturing into those male-dominated areas which were to become the
subjects for Dickens and Thackeray. However, it would be wrong to assume that Austen was untouched by these ideals. These principles seem to be at work in the delineation of her intelligent heroines who are provided with a more equal authority, a greater control and freedom over their own lives. Political and ideological issues were also mentioned but it was done in an oblique manner and the irony was impossible to miss, as these lines from *Sanditon* prove,

"Trafalgar House – which by the bye, I almost wish I had not named Trafalgar – for Waterloo is more the thing now. However, Waterloo is in reserve ... we shall be able to call it Waterloo Crescent" (*S* in *NA* vol., 336).

This is trivializing a historic-political event but done without transgressing the limitations of a woman.

Emerson had criticized Austen for belittling domesticity. In her works he finds sterility in artistic invention accompanied by an obsession for marriage. A common misconception amongst Austen’s readers and some of her critics is that her novels are overly concerned with marriages. One cannot deny the significance of marriage and that it forms an important aspect of her works because that singular event in a woman’s life provides her with the only respectable option for her in the given society. Austen’s critical views on equating the career of the governess with that of a slave in *Emma* are only too well-known. Without any means to gain financial independence women’s education and upbringing were motivated by the
prospect of a good marriage which would provide them with respectability and also a measure of financial security.

Austen's portrayals of such marriages were undertaken with the view to present the reality of the women's situation in her society. The criticism directed against Austen on this account is that she presents the eighteenth century society from too feminized a viewpoint, as Kipling does in the "The Janeites". But this issue cannot be dismissed in the manner that Kipling does because the concerns expressed through this perspective are brought about by the suppression of the female psyche in the male dominated society. Being a product as well as a victim of such a society it is only natural that such a perspective is given prominence by Austen, the sensitive writer. In doing so she extends her efforts to comprehend the intricate workings of patriarchy as she saw it, which is inseparably linked with the complicated power play between men and women.

Despite the Romantic surge which her contemporary times witnessed, she focused her attention on these issues. Feminist critics hold that eighteenth century female writers who believed on the equality of the sexes found themselves partly or entirely alienated from the Romantic Movement. Austen's lack of interest in the Romantic upheaval only reveals her understanding of the contemporary conflict on the feminist issue. This has
been cited as the reason behind her detachment from the important and controversial currents of thought and literature in her time.

Jane Austen's feminized, pro-feminist or anti-feminist approach in her novels portrays the then society with its social hierarchy, manners, conventions and culture from a woman's restricted perspective, the only one available to her as an eighteenth century woman. This perhaps explains as to why her male characters are often flat and particularly so when juxtaposed with the more vibrant female ones. Further, the absence of the men's world from the domain of her fiction, can be attributed to her pre-occupation with the women's world. Austen presents this issue of power and authority in such a manner which can engage the interest, sympathy and understanding of even a modern reader today. The attempt in this research will be to examine Austen's anxiety in the context of the society of her times and also to examine their relevance with the current trends in feminist critical approaches.
Notes


3 Claudia Johnson, Jane Austen: Women Politics and the Novel (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1988) XX. (Hereafter cited as Johnson)

4 Johnson XIX.

5 Marilyn Butler, Jane Austen and the War of Ideas, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford UP, 1987) 164. (Hereafter cited as Butler)

6 Butler 166.

7 Margaret Kirkham, Jane Austen: Feminism and Fiction (Sussex: The Harvester Press Limited, 1983) 174. (Hereafter cited as Kirkham)

8 Kirkham 46-47.

9 Alistair M. Duckworth, The Improvement Of The Estate (Baltimore: The John Hopkins Press, 1971) IX.


11 G and G 120-21.

12 G and G 107.

13 Kirkham 33.
14 Kirkham 53.

15 Kirkham 56-57.

16 Kirkham 98.


18 Woolf 5.

19 Woolf 62.

20 Woolf 56-57.


22 G and G 110.