Chapter I

Angel, Monster and the Human

... a woman writer must examine, assimilate, and transcend the extreme images of "angel" and "monster" which male authors have generated for her. Before we women can write, declared Virginia Woolf, we must "kill" the "angel in the house."  

Virginia Woolf is acknowledged as a feminist, whereas Jane Austen’s position as a feminist or an anti-feminist has generated tremendous discussion, debate and controversy. Irrespective of Austen’s position vis-a-vis feminism one has to admit that her concern in her novels are solely about the difficulties in which women in her contemporary society found themselves in. Through these characters she also expresses her views about the position of the female writer of that age. This chapter will focus on the issues which she raises through her characters.

Literature throughout the world, whether for children or for adults, whether purely fictional or based on reality is interspersed with angel, monster and human characters. The Concise Oxford Dictionary defines ‘angel’ not only as “an attendant or messenger of God” or “an attendant spirit (evil angel; guardian angel)” but also as “a very virtuous person” and “an obliging person” (40-41). Likewise, ‘monster’ has been described as “an imaginary creature, usually large and frightening, compounded of incongruous elements” as well as “an inhumanly cruel or wicked person”
(768). And 'human' has come to mean not merely "of or belonging to the genus Homo" but significantly implies "of or characteristic of mankind as opposed to God or animals or machines, especially susceptible to the weakness of mankind" (574). In literature, it could connote all these things and more. In this work the terms are used to encompass a broader meaning, often based on the male perspective of female behaviour.

Interestingly, these angel, monster and human figures that inhabit mature writings and children's works are found to conform to one singular principle – a principle that is governed by the ideals of patriarchy. In *Snow White* and *Cinderella* their victory comes only through the intervention of a male, thereby emphasizing the point that ultimately the power lies with the male. The defeat of the monster figures of the Step Mothers is also affected through men. These characters in the narratives are measured in terms of their adherence to the principles of patriarchy, and are consequently classified as an angel, monster or a human. Thus, it is to explore the issue of power and authority that these terms have been adopted and applied to the various characters being discussed. Indeed, literature is full of women in the shape of monsters and vice versa, and this is true for the angel image as well. Since this research restricts itself to Jane Austen, it is necessary that the discussion centers around her works, the author herself and particularly to that of her female characters. However, it is pertinent that a word be
mentioned about these prototypes of the angel, monster and human before studying them in the context of Austen’s novels.

In Austen’s novels it is shown that the attitude of men who want to see women as angels turns against them when their misguided expectations are not fulfilled. This she clarifies in her later novel *Emma*, when after loosing an argument with Mrs. Weston about Emma’s relationship with Harriet, Mr. Knightley gives in with good but ironic grace:

‘Very well; I will not plague you any more. Emma shall be an angel, and I will keep my spleen to myself’ *(E, 40).*

Contrasted to this ideal Englishman is the anti-hero Frank Churchill whose views on women are naturally opposed to Mr. Knightley’s. When towards the end of the narrative after his engagement to Jane is announced, Frank having made his peace with Emma reveals the shallowness of his regard for his future wife:

‘She is a complete angel. Look at her. Is not she an angel in every gesture? Observe the turn of her throat. Observe the eyes as she is looking up at her father. — You will be glad to hear’ (inclining his head, and whispering seriously) ‘that my uncle means to give her all my aunt’s jewels. They are to be set new: I am resolved to have some ornament for the head. ...’

‘Very beautiful, indeed,’ replied Emma: ...

‘How delighted I am to see you again! And to see you in such excellent looks!’ *(E, 479)*

Not only is Frank mistaken in calling Jane an angel, but he makes it clear that he values her only as an object of beauty. The ornament is for “the” not “her” head, and its decoration is a subject of serious whispering. When
Emma makes a kind though reserved reply, he at once compliments her on her appearance.

These images of the angel or the monster or the human are woven in with the issues of power and authority. Since ‘power’ and ‘authority’ are the foundations on which patriarchy is based and in which its success and preservation rest, opposition to it will naturally be resented. Patriarchy, as the feminist poetics argue, has deeply influenced men’s way of thinking as much as that of women. Behaviour, personality, words and actions of both the sexes are influenced and shaped by the patriarchal norms, which has not only given preference to the male articulation but has simultaneously tried to stifle the female voice, chiefly those that seem to pose a threat or challenge to it. In fact, so well entrenched and successful this process has been that women have proved to be women’s greatest enemy in their attempt to please men and to fit into the mould that men have constructed for them.

Thus, in *Mansfield Park*, Jane Austen mentions the two Bertram sisters – Maria and Julia – who although initially rather fond of each other, turn into rivals in their attempt to gain the attention and favour of a charming young gentleman.

The sister [Maria] with whom she [Julia] was used to be on easy terms, was now become her greatest enemy; they were alienated from each other … [they were] very good friends while their interests were the same, the sisters, under such a trial as this, had no affection or principle enough to
make them merciful or just, to give them honour or compassion. (*MP*, 132)

In *Pride and Prejudice* too, Austen through Miss Bingley mentions,

‘... of those young ladies who seek to recommend themselves to the other sex, by undervaluing their own; and with many men, I dare say, it succeeds. But in my opinion, it is a paltry device, a very mean art.’ (*PP*, 34)

The irony lies in that these words of Miss Bingley directed against Elizabeth, are but reflective of her own behaviour towards her sex, while she herself indulges in such behaviour in order to captivate Darcy. Although Austen ridiculed this hostility between young women she was conscious that women had no alternative but to compete in the marriage market. In *The Watsons*, one sister warns another sister about a third,

‘There is nothing she would not do to get married. ... Do not trust her with any secrets of your own, take warning by me, do not trust her.’ (*W* in *NA* vol., 277)

Thus, Emma is jealous of Harriet and Jane over Mr. Knightley, Lucy of Elinor for Edward, the Musgrove sisters are transformed into rivals for Wentworth as they all engage in a fierce female competition.

Austen’s contemporary society and literature on female morals and manners had stressed the need for women to be perfect angels in the house to the point of becoming non-entities, their lives dedicated to the well-being of others, particularly the men. And this entails even sacrifice of personal comforts and desires. Austen’s angelic characters, however, do not totally conform to this image of the perfect angel. Thus, Anne the most perfect
angel in Austen’s novels at the end of *Persuasion* comes out of the mould into which she was fitted, that is the landed aristocracy and begins a new kind of life through her marriage to Wentworth.

When a woman tries to overcome the restrictions set by the patriarchs, she is then categorized as a monster since she poses a challenge and a threat to their authority. She is therefore viewed as an evil character. In contrast to such an aggressive and assertive woman is the angel, who is selfless in her dedication towards men and never questions the power or authority of the patriarchs, irrespective of whether she is aware or unaware of their faults. Unlike the evil monster whose primary flaw is that she wants to write her own story and live life on her own terms, the angel has no story of her own and neither does she want to tell one. Her existence is more of a process of self-effacement dedicated to the pleasure and satisfaction of men. An antithesis of the angel, the monster woman is presumptuous, devoid of angelic humility and seeks authority and autonomy, conventionally believed to be masculine rights.

‘Humans’ are those characters who stand the risk of evolving into monster figures, but whose superior moral authority, innate goodness and ability to see their own faults save them from such a fate. Though characters like Emma and Elizabeth might initially try and challenge patriarchy, they ultimately realize their mistake and make amends. However, their male
counterparts recognize the sleeping monster in them and impose checks and balances on them so that it will not awaken again. The situations in which these three types of women find themselves are widely varied, but it is on the basis of the quintessential element of their nature and personality that they are so classified.

Austen’s angel characters like Anne, Elinor and Fanny although placed in different circumstances come quite close to the conventional picture of a Snow White, for they too can do no wrong. However, for Fanny though she does no wrong, she can feel and think wrongly, thus setting her slightly apart from the other two. The most significant contrast of these three protagonists from the traditional angel image lies in their deep-seated awareness of the defects of society and its established norms. Nonetheless, they are still angels in the eyes of men as also of women because while remaining conscious of its defects they are its greatest followers and advocates and never do anything against it. Fanny, Elinor and Anne all uphold the traditions of patriarchy and never question its ways, in spite of their being aware of its deficiencies. Only Anne by choosing to marry Captain Wentworth breaks away from the class of the landed patriarchs, and substitutes the Baronetage with the Navy Lists. But the Navy Lists is also a book in which women find no mention. These women characters belonging to the literary tradition of the Snow Whites – are born, live and die for the
glorification of their men folk and the welfare of others. Therefore, seen from the perspective of the patriarchal upbringing and mindset, they are everything that is good and right, as they would never oppose but yield to the male guardian – be it a father or a husband.

Elinor Dashwood, the eldest of the Dashwood sisters is truly an angel for she fulfills one of its most important criteria, in that, she never attempts to write her own story. She is totally selfless in all her actions and seeks the well-being of the man she loves, while cherishing no ambitions - not even recognition for the act of goodness done. Thus, Elinor is an ideal who upholds patriarchy, and men in turn like her, although we see neither Edward nor her step-brother Mr. Dashwood make any sort of concessions for her or try to make her comfortable. Elinor fits into this angelic role, for even when she looses all hopes of a marriage with Edward, she uses her good offices with Colonel Brandon and secures him a parsonage. But at the same time, her earnest request to Colonel Brandon is for an assurance that her involvement in this regard should be kept a secret. Elinor is like the conventional selfless angel figures of Snow White or Cinderella whose interests are to promote the welfare of others and who willingly fade into oblivion, and throughout remains a frozen picture of perfection.

Besides Elinor Dashwood of *Sense and Sensibility*, who perhaps can be considered as having been placed in the most difficult position among all
the female protagonists of Austen’s mature narratives it would be interesting to juxtapose Lady Susan of the novel of the same name, who presents an opposed and controversial method of survival in a man’s world. Although Lady Susan’s well hidden Machiavellian method is nowhere explicitly approved by Austen, but the way her character sparkles while the other female characters pale into insignificance has made critics doubt as to where the sympathy of the author actually lies. Women authors have often shown a tendency of losing control over their monster-woman characters owing to deep-seated psychological reasons, and this is marked in Jane Austen’s delineation of Lady Susan’s character. To borrow Blake’s famous dictum from The Marriage of Heaven and Hell about Milton in the context of Paradise Lost, Austen too has been suspected of belonging to “the Devil’s party without knowing it”.3

Lady Susan’s method of dealing with men appears nothing short of a monster behaviour – typified through such conventional female monsters like the Step Mothers of Snow White or Cinderella who try to usurp the roles usually allotted to males. However, Lady Susan is by far the cleverest and most consummate actress and knows how to make the right moves without ruffling feathers – which is why, unlike the Step Mothers she emerges victorious. Men become putty in her hands and see sense only in the way she wants them to see it and this feature in her poses a threat to the
very foundations of the patriarchal society. In making men obey her wishes as commands she subverts the first rule of the male dominated social order. True, given Lady Susan’s behaviour and the way she manipulates men, she appears to be nothing short of a monster according to the established standards of her society. By cleverly flouting the social conventions she poses an implicit threat to the power and authority of men. Lady Susan ‘the most accomplished Coquette in England’ (LS in NA vol., 211) is a monster, but a very interesting and captivating one at that. She conforms to the concept of a monster within the patriarchal conventions, since she too attempts to assert her own self and lead a life on her own terms, not dictated by the wishes of men.

The patriarchal frame of mind also believes that

... the monster may not only be concealed behind the angel, she may actually turn out to reside within ... the angel.4

Lady Susan and the similar character of Lucy Steele of Sense and Sensibility conform to this notion, since both of them appear to be deceptively sweet and angelic in their words and behaviour. Lady Susan’s true monstrous self is known to us because Jane Austen lets us into her mind through the venomous letters that she writes to her close friend, Mrs. Johnson. Her angelic mask before her male acquaintances is so convincing that she can fool just about anybody she chooses to.
For Lucy Steele however, her angelic demeanor is relatively short-lived since her actions very soon expose her true self to the society at large. This method of hiding the monster behind or within an angelic personality is a very calculated behaviour in such women like Lady Susan and Lucy Steele, designed for survival in a man’s world. These women find themselves with no options but to conceal their true selves or else they will be castigated and rejected by the society. They have to hide their real nature behind a pleasing mask if they are to survive because they are dependent on the men. On the contrary, a monster-man like General Tilney need not wear the disguise of an angelic form because he is dependent on none and wields power himself. Thus, the monster-woman seems to be a greater danger to the patriarchal society.

It is ironic that where Lady Susan’s character appears as vibrant and glamorous, two out of three of Austen’s angel characters, that is Elinor and Fanny appear to be cold and unattractive. Anne remains the only exception. It is worth noting that Lady Susan and Elinor and Marianne (the earlier epistolary version of Sense and Sensibility) were written in 1795, although these novels contain two totally different approaches to the problem of women’s survival. That Austen conceived of a character like Lady Susan - at around the same time she created Elinor - who remains the first and greatest illustration of this type of malicious, calculative protagonist in all
her mature novels, could suggest something about the darker recesses of the author’s mind. Perhaps, *Lady Susan* with a monster woman as a heroine is that one instance of a novel in which while feigning an outward level of propriety, Austen had let her guard down in a veiled manner through her protagonist. True, Lady Susan’s actions and pretensions have been criticized in the narrative but the criticism appears half-hearted and more for the sake of conforming to the societal norms, rather than to any real disapproval of her nature and behaviour. In *Lady Susan*, Austen seems divided between her delight in the vitality of a talented libertine lady and her simultaneous rejection of the sexuality and selfishness of her heroine’s role who also knows how to play a number of parts convincingly. Her daughter only plays a foil to make her unattractive - through her cruelty towards her – which can be seen as the author’s way to suppress her interest in such willful women.

Indeed, *Elinor and Marianne* written about the same time appear more as a deliberate act to placate her own conscience, conform to the expectations of her family and friends (who were her earliest readers) and to create an image of herself as a maker of human beings and not of a monster. But it would also be wrong to assume that Austen ever strove to be an angel maker. That she finally creates two perfect angel characters – Elinor Dashwood and Anne Elliot and to some extent an imperfect one in Fanny Price – is a different matter altogether.
Having found a measure of psychological release through characters like Lady Susan and Lucy Steele, Austen comfortably settled down to delineate characters like Elizabeth, Emma, Marianne and Catherine Morland. These figures who combine goodness with flaws and attractiveness with mischievousness belong to what can be categorized as the truly human ones. However, all of Austen's characters irrespective of which category they belong to, possess endearing qualities because they are portrayed as flesh and blood characters. Even the monstrous characters, no matter how evil they seem, are so on a very realistic level in that they resemble the evil characters that we meet in our day-to-day life. They are to be distinguished from the artificiality that is associated with the monster figures of the gothic novel or the fairy tale, who are often crude and appear to be literal personifications of evil.

In the figures of Lady Susan, Lucy Steele and Lady Catherine, to mention some, the writer maintains all her polish, sophistication, subtlety and irony, and marks them as complex characters whose so-called monstrous actions are motivated by their need for survival. It is their desire to live their lives on their own terms that make them monsters from the patriarchal viewpoint and not because they are mere representatives of evil in that simple sense the gothic novels employ. They are complex figures because their monstrosity is induced by their survival instinct. Women like
Lady Catherine, Lady Denham and Mrs. Norris can demonstrate that very rebellious anger which is often repressed by the heroines. These widows, aunts, mothers and surrogate mothers are powerful and dominating because they have out-lived the male authorities in their lives through which circumstance they have gained enough financial power and a certain degree of independence.

The novels that follow *Lady Susan*, except *Persuasion* deals with monster characters although their roles have been relegated to that of secondary characters from that of the heroine. *Persuasion* alone differs in that there is no monster of a mother, widow or aunt; but instead we have the rather likeable Lady Russell, who is cut out to be dissimilar from the shrewd, manipulative, cunning or dictatorial dowagers of the other novels. She is thoroughly human with grave faults and merits that touch one’s heart. And though not given to mishandling her power and authority, she does make wrong judgments. Kind, benevolent, intelligent and loving she still presents some glimpses as Austen’s last pushy widow, though she comes nowhere close to Lady Catherine, Mrs. Norris or Mrs. Churchill. *Persuasion* depicts the evolution of a possibly assertive widow into a compassionate understanding one who will not dominate but exercise her powers with a sounder head and nobler heart than her predecessors. Austen in her attempt to do so portrays Lady Russell as a frozen, lackluster character when
compared to the other dowagers because for the first time the author was faced with a challenge to portray an aging rich powerful widow who is neither an angel nor a monster. For the absence of a model past fifty who is neither exceptional, ludicrous, silly, fierce nor nasty, Austen had none on whom she could build Lady Russell’s character.

In the earlier works, angry dowagers like Lady Catherine, Mrs. Ferrars and Mrs. Churchill are seen as posing a threat to the hero, who is ultimately shown as successful in winning the heroine. But before this happens the heroines too are substantially scaled down from their almost excessive energies of sexuality, capriciousness and loquacity, as does Elizabeth, Marianne and Emma. Mrs. Ferrars even goes to the extent of tampering with the patriarchal line of inheritance by refusing to give her elder son his rightful inheritance. These early novels explicitly confirm that young women – even if they are as intelligent or as compassionate as Elinor must yield to the powerful societal conventions, as in getting married to ensure male protection. It simultaneously goes on to establish that schemers and manipulators like Mrs. Ferrars and her protégé Lucy Steele can themselves become frightening agents of repression, subverters of conventions and still triumphantly emerge as dominating survivors in a patriarchal world.

Despite being repressive these unfit figures of authority can occasionally be right as when Lady Catherine opposes entailing landed
estate in favour of a distant male relation, in the absence of a male in the family. One might presume that this would have been the opinion of Mrs. Ferrars and Mrs. Churchill too. They too would have agreed in seeing "... no occasion for entailing estates from the female lines ..." (PP, 146). While giving Lady Catherine this judicious stand, Austen in keeping with her sense of propriety continuously portrays her as officious, arrogant, rude, patronizing and egotistical. This widow who belongs to the aristocracy opposes the very basis of patriarchy by questioning the exclusive right of male inheritance. This she does partly because of her ignorance about the consequences of her actions in the patriarchal society which illustrates how ill-equipped such a character is to wield power which accrues to her as a widow. This seems to be the pattern of delineating Austen's monster characters in succeeding novels.

However, not only widows but a character like Mrs. Churchill assumes tremendous power even when the husband is still alive, for Mr. Churchill is "... an easy, guidable man, to be pursued into any thing ..." (E, 351) was consequently "... feared by nobody ..." (E, 351). Significantly, such female characters in positions of power occupy very little space in the narrative – they appear less, speak less and remain almost a secret presence – for we get to know about them indirectly through other characters. Their creator has deliberately underplayed the importance of their role in the narrative and has
tried to push them away till in the end they are finally banished, buried or killed. Lady Susan, Lady Catherine, Mrs. Ferrars, Mrs. Norris, Mrs. Churchill are all bad influences on their charges, be it in the capacity of mothers, surrogate mothers or aunts.

Like Lady Catherine, Aunt Norris has survived the paramount authority in her life – her husband – but has to submit before another powerful male authority, her brother-in-law Sir Thomas. She finally achieves freedom of sorts when she is banished from Mansfield Park to a distant country along with her favourite protégé Maria. Although these women exercise power, yet they cannot legitimize their claim to power – not only because society does not approve of it – but also because they cannot handle it properly on account of their lack of intellectual and moral authority. These assertive monster women suggest what some of the heroines could have turned out to be without the sobering influence of their husbands. Elizabeth and Emma, it can be surmised were Lady Catherine and Mrs. Churchill in the making respectively, and Lucy Steele is undoubtedly the future Mrs. Ferrars. Gilbert and Gubar rightly points out that

Aunt Norris, is clearly meant to be a dark parody of Mary Crawford.⁵

As opposed to the misguided authority in *Mansfield Park*, the vitriolic shrew Mrs. Churchill is deliberately hidden in *Emma*. One only hears about her from the opinions and conversations of others. We are informed
that she “... rules at Enscombe, and is a very odd-tempered woman ...”, “... an ill-tempered person ...” and “dreadful” (E, 110). As a woman, who is “... not capable of being fond of any body, except herself ...”, (E, 109) she has “... no more heart than a stone to people in general, and the devil of a temper ...” (E, 109). Ironically, though “... she is so very unreasonable; ... every thing gives way to her.” (E, 111)

But like Mrs. Norris she is the casual agent of the plot, influencing Mr. Weston’s life, causing him and the late Miss Churchill grief, dominating Frank Churchill’s existence, making him deceitful and forcing him to hide his engagement to Jane Fairfax that leads to the series of misunderstandings and various comic and not-so-comic developments. Proud, whimsical, arrogant, bitter and hurtful like Lady Catherine, Mrs. Ferrars or Mrs. Norris, she unlike them however uses her poor health to elicit attention and obedience from her family, when it is not attainable otherwise.

Mrs. Churchill illustrates how a person endowed with tremendous power and authority can become without the aid of intellectual and moral competence. She also represents the initial tendencies of other heroines of Austen and the inherent danger of becoming characters like her but for their intellectual and moral authority. In her feminine qualities, ladylike polite behaviour and reserve, Mrs. Churchill hides her monstrous self, born out of manipulation and deceit in order to attain power in a man’s world. But she
also ends up as a victim of her own selfish, deceptive, hypocritical methods. Her silences, evasions and lies ultimately take as its toll - her life. Given to exploiting her poor health conditions to secure her own selfish ends and exact obedience from others -

Poor Mrs. Churchill! No doubt she had been suffering a great deal: more than any body had ever supposed ... (E, 351).

In her final stage no one believes in her sincerity and considers it as mere manipulative tactics.

She had never been admitted before to be seriously ill. The event [death] acquitted her of all the fancifulness, and all the selfishness of imaginary complaints. (E, 351)

However, Austen with her sense of balance went on to create other characters who were human. In her portrayal of the likes of Elizabeth, Emma, Marianne and Catherine they are characterized more by the mistakes they make than by their right moves. All four of them believe themselves to be in the right till they are proven wrong and are guided in the correct direction by the men they love. It is their faults that make them human and are therefore, to be differentiated from the most perfect angels as Anne and Elinor. Their flaw lies in their over-confidence, inexperience and ignorance about themselves and others. Elizabeth and Emma believe themselves to be as intelligent as their male counterparts, in comprehending the man’s world and of human nature; while Catherine’s faults lie in her lack of intelligence and understanding of the world and its ways. Emma and Elizabeth, Austen
points out to be wrong, but their shortcomings are the corrigible ones which can be forgiven by the men. It is under the loving influence and attention of a Mr. Knightley or a Mr. Darcy that they can be fitted into the mould of more likeable characters.

Although Elizabeth and Emma had the potential to be become monster women, it is their goodness and moral authority coupled with the love and guidance of worthy life partners that prevents them from becoming a Lady Catherine. Emma and Elizabeth are more intelligent than most men but their intelligence is of a moral kind. Their weakness lies in that they fail to recognize their own moral strength and instead emphasize on their practical intelligence gained through limited experience in situations over which they have very little authority. Throughout the narrative and particularly in the conclusions of *Pride and Prejudice*, *Emma* and *Northanger Abbey*, Austen suggests that to wield this kind of authority they will have to rely on their husbands for ultimately such an authority belongs to men only in their world.

*Sense and Sensibility*, besides presenting an angel, monster and human character in Elinor, Lucy Steele and Marianne respectively, also presents the character of Eliza Brandon, Colonel Brandon’s first love, who does not fit into any of these categorizations. She does not belong to the stereotype of the angel, monster or the human but is nonetheless a victim of patriarchy.
Eliza must be distinguished from a monster, since her attempts to lead her own life were not intentionally directed against male power and authority. But given the circumstances she was unsuccessful. After having lived a life of disappointment in love, in being forced to marry Colonel Brandon’s brother against her own will, at whose hands she “experienced great unkindness” (SS, 150), Eliza finally ends up in a divorce – considered scandalous in Austen’s contemporary society. Thereafter, she is thrown into situations where she is forced to write her own story. In her weak and futile endeavours to chart the course of her own life she only ends up in greater misery. It is from that moment onwards when she is independent of male power and authority her process of debasement commences. Ultimately she falls in stature from a decent human being to a highly degenerated woman.

The patriarchal voice through Colonel Brandon judges,

“She [Eliza] resigned herself first to all the misery of her situation; and happy had it been if she had not lived to overcome those regrets …” (SS, 150).

In other words, even her death would have been preferable than an assertion of herself. Having been educated and brought up in a manner where women were taught to submit to the authority of men, Eliza was ill-equipped when it came to taking control over her own life. The consequences were disastrous as she was “… to sink deeper in a life of sin …” (SS, 151) and finally wasted away without money and love, a victim of consumption.
Even her appearance underwent a change, from the beautiful looks in her earlier days to that of a faded beauty. Colonel Brandon recalls,

“So altered – so faded – worn down by acute suffering of every kind! hardly could I believe the melancholy and sickly figure before me, to be the remains of the lovely, blooming healthful girl, on whom I had once doated” (SS, 151).

Comparisons between Mrs. Eliza Brandon and Marianne Dashwood by Colonel Brandon occur quite a few times in the narrative which strongly suggests that Marianne too might become someone like Eliza. Too human and attractive a woman with major flaws, Marianne stands the greatest risk of loosing her human character. That she is saved from doom unlike Eliza Brandon and can be categorized as a human is primarily because of her goodness of personality and owing to the stabilizing influence of her angelic sister Elinor. Marianne, like Eliza Brandon stood the chance of being reduced to a degenerated self, but not a monster woman, because these two characters unlike Lady Susan and Lucy Steele are not inherently evil, but more victims of their own flawed nature and circumstances. This was further worsened by their inadequate education that otherwise could have supported them through their trials and tribulations.

In _Mansfield Park_ too, we see how society treats a woman who shows a willingness to lead life her own way. However, unlike Eliza, Maria was not mistreated by her husband, although the obstinate choice of marrying a
foolish man has disastrous effects on her life. Maria with "high spirits and strong passions" had the boldness, foolishness and audacity,

... not to be prevailed on to leave Mr. Crawford. She hoped to marry him, and they continued together till she was obliged to be convinced that such hope was vain ... and then induce a voluntary separation. (MP, 378)

She consequently had to face all the indignity and humiliation of this adulterous affair whereas, Henry goes scot free. Such an action naturally led to her divorce from her husband Mr. Rushworth. Though she does not die like Eliza nor is ultimately redeemed like Marianne, she comes across as someone who though definitely not an angel or is also not a total monster, but in whom her self-destructive will is dominant and which society perceives as evil in her.

However, regarding the comparative fates of Maria and Henry, Austen comments with sharpness, sarcasm and perhaps a hint of sadness:

In this world, the penalty is less equal than could be wished (MP, 382), thereby, criticizing society's approbation of such justice which is always biased against women. By comparing their fates Austen questions whether 'virtue' was to be thought of in the same way for both the sexes or as different in kind and quality for men and for women.

Austen's creation of these types of characters of the angel, monster and human was meant to fulfill distinctive functions. Although the portrayal of these angel characters might create an impression of Jane Austen as an anti-feminist, they actually project a feminist standpoint. Austen expresses
her greatest disenchantment about patriarchy within these novels through the judicious and intelligent women who no matter how deserving of power and authority, will never acquire the power that they truly deserve in a patriarchal society. Except Wentworth and Edward no other man can genuinely appreciate the worth of Anne and Elinor respectively and as for Fanny, one cannot be very sure that Sir Thomas or Edmund can comprehend her genuine value, for in the end of *Mansfield Park*, Sir Thomas still continues to have the ultimate say. Interestingly, Austen through her angel characters – whereby, they are denied of power and authority that they deserve – reveals most staunchly her lack of faith in patriarchy. On an outward level these angel characters sincerely adhere to patriarchal standards but through these characters the author is taking a feminist stand by obliquely questioning why the deserving are deprived of the power and authority that should have been theirs. Where Austen most seems to conform to the patriarchal expectations, that same area contains her most scathing criticism of it.

It is this irony that pervades throughout her narratives and allows her to express her criticism of the society which denies the woman her rightful place. But it is the same society with allows unappealing characters like Lady Susan and Lady Catherine to exercise power and authority when they do not deserve it. Herein lies the significance of her equivocation as she
expresses her lack of faith in society and exposes the biases against women. This is however not to say that Austen is an avowed feminist for her style throughout remains very subtle.

It was strange to think that all the great women of fiction were, until Jane Austen's day, not only seen by the other sex, but seen only in relation to the other sex. ... Hence, perhaps, the peculiar nature of woman in fiction; the astonishing extremes of her beauty and horror; her alternations between heavenly goodness and hellish depravity; for so a lover would see her as his love rose or sank, was prosperous or unhappy.⁶

In Sense and Sensibility, Mansfield Park and Persuasion the author has exhibited great faith in women like Elinor, Fanny and Anne respectively, who are more capable of handling authority than their male counterparts. But at the end of these narratives, despite their higher claims to intelligence and moral authority than most men, they are not allowed to exercise power. Throughout the novels we see these women obligingly accepting the flawed set-up, either of Mr. Dashwood, Sir Thomas or Sir Walter. But being angel figures they seldom question or contradict their ways - except in extremely rare outbursts as Anne does towards the end of Persuasion.

Austen's wavering between the angel, monster and human characters about whom she shows an in-depth understanding of their psyche and situation, also suggests something about her own weakness and how she related towards them. Through the dominating, determined and ambitious women - the author found the means of artistic liberation. Her novels
provided her with the unique opportunity whereby she could create, escape as well as censure. Austen apparently seems to reject as improper and indecent the attractively dangerous Lady Susan, Emma with her witty retorts and Mary Crawford vibrant, attractive and able to compose witty letters. She might have done this with the purpose of safeguarding her role as an author. But through them she escaped those restraints which she had herself imposed on her female characters. In her narratives she throughout remains witty, brilliant, assertive, spirited, independent and occasionally even arrogant and severely scathing and satirical. Caught in a contradiction she outwardly submitted to docility like her heroines while beneath the seeming acquiescing surface she delighted in assertion and rebellion. This anxiety and conflict is evident in all her narratives, as when she is caught between the opposing types like Lady Susan and Frederica in *Lady Susan*, Elizabeth and Jane in *Pride and Prejudice*, Marianne and Elinor in *Sense and Sensibility*, Emma and Jane in *Emma*, Mary, Maria and Fanny in *Mansfield Park*, and so on. That Austen was an intelligent vibrant and even flirtatious woman with a scathing sense of sarcastic humour is amply evident from her letters and opinions, but her family always wanted to project an image of her as a good Christian – and in that they exaggerated the religiosity and goodness of her character.
Henry Austen in his “Biographical Notice of The Author” did exactly that which have been pointed out by Chapman.

But the [Austen’s] letters, ... were deliberately robbed of much of their significance, and the surviving letters, like the novels but even more so, have given their readers impressions of the writer’s character which are widely divergent. If we wish to know Jane Austen as she was, we are bound to consider the accounts of her by those who knew her. Allowance for family partiality and family loyalty may have to be made. 7

Most of Austen’s letters were addressed to her sister Cassandra to whom she was very close, and Cassandra in turn did everything to keep them a secret. Caroline Austen has stated that Cassandra “... burnt the greater part [of the letters] ... three or four years before her death” and those that survived several “had portions cut out”. 8 In many of the Brabourne letters, sections were carefully removed with scissors. However, her letters still leave traces of a person who appears not so agreeable when she can be herself, and as possessing a wit which is sharp, bitter, scathing, sparing none who is at fault.

Chapman has rightly stated,

... when we turn to Henry Austen’s Notice of his sister, we know we have to be on our guard – for Jane herself has warned us – against his ‘brotherly vanity and love’ ... 9

Henry Austen states that hers was

A life of usefulness, literature and religion ... (“Notice” in P vol., I),

and literature is mentioned only in passing along with her other qualities. Indeed, throughout the Biographical Notice the emphasis is more on all the different aspects than on literature, and he goes on to emphasize her
accomplishments as a painter, musician, dancer and a beautiful woman in
the same breath as an author. It is replete with passages like, "Neither her
love of God, nor of her fellow creatures flagged for a moment . . ." ("Notice"
in P vol., 2) and that she was "... a brighter genius or a sincere Christian"
("Notice" in P vol., 3). Henry Austen as expected concluded his piece by
emphasizing on her religiosity and goodness –

She was thoroughly religious and devout; fearful of giving offence to
God, and incapable of feeling it towards any fellow creature. On serious
subjects she was well-instructed, both by reading and meditation, and her
opinions accorded strictly with those of our Established Church.
("Notice" in P vol., 6)

But the letters give enough indication that she was not the very pious person
that her family wanted to portray, and certainly not the boring personality
that Henry Austen has drawn. In her real life there was more that was
interesting about her, and thus, there was also that which was less pleasing.

Jane Austen's own life can be surmised as no better than her
fictionalized female characters. Like them, she too, was physically restricted
in her movements by social considerations, and had to be dependent on the
goodwill of her brothers and relatives. Moreover, like her characters, these
restrictions acted as shackles because of the lack of economic independence.
Perhaps it is only Elizabeth Bennet in Pride and Prejudice who to a certain
extent is shown to overcome such restrictions when she resolves to visit sick
Jane braving the bad weather, the difficult terrain and ignoring the
insinuations of others. Indeed, such a behaviour asserting the freedom of
movement and bordering on rebellion did not go down well with others, and particularly not with her female acquaintances.

That she should have walked three miles so early in the day, in such dirty weather, and by herself, was almost incredible to Mrs. Hurst and Miss Bingley; and Elizabeth was convinced that they held her in contempt for it. (*PP*, 28)

Deeply conscious of the predicament of the women of her times, Jane Austen expressed her anxiety over it through her various female characters, whether it is the rich and handsome Emma or the not so rich and not so handsome Elizabeth Bennet, the clever and moralistic Fanny Price or the unethical Mrs. Clay or Lucy Steele, the rich and so-called powerful widows like Lady Catherine or Lady Russell or the aging and non-influential spinster like Miss. Bates. Besides her own personal circumstances which were somewhat similar to those of her own characters, Austen had to cope with the burden of being a female writer in an age where writing was also considered to be a male prerogative. It may however be stated that women were gradually beginning to write and attempting to have their voices heard, which was almost revolutionary for those times. This led to the evolution of a new social phenomena which would for a long time be viewed by men as a threat to their authority. Being sensitive to such a male attitude Austen veiled her personal prejudices through her creative sensibilities and was hence not as outspoken a writer like Mary Wollstonecraft.
Her novels may not be as vocal in feminist views like *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in manner, style, presentation or language but they testify to the fact that she was acutely aware of the position of women in the literary tradition and of herself as a woman writer. During her own lifetime she had shown an interest in the writings of contemporary female writers and their thoughts and had read the works of Fanny Burney and Maria Edgeworth amongst others. Burney and Edgeworth she regarded as her teachers for she saw that their works demonstrated that women had those powers of the mind which were earlier accorded only to men. In fact, Fanny Burney had influenced Austen to such an extent that *Northanger Abbey* reflects certain elements of Burney’s works like *Evelina*, *Cecilia* and *Camilla*. *Sanditon* too, makes comments on *Camilla* – the protagonist Charlotte,

\[...\] took up a book; it happened to be a volume of *Camilla*. She had not Camilla’s Youth, and had no intention of having her Distress, - so, she turned from the Drawers (S in *NA vol.*, 345).

*Persuasion* too, has a direct reference of “the inimitable Miss Larolles” (*P*, 179) from *Cecilia*, although she had trivialized these works. Ironically, Austen’s works are more well read today than any of her contemporary women writers, although Burney and Edgeworth were the more popular novelists during her times. Austen was highly critical of gothic and
sentimental literature too. One such criticism is found in the over-sensitive character of Captain Benwick in *Persuasion*, to whom Anne had to –

... recommend a larger allowance of prose in his daily study ... works of our best moralists, ... finest letters, such memoirs of characters of worth and suffering ... (P, 98).

But Jane Austen had an acute sense of anxiety over authorship and her awareness which she experienced as a woman. This is most poignantly expressed through Anne in *Persuasion* where in one of the most memorable lines, she expresses the predicament of women during her times – their anxiety not only over authority, but over every sphere of life be it that of a writer, a wife, a marriageable woman or a spinster. Austen through Anne – her most mature heroine - makes her point,

‘Yes, yes, if you please, no reference to examples in books. Men have had every advantage of us in telling their own story. Education has been theirs in so much higher a degree; the pen has been in their hands. I will not allow books to prove anything.’ (P, 221)

Through her heroines Austen clearly suggests that in a patriarchal society the women’s voice is often stifled. It can be seen that the author upheld the views of the heroine of *Persuasion*, than of any of the other characters in the novel. While Anne is almost revered, Catherine Morland is the butt of Austen’s irony, but despite that in her ignorance she is made to utter words of profundity on the condition of women.

‘But history, real solemn history, I cannot be interested in ... The quarrels of popes and kings, with wars or pestilences, in every page; the men all so good for nothing, and hardly any women at all – it is very tiresome: and yet I often think it odd that it should be so dull,’ (NA, 84).
History and politics as the author perceived were deliberately kept beyond the reach of a woman’s experience. But a history which is written at the cost of ignoring half the population in itself can be considered a fiction conveniently woven by patriarchy. If at all, such history treats women with indifference, who never participate in the scheme of things and are almost completely absent from its pages. As Virginia Woolf rightly observes,

Imaginatively she [woman] is of the highest importance; practically she is completely insignificant. She pervades poetry from cover to cover; she is all but absent from history. She dominates the lives of kings and conquerors in fiction; in fact she was the slave of any boy whose parents force a ring upon her finger. Some of the most inspired words, some of the most profound thoughts in literature fall from her lips; in real life she could hardly read, could scarcely spell, and was the property of her husband.¹⁰

Therefore, Austen asserts that women see male-dominated history from the disillusioned and disaffected perspective of the outsider as Catherine does.

Jane Austen’s anxiety over authorship and her awareness of the limitations to which a female writer had to restrict herself to, is best revealed in the circumstances under which her novels were written. She wrote her novels in the common sitting room and hid her manuscripts or covered them with a piece of blotting paper or a piece of lace. In fact, she was glad that a hinge creaked which provided her with the warning that someone was entering the room, and thereby, providing her with the timely opportunity to hide her composition. She had not ‘a room of one’s own’, to borrow Virginia Woolf’s phrase – for her literary pursuits, and till the end of
her life she had no separate study and did most of her work in the general sitting-room subject to all kinds of casual interruptions. In fact, Austen was very careful to ensure that not even the servants, nor any visitor, except her family members and friends should have the slightest inkling as to her literary pre-occupations. That she produced literary classics of such enduring worth and greatness under difficult and disturbing circumstances is indeed remarkable.

In creating the characters whom Jane Austen had taken from the reality around her, and who too can be categorized into the types of the angel, monster and human (especially the female ones), the author has not only revealed her own anxiety as a woman and as an author, but at the same time has shown her ability to come out of the male structured text by producing texts of her own. In spite of strong patriarchal influences she created a new world within patriarchy in her novels and delineated characters who embodied her own anxiety over authority and authorship and at the same time achieved a kind of liberation for herself. The woman's voice that had been suppressed since ages was slowly but surely getting to be heard towards the end of the eighteenth century because of writers like Jane Austen who spoke through characters like Anne Elliot, Lady Susan and Elizabeth Bennet.
Notes


5. G and G 70.


