Chapter II

Interchangeability of Selfishness and Selflessness

She ... leads a life ... in considerable isolation on a country estate ... a life without external events— a life whose story cannot be told as there is no story. Her existence is not useless. On the contrary ... she shines like a beacon in a dark world, like a motionless lighthouse by which others, the travelers whose lives do have a story, can set their course. When those involved in feeling and action turn to her in their need, they are never dismissed without advice and consolation. She is an ideal, a model of selflessness and of purity of heart.¹

This is Goethe’s description of Makarie, supposedly one of the noblest figures of femininity according to him that features in one of his later novels. Her qualities are those which make up the essential characteristics of the angel women down the ages—a type that has been loved, patronized and praised by the patriarchal society. Significantly, this elaboration of Goethe’s eternal feminine is epitomized by these words—

She is an ideal, a model of selflessness and of purity of heart.

His comments are relevant in the context of this thesis, because such an account fits the description or varies from it, in some of Jane Austen’s heroines and other female characters.

Among Austen’s angel characters Anne Elliot and Elinor Dashwood fit perfectly into this description ascribed to Goethe’s Makarie, whereas, Fanny Price while outwardly seems to conform to this picture presents some contradictions at a deeper level. In so far the human characters of Elizabeth
Bennet and Emma Woodhouse are concerned they too bear resemblances to Goethe’s eternal feminine at certain points while differing at others. As far as the monster types of Mrs. Norris, Lady Catherine and Lady Denham are concerned, the interest in them arises not in their similarity but in their differences, and how despite such differences they successfully maneuver their male counterparts and wield power over them.

In all of these characters, selflessness or selfishness either in a revealed or disguised manner, is often consciously or unconsciously a vehicle of securing authority. Thus the qualities of selfishness or selflessness are invariably related to the larger societal issues of female power and authority in Austen’s world and in the eighteenth century society. In *Sanditon*, however, the author’s treatment of this topic acquires an altogether unique position, which distinguishes this incomplete novel from her earlier works.

A day in Makarie’s life one can imagine, in spite of the differences in situation and circumstances cannot be very different from Anne Elliot’s in its essence, for it is the same quality of “selflessness and of purity of heart” that governs her activities and gives direction to her life. Thus from the beginning of *Persuasion* the reader is provided with an idea of the kind of activities that keeps the female protagonist engaged:

*It was an afternoon of distress, and Anne had everything to do at once – the apothecary to send for – the father to have pursued and informed – the*
mother to support and keep from hysterics – the servants to control – the
youngest child to banish, and the poor suffering one to attend and soothe;
- besides sending, as soon as she recollected it, proper notice to the other
house, which brought her an accession rather of frightened, enquiring
companions, than of very useful assistants. (P, 54)

This passage is meant to give the reader a fairly clear picture about the
heroine’s personality, highlighting her selfless nature, about whom Austen
admits in a letter as “almost too good for me” (P, cover page). It is in this
sense that one can say Anne, Elinor and Fanny lead “a life whose story
cannot be told as there is no story”. They, as it were, live more for the sake
of others than for themselves. It is Austen’s perception about the inner life
of such women in her contemporary times that makes a story possible out of
their otherwise uneventful lives.

Throughout, *Persuasion* abounds in instances of what this most
perfect angel of Austen – Anne does, thinks or feels. Being an angel,
whatever she does is for the sake of others, her family, friends,
acquaintances and rarely for herself. When we see Anne in action it is
usually in these moments devoted to the comfort and benefit of others. For
instance, on dancing being proposed one evening at the Great Hall,

Anne offered her services, as usual, and though her eyes would
sometimes fill with tears as she sat at the instrument, she was extremely
glad to be employed, and desired nothing in return but to be unobserved.
(P, 71) [Italics mine]
Henry Tilney the male protagonist of *Northanger Abbey*, aptly sums up the root of the dilemma when he states, “... man has the advantage of choice, woman only the power of refusal” (*NA*, 57).

Anne, the demure protagonist of *Persuasion*, “has quite given up dancing” (*P*, 71) which suggests the suppression and renunciation of the self. This anxiety over selfhood which in turn is connected with authorship has found expression in the works of female writers down the ages – Aphra Behn, Anne Finch, Maria Edgeworth, Mary Shelly, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, the three Bronte sisters, George Eliot, Louisa May Alcott, Emily Dickinson, Mary Elizabeth Coleridge, Virginia Woolf, Sylvia Plath, to name a few prominent ones, besides of course Jane Austen. Some like Anne Sexton, Margaret Atwood and even the fairy tale tradition (*The Red Dancing Shoes*) have associated the red shoes or the dancing shoes as the symbols of art which women writers have associated with anxiety of selfhood. Anne had once desired to write her story during her youth in seeking to carve a future with Wentworth – it was suppressed by hands stronger than hers. Henceforth, she never attempted it again.

Angelic women’s *self-lessness* ensures that they have no story to tell because they have to suppress the *self*. The literary tradition also implies that if a woman wears a red shoe and dances, the good man would go away. *Alternatively she could have the love of a good man if she refrained from it.*
Louisa Musgrove’s assertion of the *self* could be compared with a feverish dance, the suicidal tarantella, which ultimately leads to her almost fatal fall, leaving her extremely nervous. It is only after being duly punished and as it were, literally shorn of her dancing shoes, when she becomes the opposite of her former assertive self, does she secure the love of a good man.

After all, dancing the death dance, “all those girls / who wore the red shoes” dismantle their own bodies, like anorexics renouncing the guilty weight of their female flesh.\(^2\)

This statement points out the anxiety of female selfhood, or the anxiety that a woman undergoes when unable to renounce the *self* to become *self-less*.

Anne, unlike Louisa had given up dancing long ago. Thus, while those around her dance and sing, she fades into oblivion amidst the din and bustle of the crowd surrounding her, as if silenced by their gaiety, laughter, confusion and lively conversations. When not required to be of aid to others, she retreats into her solitary self or into a quiet corner of the room. Others are hardly aware of her, whereas, she always has time and attention for everyone. In return,

She could do little more than listen patiently, soften every grievance, and excuse each to the other; give them all hints of the forbearance necessary. (*P*, 47)

Such a life can be compared to Goethe’s Makarie. To Lady Russell alone she somewhat reveals her heart. Passages as this largely summarize Anne’s existence –
... Anne glad to be thought of some use, glad to have anything marked out as duty. (P, 36)

Another quotation from an early chapter also reinforces this point, in which Anne tells her younger sister as to why she could not come to her earlier,

'A great many things, I assure you (that I have been doing). More than I can recollect in a moment; but I can tell you some. I have been making a duplicate of the catalogue of my father’s books and pictures. I have been several times in the garden with Mackenzie, trying to understand, and make him understand, which of Elizabeth’s plants are for Lady Russell. I have had all my own little concerns to arrange — books and music to divide, and all my trunks to repack, from not having understood in time what was intended as to the wagons. ... going to almost every house in the parish, as a sort of take-leave. I was told they wished it.' (P, 41)

Austen’s emphasis is evidently on the numerous tasks that Anne carries out for others, whereas, what she does for herself comes later and occurs as an insignificant aside. The last remark about her house-visits is cleverly incorporated to show the protagonist’s moral authority above the rest. Indeed, Anne possesses this quality in a far greater degree than any of the other characters in this novel. These details of her selfless activities which are interwoven throughout the entire narrative, is more than a recounting of Anne’s pre-occupations, but also serves as a means whereby, our attention is drawn to her superiority of character which distinguishes her from her friends and family.

There is no mention of either Sir Walter or his favourite eldest daughter Elizabeth performing the duty — which should have been theirs — of “... going to almost every house in the parish, as a sort of take-leave ...”
Austen’s portrayal of them, leaves us with enough room to fairly surmise that Sir Walter and Elizabeth, are not the sort of people to be bothered with such duties and responsibilities. Anne’s moral superiority over the rest, her selfless service towards the society and family go unrecognized and unacknowledged by her family, who takes it for granted. This is not to suggest that Anne expected any acknowledgement or gratitude from her family whom she understood perfectly well. It is her sense of rightness of actions that motivates her judgment and activity, not the desire to be praised which distinguishes her from the insipid heroine of *Mansfield Park*, Fanny Price. In return all that her father the “foolish, spendthrift baronet” Sir Walter,

... could give his daughter ... [was] but a small part of the share of ten thousand pounds which must be hers. (P, 234)

Needless to say, the rest of it has been squandered away in supporting his lavish lifestyle.

Through the Elliots, Austen has once again portrayed the aristocracy in a very poor light, full of vanity and show, lacking in genuine qualities of goodness, talent or sense of responsibility. It is Anne alone who can discern their shallowness. Thus, it is she and none of her sisters or father who can comprehend the change in status that they have undergone by shifting to Bath. Anne on reaching Bath perceptively

... sigh(ed) that her father should feel no degradation in his change; should see nothing to regret in the duties and dignity of the resident land-
Anne had realized long ago that "... they were nothing. There was no superiority of manner, accomplishment, or understanding" (P, 141-42) and here her opinions are as much about the Dalymphles and the Elliots as for the degenerate aristocracy in general.

Despite this awareness of their nothingness, it is the sense of duty that compels Anne to go to almost every house in the parish, fulfilling a social obligation of the aristocratic Elliots, thus, maintaining the dignity of her family in such a society. The irony lies in her awareness of "... knowing our own nothingness beyond our own circle" (P, 44), but this "nothingness" has not prevented her from doing what ought to have been done by them. Her act is totally selfless, because she has nothing to gain from this male dominated socio-political institution of rank and hierarchy, except goodwill.

The reward is, indeed, ironic. Although Anne and not Elizabeth visits the parishioners, it is the latter who will be the...

...mistress of Kellynch Hall, presiding and directing ...doing the honours, and laying down the domestic law at home (P, 12-13),

as long as Sir Walter is alive or till she gets married. The irony is implicit in the situation, in the socio-political aristocratic structure which does not give honours to the most deserving but is based on the law of succession, rewarding not the ablest but the eldest. Elizabeth, although far inferior in
moral and intellectual authority to Anne, had occupied Lady Elliot’s place since her death thirteen years ago, and William Walter Elliot, Esq. no better or more deserving than Sir Walter himself, will finally inherit Kellynch-hall. Anne the voice of propriety,

... could not but in conscience feel that they were gone who deserved not to stay, and that Kellynch-hall had passed into better hands than its owners (P, 119).

when Sir Walter rents it out and he himself retires to Bath. Admiral Croft and his wife who are merely the tenants of Kellynch-hall will ultimately go away, as it would pass on, into the hands of William Elliot, although the Crofts are far more deserving than the Elliots.

Anne’s genuine selflessness whether for her family, friends or society finds mention right from the beginning to the end of Persuasion. Never does she perform them with disinterest or malice, a little regret maybe in certain exceptional situations, as when she is asked to explain an Italian song to Miss Carteret, at the cost of being separated from Wentworth. It is her innate goodness wishing well for all - that differentiates her actions from the seemingly selfless deeds of Fanny Price in Mansfield Park which will be discussed later in this chapter. Anne’s goodness of nature and selfless behaviour is not of a cloying kind as it is with the heroine of Mansfield Park, but possesses an unsentimental quality that is combined with stoicism and integrity.
Anne alone, of all of Austen’s female protagonists possesses those purely selfless qualities which perhaps only Elinor Dashwood can claim to possess. But in Anne’s case more than in Elinor’s, her goodness is defined in terms of her selfless activities for others. Significantly unlike Elinor who is the eldest and hence has to shoulder the responsibility of her family, Anne technically need not bear any. Qualities like kindness, generosity, virtuousness, patience etc. are borne out by what she does for others.

Wentworth always recognizes Anne’s superiority over the rest of her acquaintances. But Austen nonetheless explains that it is “...the scenes on the Cobb, and at Captain Harville’s, [which] had fixed her superiority” (P, 228). These episodes displayed her capacity to provide instant comfort and useful service more efficiently than any of the gentlemen or ladies. Thus, after Louisa’s fall on the Cobb, Wentworth with deep feelings implores her, “... but, if Anne will stay, no one so proper, so capable as Anne!” (P, 111). Clearly, the faith and confidence he can repose on her and on nobody else comes from his knowledge of her from the past - be it her attending the young sick little Charles, her behaviour at the Great House or the numerous small acts of goodness. It is by chance that he had been a witness to a few of such acts, though many more were carried out in his absence. Even her decision not to be engaged to Wentworth at nineteen,

... was not a merely selfish caution ... Had she not imagined herself consulting his good, even more than her own, she could hardly have given
him up. - The belief of being prudent, and self-denying principally for his advantage, was her chief consolation, under the misery of a parting — a final parting ... all the additional pain of opinions on his side (P, 31).

Her selflessness had only afforded her pain, hurt and suffering for the next seven long years.

It is more than mere coincidence or a matter of irony that such gestures shape the destiny of the protagonist, paving the way for Anne’s escape from the cloistered confines of the aristocracy and gives her the authority — no matter how little - that she can exercise through her marriage to Wentworth. The turning point in her fortune and her relationship with Wentworth commences in *Persuasion* from the point where her usefulness at Lyme stands in sharp contrast to the uselessness and confusion of others during Louisa’s accident. Also when the eldest Musgrove boy suffered from a dislocated collar-bone, she once more takes up a similar position, displaying more calmness, sense and control than any of her female or male counterparts.

Hence Wentworth’s public avowal of confidence in Anne. This is also one of the first instances where Wentworth betrays his emotions for her. This incident is the centre of the narrative for it is from now on that they, the once engaged pair moves again towards love, understanding and respect, culminating in marriage. Austen comments

... but he was obliged to acknowledge that only at Uppercross had he learnt to do her justice, and only at Lyme had he begun to understand himself. (P, 228).
Lyme also marks another highpoint in *Persuasion* in a different way. It has a sobering effect on Louisa which ultimately paves the way for her marriage with Captain Benwick. Wentworth, who was at one time attracted to Louisa, once expressed his view of what should characterize an ideal woman:

‘To exemplify, - a beautiful glossy nut, which blessed with original strength, has outlived all the storms of autumn’ (*P*, 86),

suggest all praises for Louisa’s “character of decision and firmness” (*P*, 86) while being critical of Anne’s lack of it. But he confesses to Anne in the denouement of the narrative,

... he had learnt to distinguish between the steadiness of principle and the obstinacy of self-will, between the darings of heedlessness and the resolution of a collected mind (*P*, 228).

This shows that Wentworth recognizes Anne’s true personality of selflessness as opposed to Louisa’s shallow personality. Louisa never goes on to become the perfect ‘nut’ the way Anne is, and hence will have to settle for a groom who is less worthy than Wentworth. She pays dearly for her “self-will” (*P*, 228) when she falls from the steps at Lyme. It tames her spirit and curbs her zest by leaving her only slightly better than a cripple. Louisa does not suffer the fate of a Mary Crawford or a Maria Bertram, but her rewards have been proportionately less than that of Anne’s – for she ends up with a second best husband like Captain Benwick. The fate that Louisa suffers from, exhibits the author’s ambivalence. Although Austen
often presents a judicious balance between the two extremes but she can be occasionally unkind to her vocal and spirited female characters as seen in her treatment of Louisa in this novel and Mary Crawford in *Mansfield Park*.

Although it is Anne’s genuine qualities of head and heart – and primarily her selflessness - that wins Captain Wentworth’s love, her actions are never motivated by such a reward in mind. She never displays any desire to attain or exercise power and authority nor has the slightest hope for love and marriage. “Anne, at seven and twenty, thought very differently” (*P*, 32) cherishing little hope for love or romance, is instead reconciled to her destiny of spinsterhood. With her decision not to marry Sir Walter’s successor she forever losses the opportunity of becoming the mistress of Kellynch-hall, that would have conferred on her the maximum powers that a woman can exercise within the landed aristocratic set-up. Significantly, this decision is taken by Anne with promptness and without regrets.

For a few moments her imagination and her heart were bewitched. The idea of becoming what her mother had been; of having the precious name of ‘Lady Elliot’ first revived in herself; of being restored to Kellynch, calling it her home again, her home for ever, was a charm which she could not immediately resist. (*P*, 151-52)

But it was only for a moment and despite such tantalizing prospects she was sure that

... she never could accept him ... her judgment, on a serious consideration of the possibilities of such a case was against Mr. Elliot. (*P*, 152)
Selflessness is not just another virtue in Austen's scheme of things. Perhaps the same can be said for her contemporary eighteenth century society. It is interesting that Anne was the choice of both Wentworth and William Walter Elliot. That this should be so can be construed as more than a narrative device to enhance the climax through the element of jealousy. Both the gentlemen are shown to be superior in intelligence than most others, in the case of William it can be described as shrewdness. That they with a better understanding than most men should have Anne as their preferable choice, points out that Anne despite being “faded and thin” with “little to admire in her [looks]” (P, 12) was still attractive to sensible men, and also women, by virtue of her “… elegance of mind and sweetness of character” (P, 11). Also beautiful are her “mild dark eyes” (P, 12) which are the windows to her soul. Earlier Wentworth had described to his sister Mrs. Croft that –

‘A strong mind, with sweetness of manner,’ made the first and the last of the description (P, 62),

of what he wanted in a wife. He was reacting against what he accused Anne of - “feebleness of character”, “weakness and timidity” (P, 62), little conscious that the qualities that he would prefer in his would-be wife are the very qualities which Anne possesses. An integral and important part of this “sweetness” is her selflessness, amongst “her merits” (P, 227). Thus, in Jane Austen selfish or selfless qualities to a significant extent can endear or
remove women from patriarchal patronage. "Mrs. Clay's selfishness" (P, 202) in her attempts to secure Sir Walter or his successor is disguised under her "... affections ... [that] may finally carry the day" and she hoped that Mr. Elliot might "... be wheedled and caressed at last into making her the wife of Sir William." (P, 236). Austen's other novels too, present glimpses of women who don the mantle of selflessness to further their selfish objectives.

Anne and Elinor in being selfless, approximate a status where they are almost self-less. As has already been observed in the case of Anne, her thoughts are directed more at the well-being of others than of her own. The same is true for Elinor. However, in her case they are more for her immediate family, particularly her sister Marianne, her mother and Edward, than for the wider circle of friends and acquaintances. In some degrees Anne is closer to the ideal than Elinor, for her selflessness crosses all social boundaries, as is amply illustrated in her actions towards the Musgroves, Mrs. Smith and the parishioners amongst others.

Significantly, unlike die-hard feminists who hold that being self-less includes within its ambit moral and psychological implications that the term can imply, Austen's protagonists, however, do not totally conform to this extreme. Neither Anne nor Elinor are morally or psychologically self-less, for they constantly have an awareness of what is right and not right. They
very much have a mind of their own, and in being gifted with superior intelligence and understanding they can often recognize people for what they are. Otherwise Anne would not have reflected about her family on reaching Bath or felt about Mr. Elliot the way she did, if she had been morally or psychologically unaware. This is further evident in her choice of Wentworth over William. Anne seems almost too perfect for an Austen heroine, but careful distinctions, separating her from the sentimental ideal are made. Although she is not witty in the striking way that Elizabeth Bennet and Emma are, there are moments when she shows a quick, critical mind and sharpness of tongue as in her conversation with Captain Harville.

But it is true that Anne and Fanny are generally scared at the prospect of being heard or noticed in public. About Anne’s utterance Austen tells us,

She had spoken it; but she trembled when it was done, conscious that her words were listened to, and daring not even to try to observe their effect. (P, 212)

Even while making a case for women her tone is not one of confidence or assertion but of self-less submission:

‘All the privilege I claim for my own sex (it is not a very enviable one, you need not covet it)’ (P, 222).

This is even more true and pronounced in Fanny Price who “... seemed almost as fearful of notice and praise as other women were of neglect.” (MP, 159) This selflessness is related to the patriarchal belief that to please man should be the fair sex’s greatest pleasure. This in turn denies her any
scope for writing her own story or of living her life the way she desires. Therefore, the art of pleasing men is not only an angelic quality but one that was considered proper of a lady. This selflessness, the need to negate oneself when taken to an extreme level, can also lead to a form of renunciation in the angel women. Thus, Anne and Fanny are both thin and delicate. They are angel characters because by surrendering their self, that is, their personal comfort and desire they reach the position of the ideal feminine. Feminist critics like Gilbert and Gubar further explicates that

... it is precisely this sacrifice which dooms her [a woman] both to death and to heaven. For to be selfless is not only to be noble, it is to be dead.3

The feminist school also holds that physical frailty as also religiosity are consciously or unconsciously means of making women attractive to the opposite sex, by which they gain an ambiguous power over men. Citing Fanny’s example, Margaret Kirkham says,

Fanny’s apparent innocence and religiosity is an aspect of her sexiness, a veneer of the ‘angelic’ which makes her sexually exciting to men like Crawford, who wish to find in their wives such vulnerable ‘virtue’ as will excite both sexual passion and manly protectiveness. The conduct-book genre included works like Fordyce’s Sermons, in which religiosity in pretty young women was thought of in a salacious way.4

Thus, in Austen ‘selfless’ means the opposite of being ‘selfish’, that is, to be ‘unselfish’. But additionally, in the context of her novels, to be ‘selfless’ is unavoidably and intricately connected with being ‘self-less’, in a sense the patriarchal society wants women to be. In being stripped of their selves, women are expected to take little interest in themselves, but devote
themselves to the gratification of others, particularly the men folk. Only if they live up to this ideal will they be rewarded by the patriarchy, or else punished for being an over-reacher. According to standards of this society, the reward for this is the love of a good man. Fanny Price does this over and over again to please Sir Thomas, her guardian. After facing several trying situations she still does not falter – at least outwardly – in being a selfless angel, perhaps a feminine ideal, ultimately securing for herself the love of the most deserving and best man, the cousin she always loved. Significantly she also gains the blessings of one of the most dominating patriarchal figures in Austen’s works - Sir Thomas. It is Maria and Julia Bertram and Mary Crawford who are punished in proportion to their willfulness or stubbornness in their pursuit to gratify their wishes.

Fanny Price is a classic instance where the need to be selfless is constantly in conflict with the basic, unacknowledged and sub-conscious instinct to be selfish – unlike most of Austen’s other protagonists. This is most pronounced during Fanny’s reaction to the staging of a theatrical in Mansfield. She opposes it because,

… she could never have been easy in joining a scheme which, considering only her uncle, she must condemn altogether. (MP, 130)

Fanny’s quiet resistance to the play was ostensibly on ethical grounds, but at the same time she was motivated by the desire to remain in Sir Thomas’s favour.
However, her decision does not make her happy.

Every body around her was gay and busy, prosperous and important, ... She alone was sad and insignificant; she had no share in anything; she might go or stay, she might be in the midst of their noise, or retreat from it to the solitude of the East room, without being seen or missed. She could almost think anything would have been preferable to this ... in some danger of envying. (MP, 129)

Anne too often felt lonely in a crowd but that never evoked bitterness and envy in her, the way it does in Fanny. Unlike Anne and Elinor, she appears as cold, jealous and unhappy at the happiness of others.

Fanny’s complex character is due to her upbringing in the Bertram household where she is the poor niece totally dependent on the kindness of her benefactor, Sir Thomas. That is why she consciously places her first loyalty on the patriarch. Although Sir Thomas is a strict authoritarian he is not unkind, and is quite capable of appreciating the worth of an individual. Though he has taken in his poor niece Fanny under his care, he nevertheless insists that

the distinction proper to be made between the girls as they grow up; how to preserve in the minds of my daughters the consciousness of what they are, without making them think too lowly of their cousin; and how, without depressing her spirits too far, to make her remember that she is not a Miss Bertram. (MP, 7)

Fanny Price is constantly aware of the nature of her indebtedness to Sir Thomas and to Mansfield to such an extent that even in his absence when he is in far away Antigua she does not loose sight of it. This sets her apart from his own children who often have no such feelings regarding filial piety, except Edmund. Fanny’s excessive fidelity is often attained at the cost
of self-effacement, by stifling her own likes, dislikes, desires, wishes and even hopes. But Fanny is not totally unselfish in her intentions, for her outward act of selflessness is motivated by her desire to be indispensable in the Bertram household, be the favourite of Sir Thomas, and be loved more than he loves any of his children, especially his daughters Maria or Julia. Therein lies the conflict between the two sides of her personality – selfless and selfish.

Ironically, the protagonist is unaware of this conflict within her and never thinks her behaviour to be stimulated by ulterior motives. Instead she convinces herself that her judgment is based on ethical grounds only. She defends her opposition against the staging of *Lovers' Vows* on the grounds that it

... appeared to her ... so totally improper for home representation- the situation of one, and the language of the other, so unfit to be expressed by any woman of modesty ... *(MP, 112).*

Although incapable of perceiving the relationship between her subconscious desires and the self she can see it in the action of others.

Fanny looked on and listened, not amused to observe the selfishness which, more or less disguised, seemed to govern them all ... *(MP, 107).*

To a certain extent Fanny’s behaviour and speeches can be placed in the same plane as Anne’s, but further comparison between the two makes it increasingly clear that she is rather removed from the truly ideal, unadulterated angel that the latter is. Like Anne who is
being treated with too much confidence by all parties, and being too much in the secret of the complaints of each house [Uppercross Cottage and Great house] ... (P, 45-46),

as also of her friends and relatives; Fanny too is

... always a very courteous listener ... came in for the compliments and distresses of most of them. (MP, 133)

Fanny’s activities, apart from whatever little time she spends in the company of books are arranged to be at the beck and call of others, just like Anne. Indeed, Lady Bertram repeats again and again, “I cannot do without Fanny” (MP, 62) and even adds with an emphasis, “but I cannot do without her” (MP, 63). Always ready to be of service either to her aunts or any of her cousins, we find that

... Fanny was up in a moment, expecting some errand, for the habit of employing her in that way. (MP, 119)

Furthermore, her personality and bearing conform to the typical characteristics of an angel woman; we often find her “nearly fainting” (MP, 141), in the habit of “excessive trembling” (MP, 141) and often making an attempt “to collect herself” (MP, 142).

Fanny is not a paradigm of selflessness – despite appearances she has her own opinions but is too shy and frightened to express them. Thus, when Edmund says, “I want to consult. I want your opinion.” (MP, 125) - regarding the play, Fanny is taken by utmost surprise. Her shocked response is - “‘My opinion!’ she cried, shrinking from such a compliment, highly as it gratified her.” (MP, 125) She does not give her opinion on various subjects
as Mary Crawford does. Nonetheless she declines Henry Crawford’s marriage proposal, decides about the play and other matters, although it is done humbly and timidly. Anne and Elinor too, possess an ability to think, but their thoughts have warmth and genial goodness, in opposition to Fanny’s which can be associated with coldness.

It is worth mentioning that not Anne, not Elinor but Fanny alone who has been given an ‘attic’ of her own by Austen. The author informs that she was the mistress of “the little white attic” (MP, 122), in addition to,

The East Room as it had been called ... was now considered Fanny’s, almost as decidedly as the white attic. (MP, 123)

The significance of the ‘attic’ either symbolically or otherwise, in English literature during those times and the following years as manifested in the Gothic works is too well-known. Perhaps, it would not be wrong to surmise that Austen too had suggested a space of one’s own – not just a room or a study in the simple sense – but one where the mind could learn to think independently. It is towards this end that Fanny uses it – she has literally two of them, the white attic and the East Room - but these are liberating spaces unlike the attics in the works of Charlotte Bronte or other Gothic novelists.

For Fanny it is a place that affords her solace and respite, an image that is in striking opposition to the dungeon-like attics where eccentric, mad and ambitious women having lost their minds find themselves trapped in,
with no way of escaping except by death. On the contrary, the attic in Mansfield presents, an

... aspect so favourable, that even without a fire it was habitable ... to such a willing mind as Fanny's ... she hoped not to be driven from it entirely ... The comfort of it in her hours of leisure was extreme. She could go there after anything unpleasant below, and find immediate consolation in some pursuit, or some train of thought at hand. Her plants, her books- ... Every thing was a friend ... and though there had been sometimes much of suffering to her ... so harmonized by distance, that every former affliction had its charm. The room was most dear to her. (MP, 123-24)

Mary Crawford on the other hand, has not been gifted with an attic to brood and ponder over, but she is a foil to Fanny because she is the only woman in this novel who has no hesitation about expressing what she thinks. She is uninhibited and expresses her opinions with such frankness that at times her utterances are unpalatable. Mary, “mostly used to London” (MP, 32) brings along the corrupting influence of the bad city life, to the supposedly pure rural countryside. Austen excels in her characterization, so much so that she appears as the most attractive female character, overshadowing Fanny. In contrast Austen’s insipid characterization of Fanny has drawn severe criticism from readers and critics alike because of the preponderance of her prudishness.

Mary though brilliant in her own rights, is a character who falls somewhere between the human and monster. Her excessive outspokenness in public at times borders on vulgarity, “What gentleman among you am I to have the pleasure of making love to?” (MP, 117) - is unacceptable in any
society. Her overtly sexual comments, her ideas about the church and the clergy are outrageous. She declares in public that “A clergyman is nothing” (MP, 74), and shows little respect for the institution of the church, prayer services etc. The author states that “Mary Crawford was remarkably pretty” with a “lively and pleasant” (MP, 32) nature and possessed “… lively dark eye, clear brown complexion, and general prettiness”, although not “… tall, full formed, and fair … she was most allowably a sweet pretty girl” (MP, 34). Further, Mary “seriously” thinks that “Matrimony was her object, provided she could marry well” (MP, 33) and unabashedly declares, “I am not at all ashamed of it … every body should marry as soon as they can do it to advantage” (MP, 34).

Unlike Goethe’s heroine, Anne or Fanny, Mary is a woman of the world, and has no hesitation about declaring it. She is forthright about the mercenary designs in marriage deals, nor does she behave like a hypocrite regarding other matters. On the other hand, the seemingly angelic Fanny often behaves like a hypocrite. She professes to be happy, subdued, grateful and content, when we actually find her envious, critical and the biggest pretender in the novel. Thus, when the occupants of Mansfield were facing shame and distress owing to Maria’s elopement and Tom’s almost fatal illness, Fanny alone, was capable of feeling disgustingly joyful.
She was, she felt she was, in the greatest danger of being exquisitely happy, while so many were miserable. The evil [Maria’s elopement with Henry] which brought such good to her. (MP, 361)

Mary Crawford makes no attempt to hide herself behind a facade. She is adept at the techniques of seducing men and makes no endeavour to hide it. Instead like a siren she beautifully plays the harp and successfully seduces Edmund:

A young woman, pretty, lively, with a harp as elegant as herself; and both placed near the window, cut down to the ground, and opening on a little lawn, ... was enough to catch any man’s heart. (MP, 52)

Therefore, though often,

Edmund was sorry to hear Miss Crawford [speak so outspokenly], whom he was much disposed to admire ... It did not suit his sense of propriety, and he was silenced, till induced by further smiles and liveliness, to put the matter by. (MP, 46)

Instead, Edmund with all “his sincerity, his steadiness, his integrity” (MP, 53) makes concessions for Mary to Fanny, by defending her behaviour as “The right of a lively mind” (MP, 51), and emphasizes that “She is perfectly feminine” (MP, 52) - signifying the influence she has over him. Interestingly Edmund’s speech goes on to manifest the qualities that men conventionally associate with femininity – which are, “nothing sharp, or loud, or coarse” either in countenance or manner, “untinctured by ill humour or roughness” (MP, 52).

Mary however, is not only “sharp”, “loud” but also has a scathing sense of humour – contrary to what Edmund has to say under her influence.
Though definitely not angelic, one nonetheless cannot ignore that it is she who comes to Fanny's rescue with genuine good humour and kindness when she is slighted by others and particularly ill-treated by Mrs. Norris because she refuses to oblige her cousins and the Crawfords by acting in the play. At that moment it was Miss Crawford who,

moved away her chair to ... the table close to Fanny, saying to her in a kind low whisper ... 'Never mind, my dear Miss Price-this is a cross evening,-everybody is cross and teasing-but do not let us mind them'; and with pointed attention continued to talk to her and endeavour to raise her spirits, in spite of being out of spirits herself.-By a look at her brother, she prevented any further entreaty from the theatrical board. (MP, 120)

Such genuine selfless act of goodness, without drawing the least attention to her actions is rarely seen even when it comes to Fanny. Significantly Mary here thinks of others at a time when she herself is feeling low.

It is such gestures as this that blur the distinction between a selfless pale angel and the attractive semi-monster woman. This point to the possibility of interchanging the two reverse virtues that adds to the difficulty of maintaining the distinctions between the two. In appearance, vitality, vigour of life and actions Mary appears to be the monster woman, but how do we explain the softness in her, the good and selflessness that surface occasionally? It is this that makes her neither completely a monster, nor an angel, while she does not even belong to the type of the humans like Elizabeth or Emma. Importantly, unlike the monster women who often
resort to disguise, acting, and hide their true selves behind a mask, Mary does none of these. Where angelic Fanny can be accused of a high degree of hypocrisy and acting, Mary might act in a theatrical, but refuses to do so in real life. This accounts for her outspokenness, though its vulgarity is not excusable. Mary Crawford, perhaps more than any of Austen’s female characters, signifies most strongly the blur between the angel and the monster, selflessness and selfishness.

It is through Fanny and Mrs. Norris that Austen brings out a connecting link between the angel and the monster. Fanny and Mrs. Norris may seem poles apart but are very similar in so far as their use of selfless behaviour serves as a vehicle for securing authority and power in the form of importance and indispensability to others. *Mansfield Park* abounds with instances of the aunt and niece’s endeavour to dedicate their lives for the comfort of others. Indeed, it is in this urge to be of service that they are engaged in an unacknowledged competition, with prospects of rewards for the one who excels in this art. The reward will be Sir Thomas’ appreciation which in turn will strengthen their position in the household.

Mrs. Norris’s real selfish nature behind the façade of selflessness is exposed over and over again through her speeches, her neglect and mistreatment of Fanny and her response to the various incidents that unfold in the narrative. We find her bustling with life, activity and spirit, more than
anyone else within the grounds of Mansfield. Austen caustically remarks about her,

... trying to be in a bustle without having any thing to bustle about, and labouring to be important where nothing was wanted but tranquility and silence. (MP, 144)

When Sir Thomas returns safely from Antigua without prior announcement she feels let down instead of joy

... by the manner of his return. It had left her nothing to do ... Mrs. Norris felt herself defrauded of an office ... whether his arrival or his death were to be the thing unfolded ... (MP, 144).

Her need to be important through service to the Bertram household is an obsession which obliterates all considerations of right and wrong.

With Mrs. Norris the appearance of selflessness was all pretence while with Fanny it was a genuine attempt. With Mrs. Norris her selflessness was a means to an end, that is, to acquire power and authority, but with Fanny it was an end in itself that is to please Sir Thomas. Nonetheless, their selflessness can be construed as an outcome of their selfishness.

Austen's ironic attitude becomes unsparring and pungent when it comes to characters like that of Mrs. Norris, the interfering aging aunt. The same attitude is displayed against similar women characters in Sanditon. Monster women like Mrs. Norris endeavour to employ their intelligence and imagination in plotting and planning to outwit men to get what they want—authority. Some of them like her and the Parker sisters go on to become
masters in this art, because for them achievement lay in getting what they wanted by tricking the men who controlled their lives. It was survival in an unequal world.

In *Sanditon* her incomplete novel, Austen directs her irony and sarcasm against similar women characters but with a difference for it reveals a new depth and breath of comic insight of the author. In the case of Mrs. Norris the irony is bitter, scathing and totally unsparing, but when it comes to the two Parker sisters, the bitterness and gall is toned down for the author emphasizes more on the element of the ridiculous, where they are treated as eccentric creatures. These following lines sum up the author's treatment of them:

Disorders and Recoveries so very much out of the common way, seemed more like the amusement of eager Minds in want of employment than of actual afflictions and relief. The Parkers, were no doubt a family of Imagination and quick feelings ... (*S* in *NA* vol., 365).

The first impression of the Parker sisters is formed through the words of their brother:

They have wretched health ... are subject to a variety of very serious Disorders ... they know [not] what a day's health is; - and at the same time, they are such excellent useful Women and have so much energy of Character that, where any Good is to be done, they force themselves on exertions which to those who do not thoroughly know them, have an extraordinary appearance. – But there is really no affection about them. They have only weaker constitutions and stronger minds than are often met with ... (*S* in *NA* vol., 340-41).
But Mr. Parker's remark connects two things – selflessness with weak health – the essential characteristic of the angel women. Austen comments on this behaviour,

The whole of their mental vivacity was not so employed [in sickness]; Part was laid out in a Zeal for being useful. – It should seem that they must either be very busy for the Good of others, or else extremely ill themselves. (S in NA vol., 365)

Whereas, the angel women genuinely possess these qualities, the monster women too attempt to display them, using them as a convenient mask to hide their real nature. In the case of Diana and Susan Parker they do it so well and for so long that it convinces themselves and those gullible enough to believe them.

Although the fate of the two ageing spinsters Diana and Susan remains unknown, because Sanditon remains incomplete and unedited owing to Jane Austen's death, the author's treatment of them is quite in line with Mrs. Norris. Diana Parker, more than her sister, is officious and irritating as the Aunt at Mansfield, but certainly appears less of a monster character since she has lesser potential to harm and has been portrayed less bitterly. The more dominating older sister Miss Diana Parker is clearly conceived as a figure of satire. The Parker sisters like Mrs. Norris are equally lacking in rational, self-critical powers of mind. Women like them throughout the eighteenth century and beyond, held on to such a simplistic notion of female 'usefulness' in which intelligence and common sense
played no part. Had they the comprehensive education like men or been fully employed, persons like Diana Parker and Mrs. Norris might have turned out to be different persons. Austen endorses this view when she suggests that the "... want of employment" (S in NA vol., 365) is the cause of such behaviour.

This constant drawing of attention to their health, can be interpreted in the same way as Mary Musgrove resorts to it for want of an employment and to attract the attention of the men folk in Persuasion. Austen through these characters not only discredited such tactics, but also made it clear that she was no admirer of physical weakness, ill-health or ignorance in young women. Diana and Susan Parker like Mary Musgrove are far from sick; their's is more of a psychosomatic illness to attract attention. However, feminist critics argue that sickness in women, particularly headache, can be triggered off by suppression and can be the side effect of the restrictions that society imposes on women. Gilbert and Gubar hold,

> Given this socially conditioned epidemic of female illness, it is not surprising to find that the angel in the house of literature frequently suffered not just from fear and trembling but from literal and figurative sickness unto death ... suffers from migraine headaches. Implying ruthless self-suppression, does the "eternal feminine" necessarily imply illness ...

Whether Jane Austen was aware of such implications or was convinced by it cannot be ascertained, for she shows little sympathy and instead mocks at such malingering characters. Fanny's frailty and headaches
however, have been treated sympathetically and without irony by the author. But social scientists argue that patriarchal socialization literally makes women physically and mentally sick. Hysteria, anorexia, bulimia, claustrophobia, agoraphobia (as in Fanny Price and Anne Elliot), headache (as in Fanny and Mary Musgrove) were particularly frequent with women, as was crippling rheumatoid arthritis found in middle-aged housewives (Mrs. Smith). There was also the popular misconception in circulation that most of them were caused by the female reproductive system. But modern studies have shown that these diseases were often caused because of their habitual docility and submissiveness perpetrated by patriarchy, whereby they were taught to renounce their pursuit after pleasure and self-assertion.

However, it is an established truth that Austen’s contemporary, the famous gothic novelist, author of *Castle Rackrent* and one of the most popular and influential writers of her times, Maria Edgeworth suffered from chronic headaches. This is believed owing to suppression and submission to her dominating father Richard Lovell Edgeworth, who had an overbearing egotism, was an Enlightenment Theorist and had fathered twenty-two children by four wives. Maria Edgeworth was the third of twenty-two and the daughter of the wife most completely neglected. She tried to gain attention and approval of her father through her writing. This analogy could be extended to the relationship between Fanny and Sir Thomas.
Sanditon besides the Parker sisters, presents another character in a similar context, though in comparison to the sisters she appears to be only a peripheral character. Nonetheless, this character, Clara Brereton is more full of intrigue, therefore, more interesting. She is a poor niece and a companion to Lady Denham – like Fanny – who appears to be perfect in her disposition and manners, that she can be almost categorized as another Fanny Price. Mr. Parker describes her,

... to be lovely, amiable, gentle, unassuming, conducting herself uniformly with great good sense, and evidently gaining by her innate worth, on the affections of her Patroness. (S in NA vol., 334)

On her first meeting with Clara, even Charlotte is thoroughly impressed by her –

Charlotte thought she had never beheld a more lovely, or more Interesting young woman … could see in her only the most perfect representation of whatever Heroine might be most beautiful and bewitching … (S in NA vol., 346).

It is not surprising that with qualities like ‘Interesting’ and ‘bewitching’ – monster-like qualities at that - she soon becomes a companion to Lady Denham. In her relationship with Sir Edward too, she is very circumspect in public but is capable of making herself attractive to him in private away from the gaze of others, and protected by the mist at the foot of the banks. Charlotte, who recognizes this subterfuge however, expresses sympathy, “… hers was a situation which must not be judged with severity …” (S in NA vol., 378). But this raises certain doubts about her integrity. By then
though Clara had come to occupy such favour with Lady Denham that it was the general expectation that she would, "... be the very companion who would guide and soften Lady D. – who would enlarge her mind and open her hand ..." (S in *NA* vol., 335). The irony of Clara becoming “worthy of trust” (S in *NA* vol., 335) is highlighted by Austen.

Lady Denham’s position, with the additional power that she wields in the absence of her husband, makes her a figure who occupies the place of patriarchy. She assumes the role of a patriarch, carries out the same functions, duties and responsibilities and wields as much power and authority, in spite of being a woman. In order to influence such a person who possesses all these, one needs to be more than clever. Through this cunning which was very skillfully veiled behind a carefully ‘acted out’ front Clara was able to win over Lady Denham’s approval and thus, avoid a situation where she could have been “ill-used” (S in *NA* vol., 346).

It is apparent that an integral part of her pleasing manners is her seemingly selfless service to her patroness like the way Mrs. Clay is seen doing to Sir Walter and Mr. Elliot in *Persuasion*. Clara like her appears to be adept in the art of pleasing. Just as Mrs. Clay’s reward could have been her marriage to Mr. Elliot, Clara too - one might surmise since this novel is incomplete - could acquire a handsome share of Lady Denham’s riches and could become the wife of Sir Edward.
Characters like Mrs. Clay and Clara survive by their pretence of a selfless attitude, their dedication to the comfort of others, and their clever disguise of their deep-rooted desire for wealth and status and all the power and authority associated with it. They seem to be compelled to do it because of their poverty and dependence, lack of a suitable education which could have otherwise found them in a more respectable employment. But in the patriarchal society they were given an education that made them dependent on others. Therefore, their actions can be attributed to their ambition to overcome this constraint and acquire some measure of power and authority.

The characters studied so far in the context of selfishness and selflessness fall under the category of the angel and the monster characters. Elizabeth Bennet of *Pride and Prejudice* has been chosen because she seems to embody all the qualities that make her the most human among the characters who have been placed in this category. In all her dealings within the family and outside Elizabeth is free from all pretence and speaks her mind freely although it does have the potential to occasionally hurt someone without intending to. Her actions at Netherfield come directly from the heart, with no intention whatsoever of attracting Darcy’s attention, nor pleasing anyone else. On the contrary till the first half of the novel she made no conscious effort to please him. At Rosings she emphasizes this,

> "I have never desired your good opinion, and you have certainly bestowed it most unwillingly ..." (*PP*, 169),
when Darcy proposes marriage to her. Whereas, even Elinor and Anne attempt to hide their true emotions and sentiments at times from others, which can be termed as ‘sensibility’, Elizabeth alone makes no such endeavour at pretence. If she is good to someone it is without any hidden intentions or ulterior motives. She has the courage and ability to turn down an offer as when she refuses to dance with Darcy in spite of several requests by him. She even rejects his wedding proposal as she had Mr. Collins’s.

Even with her dealings with formidable characters like Lady Catherine she displays this forthrightness. Though she herself is indifferent to Lady Catherine and at times disparages her in private she realizes that family relationships must be respected. Therefore, it is seen that it is owing to Elizabeth’s genuine efforts and goodness of heart that Darcy and his aunt are reconciled.

But at length, by Elizabeth’s persuasion, he was prevailed on to overlook the offence, and seek a reconciliation … (PP, 345).

The fact that Elizabeth was instrumental in bringing about this reconciliation is ironic, because Lady Catherine herself was opposed to her marriage to Darcy. Yet through this gesture Elizabeth’s goodness of heart and the absence of any ulterior motive in her actions are revealed. This in a sense can be termed as an example of selflessness.
However, there is another side to Elizabeth’s personality which makes her as fallible as any human being – most of the time she thinks highly of her own intelligence and believes that there are few who understand human character as well as herself. The truth however is that she is quite prejudiced. Although she sees herself as “a studier of character” (PP, 37) she proves very wrong in her understanding of complex personalities like that of Wickham and Darcy. By her own admissions, “Yes; but intricate characters are the most amusing…” (PP, 37).

On the other hand, she misunderstands Darcy and accuses him of cruelty towards Wickham,

‘You have reduced him to his present state of poverty, ... You have withheld the advantages, which you must know to have been designed for him. You have deprived the best years of his life, ...’ (PP, 171).

But her accusations do not end here,

‘From the very beginning, from the first moment I may almost say, of my acquaintance with you, your manners impressing me with the fullest belief of your arrogance, your conceit, and your selfish disdain of the feelings of others, were such as to form that ground-work of disapprobation, on which succeeding events have built so immovable a dislike; ...’ (PP, 172).

‘Succeeding events’ that shortly follow instead make her clearly see that she is fooled, compelling her to revise her reading of some characters like Wickham for whom she had earlier great liking, trust and compassion. But he elopes with her sister proving her wrong in judging his character. But it is
her ability to acknowledge her mistakes and try to rectify herself that makes her so appealingly a human character.

A part of her attractiveness even for Darcy lies in her genuine selflessness. In the end of the novel when Elizabeth playfully questions him about the moment when he fell in love with her – "... but what could set you off in the first place?" (PP, 337), he although unable to pin point the exact moment, does make mention of two things which attracted his attention. They were "... the liveliness of your [Elizabeth's] mind ..." and the "... good in your affectionate behaviour to Jane, while she was ill at Netherfield", that revealed to him the "actual good" (PP, 338) signifying her truly selfless behaviour. The former adds to her charming appeal that captivates Darcy, and the latter constitutes her genuine worth as a human being that he recognizes, admires and loves. Darcy despite all his faults of pride and arrogance is among those few Austenian characters who is able to recognize, respect and appreciate genuine acts of kindness and unselfish behaviour. His choice of Elizabeth is not based on the normal expectations of men in his society but out of a true perception of her worth as a good human being.

In Jane Austen, the concept of selfishness and selflessness are intricately connected to the acquisition of power and authority in a patriarchal society. However, the rewards are often not what they are
expected to be. Thus, the truly selfless characters like Anne and Elinor get less than they actually deserve, whereas, the less deserving ones like Lady Catherine and Lady Denham gets much more. The only exception is Elizabeth Bennet when she is rewarded with what she deserves. Mary Crawford on the other hand, suffers a fate which seems to be unjustified. As for the fate of Mrs. Norris, though justifiable, seems to have come too late. The realism of Austen’s works does not always allow good to win over evil nor are the angel and human characters made victorious over the monster characters. There is no approbation of selfish characters and their behaviour which ultimately determines their fate. But it must be noted that Austen goes beyond mere disapproval and probes into the reasons why some of these characters were made to behave in such a manner. She puts much of the blame on the patriarchal society which made women dependent on men - socially, financially and legally. In order to survive in such a circumscribed world many of Austen’s women characters are seen to adopt means such as overt selflessness as in the angel characters and selfishness cunningly disguised as selflessness as in the monster characters. Such behaviour is motivated by their conscious desire to acquire patriarchal approval or by their deliberate or unintentional attempt to get as much of power and authority within the patriarchal set-up. It is in this sense that the two opposite concepts centering around the ‘self’ are interchangeable as
virtues or vices. It is only in human characters like Elizabeth, Emma and Marianne where such an analysis seems to be inapplicable.
Notes

1 Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Wilhelm Meister's Travels*, n. pag., online, 

2 G and G 57.

3 G and G 25.

4 Kirkham 102.

5 G and G 55.