Chapter 3

JANE AUSTEN : QUEST FOR MORAL AUTONOMY

Jane Austen is traditionally considered to be an unambiguous writer who accepted the order and stability of society confirming in the process the norms of patriarchy. Jane Austen's novels have been dismissed by feminist critics because of their conventional endings. But her real concern is the way the events prepare the female protagonists for the business of living. She wrote at a time when patriarchy was taken for granted. For instance, Valerie Shaw calls her "a cool, rational comedienne of manners who delineates social surfaces and measures comic aberrations against the stable moral norms of a civilisation in whose values she has supreme confidence." Obviously, such a view rests easily in externals.

Jane Austen's women are at the bottom rung of a patriarchal hierarchy with a male master at the top, hawk-like looking for any transgression of authority. Such a system flourished on unfair property laws where women were mere "pawns in the game of expansion and acquisition." Constant references to money and property in Jane Austen's novels manifest her concern with the unfairness of authoritarian property laws. In the absence of a male heir, the widow and the daughters are displaced. Jane Austen links women's vulnerability not so
much to female weaknesses as to their lack of economic rights.

That Jane Austen is a classic is indubitable. She fascinates her readers with her lovable characters, lively wit and deep ironic vision. She will survive as long as the institution of marriage exists in all civilized societies and search for eligible boys for marriageable girls continues. According to Lewes, Jane Austen,

...will doubtless be read as long as English novels find readers....Nothing that is really good can fail, at last, in securing its audience; and it is evident that Miss Austen's works must possess elements of indestructible excellence, since although never 'popular' she survives writers who were very popular.³

Similarly, David Nokes observes:

In the stock exchange of literary reputations Jane Austen is a blue chip name. Dickens may fluctuate as Galsworthy tumbles and Aphra Behn soars, but Austen remains as solid an investment as Coca Cola or Levi Jeans.⁴

The common view of Jane Austen as a novelist of manners undermines her subtle and original portrayal of her heroines. Modern feminist critics are put off by old-fashioned conventions and the significance given to marriage in Jane Austen's novels. Marriage for Jane Austen does not mean woman's subordination. Rather it represents an emotional and intellectual union of two adults leading to real marital bliss. Women's identity instead of being subsumed is recognized and respected. The social and moral codes of Jane Austen's time laid a
definite pattern for a woman. Inspite of the patriarchal nature of society, a major change in the sensibility and sensitivity had begun to take place. Jane Austen was deeply influenced by Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* published in 1792, which reflected her ideas on feminine rationality, status of women in society, their education and marriage. The similarity between Jane Austen and Mary Wollstonecraft has made Margaret Kirkham remark that, they were heirs to "a common tradition of feminist development." Being sensitive to the controversial social environment around her and also realizing the drawbacks suffered by women in her society, Jane Austen placed more emphasis on female characters in her novels. The accomplishments of women in the eighteenth century were restricted to dancing, playing the piano, painting etc. in which no intellectual pursuits were involved. They were expected to restrain their natural desires and wishes and to excel only in one art — to attract eligible bachelors with fortune and marry them. All of Jane Austen's young heroines are engaged in debunking this game of love and intrigues.

In this context Andrew H. Wright remarks are relevant:

> Jane Austen's characters are instruments of a profound vision: she laughs at man, but only because she takes him seriously; examines humanity closely, but the more she perceives the less she understands — or perhaps one had better say, the more she understands, the more is she perplexed by the contradictions which she finds. She has what Vivas 'calls a conception of the total personality.'

This is a profound comment on the way Jane Austen understood the contradictions
in human nature and relationships. The prevalent notion about Romanticism and Sentimentalism so commonly found in Richardson's works had no impact on Jane Austen. She formulated her own ideas and views and felt that tales should have a moral. She abhorred romanticised characters living in idealized conditions and made them into practical and down-to-earth beings. She felt that the mind must govern the heart. Her heroines like Emma Woodhouse and Catherine Morland exhibit a gradual progression from a state of naivety to rational maturity. Jane Austen's moral vision has been rightly appreciated by Walter Allen who remarks:

_Miss Austen was a highly sophisticated artist. That her life was retired is quite beside the point. Because her subject matter is in a sense trivial—it stated very superficially, it is always a young woman's finding a husband—it must not blind us to the fact that she is, with Doctor Johnson the most forthright moralist._

Thus quite a large majority of critics of English novel, and they are a legion, such as Mary Lascelles, Marvin Mudrick and D.W. Harding, while analysing Jane Austen's structural excellence, style, moral concerns and ironic vision tended to shy away from the fact of her femininity. Even women critics like Barbara Hardy and Marilyn Butler preferred not to emphasize her femaleness because she unquestioningly accepted patriarchal values.

But there has been a considerable shift in critical opinion after the publication of the influential book by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, _The Mad Woman in the Attic_ (1979). The journal _Woman and Literature_ (formerly _Mary_
Wollstonecraft Newsletter) brought out a special issue on Jane Austen in 1982 (edited by Janet Todd) and in 1983 Margaret Kirkham's Jane Austen: Feminism and Fiction, placed her right in the mainstream of the intellectual tradition of Enlightenment feminism that began in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries with Mary Astell and continued until the French Revolution culminating in the works of Mary Wollstonecraft.8

Jane Austen knew well the sorry plight of young women in the late-eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. They had no choice but to live with their families until their marriage. But it was an arduous task to enter the marriage market without sufficient money. Middle-class women were in a bind as they could not undertake any menial work without the fear of loss of their good name and reputation. The portals of universities were closed for women. That is why most of the women who had to fend for themselves became governesses. They were at least assured of the basic necessities of food and shelter. Though such women lived with the family their position was scarcely better than servants. Teaching in a school or working as a governess were the only options open to decent women. The plight of a governess is the subject of most of the novels written by women in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Mr Kinghtley in Emma feels bad for Emma's governess Miss Bates, "she has sunk from the comforts she was born to; and if she live to old age, must probably sink more."9 Knightley's comment stresses dire financial and material straits of Miss Bates.
Like Fanny Burney, Jane Austen was acutely aware of the great ideological debate about the education, place and status of women in society at the end of the eighteenth century. In a very subtle manner, Jane Austen wove these strands into the fabric of her fiction and questioned the gender based gamut of relationships. According to Rousseau, men are the *raison-d'-etre* of women’s life. Rousseau's statement that "woman is framed particularly for the pleasure of man" had drained all meaning from woman’s life. Her sole objective was to allure man. This provocative statement finds its rejoinder in Elizabeth Bennet’s refusal of Mr Collin’s marriage proposal in *Pride and Prejudice*. Jane Austen, like Mary Wollstonecraft believed in the rationality and moral autonomy of women. *Pride and Prejudice* exposes confrontation between two ideologies of marriage and two conflicting views about women. Mr Collins cannot believe Elizabeth’s rejection of him and interprets it as her "wish of increasing [his] love by suspense according to the usual practice of elegant females." Elizabeth's reply "Do not consider me now as an elegant female intending to plague you, but as a rational creature speaking the truth from her heart," indicates the dilemma of intelligent women. Jane Austen was aware of the views of thinkers and philosophers who stressed the importance of reason in human behaviour. But in respect of women’s education and ideals of feminine behaviour, society followed double standards. All Jane Austen’s novels present the deep-seated contradiction between the rational norm in the eighteenth century society and the standards which women were expected to follow.

The question of women’s education was one of the burning issues of
Jane Austen's time. Catherine Macaulay Graham pleaded for a regular formal education on rational lines. According to her, "when the sex has been taught wisdom by education, they will be glad to give up indirect influence for rational privileges." Mary Wollstonecraft in *Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792) argued that women should have proper education so that they would not have to resort to indirect and artful means to gain power over men. She condemned the conduct book writers for being more anxious to fashion "alluring mistresses than affectionate wives and rational mothers." This was in total contrast to the orthodox views held by the likes of the Earl of Chesterfield who saw women as "children of a larger growth." Hannah More too, in the next decade echoed similar views to prove that logic and abstract thought were foreign to women. She also spoke of the 'porcelain clay' of which women are made:

*Greater delicacy evidently implies greater fragility; and the weakness, natural and moral, clearly points out the necessity of a superior degree of caution, retirement and reserve.... They find their protection in their weakness and their safety in their delicacy.*

While rationality and individuality were the leading concepts, the writers of conduct books were exhorting women to display their weakness and frailty as their most attractive features to tempt men. Jane Austen understood the irrelevance of such ideas, which were meant not to make women individuals but only to secure husbands for the sake of a spurious identity and status. According to Meenakshi Mukherjee,
Through her creation of several robust and forthright heroines (Catherine Morland, Elizabeth Bennet, Emma Woodhouse), her negative representation of affected women who exploit their weakness to gain power (Isabella Thorpe, Louisa Musgrove, Miss Bingley) .... Jane Austen contributed to a continuing debate about frailty and cunning as necessary feminine characteristics and part of woman's legitimate Armoury. 18

Obviously, Jane Austen took a radical stand as far as the question of women's education was concerned. She broke away from the stereotype frail and weak heroine entirely dependent on man. Elizabeth Bennet is independent, unaffected and intelligent. By walking through the muddy countryside to see her sick sister, she throws to the four winds all codes of female propriety. Catherine Morland too, symbolises rejection of the standard notions of femininity in Northanger Abbey which is a scathing satire on Gothic Romance. She preferred rough boys' games to elegant occupation such as watering a rose-bush or feeding a canary. "She was moreover noisy and wild, hated confinement and cleanliness, and loved nothing so well in the world as rolling down the green slope at the back of the house." 19 She does not pine and swoon like the heroine of the novels of sensibility, but takes a hearty meal and has sound sleep. She is a picture of physical energy and spontaneity and provides a fitting contrast to affected and cunning Isabella Thorpe, a husband hunter. This shows Jane Austen's stand in favour of female autonomy, eschewing romantic fantasies.

Jane Austen provides contrasts between vitality and sense and debility and sentiment, though in a subtle manner, in Pride and Prejudice between
Elizabeth Bennet and Miss Bingley, in *Persuasion* between Anne Elliot and Louisa Musgrove and between Elinor Dashwood and Lucy Steele in *Sense and Sensibility*. Elizabeth Bennet reads a book not to attract Darcy and win his approval like Miss Bingley, who pretends to dislike dance as Darcy does not like it. Elizabeth Bennet, Emma Woodhouse and Catherine Morland enjoy robust health as opposed to delicate fore-runners like Pamela, Clarissa and other female protagonists prone to fainting fits. Out of these three Jane Austen heroines, only Elizabeth is a complete individual and is closest to the feminist ideal of an independent woman. She does not need a man to complete her. Jane Austen lays great stress on physical health and makes it an imperative of emotional strength. Even modern feminists will not fail to appreciate Jane Austen for creating heroines with their own individuality who do not exist only for men's pleasure.

Jane Austen anticipated feminism by condemning sexual and moral double standards. Three of her heroines, Anne Elliot in *Persuasion*, Elinor Dashwood in *Sense and Sensibility* and Fanny Price in *Mansfield Park* challenge the patriarchal order. And as Mary Evans points out it is "an explicitly feminist assertion of the rights of women to self-determination."20 A recurrent theme of Jane Austen's novels is the heroine's resistance to the patriarchal social mores which curb her individuality. Jane Austen's concern is woman as an individual and her inter-action with other individuals.

For many contemporary feminists, Jane Austen's novels have neither interest nor place in feminist tradition as she accepts hetero-sexual marriage. But as
Margaret Kirkham has cogently argued:

*Jane Austen's heroines are not self-conscious feminists, yet they are all exemplary of the first claim of Enlightenment feminism: that women share the same moral nature as men, ought to share the same moral status, and exercise the same responsibility for their own conduct.*

Jane Austen's singular contribution to feminism is in making her heroines strive for moral autonomy. Being a realist, she was aware of the hazards on the way. Like Fanny Burney, Jane Austen is not concerned with abstractions. She relates women's aspirations to sexual politics of micro-economics and laws governing property and inheritance.

*Jane Austen's very first novel Sense and Sensibility poignantly portrays the displacement of Mrs Dashwood and her three daughters Elinor, Marianne and Margaret from their home, Norland Park after the death of Mr Henry Dashwood. Like Fanny Burney, Jane Austen had scant regard for the whims of the old men in making their bequest. Mrs and Mr Henry Dashwood along with their three daughters had given the old man solid comforts and love for ten long years. But after his death, he entailed his estate for the benefit of his great-grandson who had charmed the old man on his occasional visits to his parents, Mr and Mrs John Dashwood.*

*In the behaviour of John Dashwood towards his step-mother and sisters, Jane Austen evokes the power of women to guide and manipulate men.*
Though women are not the lawful possessors of estate, they wield a considerable power in its management. 'Narrow-minded and selfish' Mrs John Dashwood successfully prevails upon her 'cold hearted' husband not to do anything for his sisters and mother. After Mr Henry's funeral, Mrs John Dashwood installs herself as the mistress while relegating the former inhabitants to the condition of visitors and her condescending manner forces them to leave their home. Their melancholy resonates in this extract:

Many were the tears shed by them in their last adieus to a place so much beloved. 'Dear, dear Norland!' said Marianne, as she wandered alone before the house, on the last evening of their being there, 'when shall I cease to regret you!' — when learn to feel a home elsewhere! — Oh! happy house, could you know what I suffer in now viewing you from this spot, from whence perhaps I may view you no more!'

Their calm acquiescence in their plight is construed as a statement on the frequency and ordinariness of this occurrence. Death of the patriarch invariably led to impoverishment and homelessness. The agonising experience of Mrs Henry Dashwood and her daughters is the main reason of Jane Austen's laying it thick on property, money and marriage. A wise father by bestowing on his daughter a reasonable dowry could ensure a favourable settlement for her. Significantly, both Elinor and Marianne, in the absence of paternal and fraternal patronage are seduced and betrayed by Edward and Willoughby respectively though, Elinor's faith in Edward is redeemed ultimately. The significance of the title lies in their manner of coping with their vicissitudes.
The title of the novel *Sense and Sensibility* has been commonly analyzed to reduce the two sisters from complete human beings to abstract traits. A careful and unbiased reading of the novel unravels not anti-thesis but the over-lapping of various attributes. Elinor is not Lady Sensible nor is Marianne senseless Sensibility. At the very outset, Jane Austen points out the likeness between Elinor and Marianne along with the qualifying clause:

> Marianne's abilities were, in many respects, quite equal to Elinor's. She was sensible and clever; but eager in everything; her sorrows, her joys could have no moderation. She was generous, amiable, interesting: she was everything but prudent. The resemblance between her and her mother was strikingly great. [23]

This excess of sensibility in her seventeen year old sister was perceived with great concern by Elinor.

> Elinor... possessed a strength of understanding, and coolness of judgement... She had an excellent heart; — her disposition was affectionate, and her feelings were strong; but she knew how to govern them... [24]

Elinor and Marianne are the best of friends and share common interests and a kind and amiable disposition. Andrew H.Wright characterizes Elinor and Marianne as, "twin heroines, each embodying a mode of existence which is desirable, but each of which contradicts the other." [25]

> Jane Austen extols neither sense nor sensibility but advocates a
blend of the two. This idea of 'a double heroine' is endorsed by Mansell, who anchors the central consciousness of the novel both in Elinor and Marianne.

Neither of these dispositions ever quite cancels out the other in the course of the novel. The two sisters merely converge on an imaginary point somewhere between them. This would be the ideal 'heroine' of the novel: a heroine who could never exist in this, or Jane Austen's, imperfect world; and who would perfectly reconcile what neither of the Dashwood sisters alone ever quite does.26

Mansell identifies Eliza Williams as the epitome of 'unalloyed sensibility', and Lucy Steele, of 'unalloyed sense'.27 Elinor's intensity of feelings comes to the fore in defence of Edward who lacked,

...and his manners required intimacy to make them pleasing. He was too diffident to do justice to himself; but when his natural shyness was overcome, his behaviour gave every indication of an open affectionate heart. His understanding was good, and his education had given it solid improvement. But he was neither fitted by abilities nor disposition to answer the wishes of his mother and sister, who longed to see him distinguished - as they hardly knew what.28

This calm and composed Elinor is provoked by Willoughby and Marianne to 'saucily' defend Col. Brandon. Elinor is extremely critical of Marianne and Willoughby who boast of their antipathy towards Col. Brandon without any restraint. Marianne pronounces her verdict emphatically, "he has neither genius, taste, nor spirit...his understanding has no brilliancy, his feelings no ardour, and his voice no expression."29 Elinor retorts to this:
'You decide on his imperfections so much in the mass,' replied Elinor, 'and so much on the strength of your own imagination, that the commendation I am able to give of him is comparatively cold and insipid. I can only pronounce him to be a sensible man, well-bred, well informed, of gentle address, and I believe possessing an amiable heart.'

Elinor's spirited defence of Edward and Col. Brandon should be of particular interest to feminists in its belittling of the macho image in favour of the sensitive man. Women cannot live in isolation. Even emancipated women have to inter-act with men. Only a sensitive man can understand and respond to the aspirations of a woman. Significantly, all the 'good' men who ultimately marry Jane Austen's heroines lack the polish and captivating manner of suave dilettantes like Willoughby. Jane Austen's shattering of the macho-image is a great step forward. The novelist has very little regard for Willoughby's "manly beauty and more than common gracefulness."  

Jane Austen is at her ironical best in the portrayal of Willoughby and Marianne. She scathingly lambasts the romantic syndrome of knight in armour and damsel in distress. Marianne is captivated by Willoughby's gallantry.

"His person and air were equal to what her fancy had ever drawn for the hero of a favourite story; and in his carrying her into the house with so little previous formality, there was a rapidity of thought which particularly recommended the action to her. Every circumstance belonging to him was interesting. His name was good, his residence was in their favourite village, and soon she found out that of all manly dresses a shooting - jacket was the most..."
becoming. Her imagination was busy, her reflections were pleasant, and the pain of a sprained ankle was disregarded.\textsuperscript{32}

Willoughby charms Marianne because of his exuberance that knows "no moderation."\textsuperscript{33} This propensity for 'no moderation' proves to be Marianne's tragic flaw. To give due credit to Marianne's sense, she is at pains to know of Willoughby's "pursuits, his talents and genius" as well as "his manners on more intimate acquaintance."\textsuperscript{34} Irony is complete when Willoughby described by the youngest sister, Margaret as "Marianne's preserver"\textsuperscript{35} destroys the "domestic idyll"\textsuperscript{36} of Dashwoods by his betrayal which nearly kills Marianne.

In dwelling on Elinor's censure of Willoughby's "propensity ... of saying too much what he thought on every occasion, without attention to persons or circumstances"\textsuperscript{37} Jane Austen examines the issue of intimacy and reserve. All her novels resonate with the significance of 'inner space' for the development of an individual's personality. This inner space can be guaranteed only through reserve. But reserve for Jane Austen is distinct from self-centredness and does not preclude responsiveness. It enables Elinor to withstand bereavement, sorrow, adversity, humiliation, her sister's illness, disappointment in love and even fulfillment in love. Elinor is able to keep up the \textit{facade} of politeness with her brother, even when she is annoyed or hurt. She can put up with grave provocation as is evident from her interaction with Lucy. But Elinor is neither a hypocrite nor a dissembler, only an amiable and pleasant person. Nowhere in the novel, she tries to be self-righteous. Her imperfect human state is revealed in her mis-apprehension of character.
‘I have frequently detected myself in such kind of mistakes,’ said Elinor, ‘in a total misapprehension of character in some point or other: fancying people so much more gay or grave, or ingenious or stupid than they really are, and I can hardly tell why or in what the deception originated. Sometimes one is guided by what they say of themselves, and very frequently by what other people say of them, without giving oneself time to deliberate and judge.’

The observation proves to be quite prophetic in the light of Lucy's disclosure of her secret engagement with Edward. Elinor betrays her feelings only through slight change in her complexion. "Astonishment... disbelief... amazement... and though her complexion varied, she stood firm in incredulity and felt no danger of an hysterical fit, or a swoon." 39

Her ‘mourning’ for her love remains her ‘secret’. It is a tribute to Elinor's concern for the happiness of her mother and sister that she keeps her misery to herself. In the beginning, when Elinor feels herself drawn towards Edward, she restrains herself for the same reason: "She knew that what Marianne and her mother conjectured one moment, they believed the next — that with them, to wish was to hope, and to hope was to expect." 40 Elinor is aware of lack of moderation in them. Elinor subdues her sorrow lest she should alarm her mother and sister just as she had suppressed her warmth lest they should entertain premature expectations.

Elinor's fortitude is in contrast to impulsive Marianne who believes in giving full vent to her grief. Her ‘potent’ sensibility considers composure a disgrace. In an obvious rebuff to Elinor who appeals to Marianne's pride to conduct herself
gracefully, Marianne disdainfully retorts,

... they who suffer little may be proud and independent as they like — may resist insult or return mortification — but I cannot. I must feel — I must be wretched — and they are welcome to enjoy the consciousness of it that can... 41

Marianne's development involves chastening of her romanticism and she is forced to take in reality. This change in her is brought about when she is laid up in bed. Her fever symbolizes her catharsis of self-enlightenment resulting in her acceptance of Col. Brandon:

She was born to discover the falsehood of her own opinions, and to counteract, by her conduct, her most favourite maxims. She was born to overcome an affection formed so late in life as at seventeen, and with no sentiment superior to strong esteem and lively friendship, voluntarily to give her hand to another! 42

Similarly, Elinor who is deemed to be all sense is given a lesson in sensibility in her interview with Willoughby. The softening of her heart towards Willoughby is an evidence of the shades of sensibility in her. Her reluctant hand shake with him is a part of her education. Jane Austen abhorred the idea of perfection and considered moral platitudes untenable.

Her thoughts were silently fixed on the irreparable injury which too early an independence and its consequent habits of idleness, dissipation, and luxury, had made in the mind, the character, the happiness, of a man who, to every advantage of person and talents, united a disposition naturally...
open and honest, and a feeling, affectionate temper.
The world had made him extravagant and vain — Extravagance and vanity had made him cold-hearted and selfish.43

Elinor's commiseration for Willoughby is essential for her forgiveness of Edward. When Elinor reproves him for his inconstancy and for misleading her, his unconvincing pleadings of "ignorance of his own heart, and a mistaken confidence in the force of his engagement" are smilingly waived: "Elinor smiled, and shook her head."44 Men in Jane Austen's novels are not presented as predators seducing their helpless victims. Women's entanglements are the result of their choice, exercise of their free will. One of Jane Austen's noteworthy contributions to women's cause is in vesting her heroines with active principle by making them responsible for their actions.

*Pride and Prejudice*, perhaps the most popular of Jane Austen's novels, exhibits definite traces of what we call feminism. Elizabeth Bennet, 'the wittiest and most spirited heroine' of the novel anticipates modern emancipated woman. While most of the other characters are all cast in a mould and their lives move in a small circle, Elizabeth abundantly displays an independence of mind and a capacity for independent thought. A young girl of refinement and cultivated intelligence as she is, she finds it difficult to conform to the standards of behaviour prescribed by the society which she holds in contempt. Unlike her sister Jane and others, Elizabeth possesses the remarkable trait of assertiveness. Equipped with intellectual superiority and a capacity for judgement she refuses to be constrained by stagnant conventions and conformism.
Elizabeth is gifted with a rare strength of character, a significant sign of asserting the rights of woman. She has her own dignity and is not prepared to give it up just for security sans love. Elizabeth has two very attractive offers of marriage which she rejects outright, thinking these proposals to be undesirable. We know that her father's property is entailed on Mr Collins. And Mr Collins makes the marriage proposal saying, "Almost as soon as I entered the house I singled you out as the companion of my future life." He further says:

But the fact is, that being as I am, to inherit this estate after the death of your honoured father, (who, however, may live many years longer), I could not satisfy myself without resolving to choose a wife from among his daughters, that the loss to them might be as little as possible, when the melancholy event takes place — which, however, as I have already said, may not be for several years. This has been my motive, my fair cousin, and I flatter myself it will not sink me in your esteem. And now nothing remains for me but to assure you in the most animated language of the violence of my affection. To fortune I am perfectly indifferent, and shall make no demand of that nature on your father, since I am well aware that it could not be complied with; and that one thousand pounds in the 4 per cents, which will not be yours till after your mother's decease, is all that you may ever be entitled to. On that head, therefore, I shall be uniformly silent; and you may assure yourself that no ungenerous reproach shall ever pass my lips when we are married.

Elizabeth interrupts him saying:

'You are too hasty, Sir,' she cried. 'You forget that
I have made no answer. Let me do it without further loss of time. Accept my thanks for the compliment you are paying me. I am very sensible of the honour of your proposals, but it is impossible for me to do otherwise than decline them.47

When Collins says,

... it is usual with young ladies to reject the addresses of the man whom they secretly mean to accept, when he first applies for their favour; and that sometimes the refusal is repeated a second or even a third time. I am therefore by no means discouraged by what you have just said, and shall hope to lead you to the altar ere long.48

Elizabeth retorts:

I do assure you that I am not one of those young ladies (if such young ladies there are) who are so daring as to risk their happiness on the chance of being asked a second time. I am perfectly serious in my refusal. - You could not make me happy, and I am convinced...49

Mr Collins continues to think that she is not serious in rejecting the offer. Elizabeth finally says:

Can I speak plainer? Do not consider me now, as an elegant female intending to plague you, but as a rational creature speaking the truth from her heart.50

Her mother also warns her that she would not be able to support her after her father's death. But Elizabeth firmly sticks to her decision. Elizabeth is not tormented by the thought of a bleak future full of suffering and humiliation. She knows herself
and is not willing to accept a proposal where she cannot love. In her outright
dismissal of the marriage proposal, Elizabeth asserts her independence and her
dignity.

Again, Elizabeth reveals her inner strength in preserving her
composure. Mr Bingley asks his handsome friend Darcy to choose Elizabeth as
his dance partner. Darcy looks for a moment at Elizabeth and coldly remarks —
"She is tolerable; but not handsome enough to tempt me; and I am in no
humour at present to give consequence to young ladies who are slighted by other
men." Darcy walks off and Elizabeth remains there with no cordial feelings
towards him. Jane Austen writes about the attitude of Elizabeth,” She told the story
however with great spirit among her friends; for she had a lively, playful disposition,
which delighted in anything ridiculous.” After hearing the story of Wickham,
Elizabeth becomes convinced that there can be no good in the proud and arrogant
Darcy. Despite of what Jane tells him about Darcy, ‘that no man of common
humanity’ could be capable of such malice, Elizabeth does not change her opinion of
Darcy and declares that she knows what to think. So later when Darcy makes a
marriage proposal, she rejects it with unmasked contempt. She has the intellectual
strength to rebuff a man like Darcy. She knows that to be a mistress of
Pemberley would be something but she exhibits her great spiritual and moral
courage in saying ‘no’ to the proposal. She shocks Darcy into a state of humiliation
when with great dignity she says:

You are mistaken, Mr Darcy, if you suppose that the
mode of your declaration affected me in any other
way, than as it spared me the concern which I might have felt in refusing you, had you behaved in a more gentlemanly manner.\footnote{53}

Elizabeth is capable of asserting her individuality in an unmistakable manner. She is indeed a spirited young girl, capable of holding her own. She does possess those remarkable traits and virtues which the modern feminist movement stands for. Her independence of mind comes into play whenever she is challenged or whenever she is faced with an act of absurdity. She is endowed with sound common sense which helps her face any situation with confidence and courage.

In one of the earlier chapters (chap. 7) we get a peep into her sense of independence and scant regard for social propriety. Elizabeth is invited to Netherfield Park where Jane is to spend a few days because of her illness. Anxious to look after her sister, Elizabeth hastens to the Bingley’s residence and we are told:

Elizabeth continued her walk alone, crossing field after field at a quick pace, jumping over stiles and springing over puddles with impatient activity, and finding herself at last within view of the house, with weary ankles, dirty stockings, and a face glowing with the warmth of exercise.\footnote{54}

Her coming on foot and by herself in such a dirty weather excites the unwilling admiration of Darcy. Her sense of self-respect and self-confidence does not keep her blind to the facts of the situation. She sheds the prejudice which earlier makes her misconstrue every word and every action of Darcy. On the receipt of Darcy’s letter begins the process of self-awakening. She realizes the truth of his explanation and feels ashamed of having been ‘wretchedly blind’! She is filled with revulsion at

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her own lack of fairness and cries out: "How despicably have I acted!... I who prided myself on my discernment!-1, who have valued myself on my abilities!... How humiliating is this discovery..." This is a moment of truth for Elizabeth. She is confronted with the truth of her own follies and prejudices. From this turmoil within her, caused by the reading of the letter, she emerges with a strong grip on her thinking and her instincts. She now takes stock of herself and becomes aware of the reality. And she becomes all the more lovable and adorable for her honesty of mind. As she comes to learn more and more about the positive side of Darcy, she feels proud of him and thinks that she will never be able to show the full measure of her gratitude to him. This transformation in her attitude is a sign of Elizabeth's mature thinking which harmonises with those who assert the rights of women.

Elizabeth gives a clear indication of her mental strength when she faces Lady Catherine with unruffled dignity. She accuses Elizabeth of having trapped Darcy and of spreading the rumour that he will marry her. Very insolently, this bully tells Elizabeth that she cannot marry Darcy:

Because honour, decorum, prudence, nay, interest, forbid it. Yes, Miss Bennet, interest; for do not expect to be noticed by his family or friends, if you wilfully act against the inclinations of all. You will be censured, slighted, and despised, by every one connected with him. Your alliance will be a disgrace: your name will never even be mentioned by any of us. 56

She further adds insult to injury:

The upstart pretensions of a young woman without
family, connections, or fortune. Is this to be endured! But it must not, shall not be. If you were sensible of your own good, you would not wish to quit the sphere, in which you have been brought up.

Elizabeth is not at all intimidated. She faces Lady Catherine with composure and remarks,

_In marrying your nephew, I should not consider myself as quitting that sphere. He is a gentleman; I am a gentleman's daughter; so far we are equal._

As the dialogue proceeds, she admits that she is not engaged to Darcy but she refuses to give any undertaking to refuse him if he makes the proposal again. Lady Catherine tries to extract from her an assurance that she will not marry her nephew but Elizabeth retorts very emphatically: "I will make no promise of the kind."

Lady Catherine asserts: "I shall not go away, till you have given me the assurance I require." Elizabeth affirms:

_And I certainly never shall give it. I am not to be intimidated into anything so wholly unreasonable. Your Ladyship wants Mr Darcy to marry your daughter; but would my giving you the wished-for promise, make their marriage at all more probable?_  

This long dialogue candidly reveals that Elizabeth is a spirited and independent young girl who cannot be browbeaten.

Even after Elizabeth has revised her opinion of Darcy and is full of appreciation for the man, she does not go to the other extreme of eulogising him.
She comes to feel that theirs is a "union that must have been to the advantage of both." With her tremendous self-confidence, admirable composure of mind, and her innate talent she is able to bring about a complete change in the attitude of Darcy. And her prejudice against him gets shed.

If Elizabeth continues to be a lovable heroine who impresses and delights the readers the most, it is because of her inner strength which makes her assert herself and establish her superiority over others. Elizabeth's remark about her relations with Darcy, brings out her self-confidence:

*Darcy is rich and rather grand while Elizabeth is poor and hampered by a ramshackle family is not crucial to her but their common participation in gentility.*

Elizabeth's gender and her family's financial state fail to curb her self-confidence. She is just the obverse of her mother who is the epitome of a garrulous female—beauty sans brain and whose sole business in life is the marriage of her daughters. Lloyd W. Brown is not wrong in remarking that ". . . She is the business woman disposing off her two most deserving (marketable) commodities in the business of marriage."
and proper behaviour. What Darcy teaches Elizabeth
is not that different in kind from what she teaches
him: the novel argues, then, not that women do have
an area of expertise that is different from men’s —
not that women have “natural” access to kinds of
knowledge to which men do not — but that men and
women need each other to become and continue to
remain as moral and socially responsible as
possible. 65

Elizabeth does not represent prejudice nor does Darcy embody pride. Both of them
have their share of these feelings in different proportions. Elizabeth and Darcy can
relate to each other only after purging their selves of their negative emotions.
Though Elizabeth seems to be prejudiced by Darcy’s pride it “is Darcy who is
prejudiced against a lower social order, and it is Elizabeth who is poor but proud in
the face of his prejudice…”66

The novel Pride and Prejudice upholds woman’s dignity.
The opening sentence, "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in
possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife"67 itself underlines man’s
need of a wife. Elizabeth is not overawed by the presence of Lady Catherine or
Darcy. Elizabeth’s vivacious wit forces Darcy to take more than due notice of her.
Though noticing the absence of conventional beauty, Darcy is arrested by her lively
manners and beautiful expression. Female charm is re-defined in Elizabeth whose
bantering fascinates Darcy. Teasing is a fore-play in Jane Austen’s terminology.
Women’s accomplishments do not consist in fine arts, embroidery etc. Darcy’s
emphasis is on reading. He is fascinated by Elizabeth’s fine eyes. Stress on eyes is
significant because eyes are an index of one’s mind. Mary Evans adduces two
reasons for interpreting Jane Austen as a feminist besides her support for upholding English Morality which decries the sexual and moral double standards:

First, Austen values the part that women play in domestic and family life, and second, she portrays women as acting, and capable of acting, independently of men and patriarchal interests. Austen's morality then is one which does not endorse worldly self-interest, public and fashionable standards, material self-enhancement, or entrepreneurial greed.68

Women in Jane Austen's novels have moral autonomy and are capable of deciding for themselves without referring to any paternal mentor. As Fanny points out in *Mansfield Park*: "We have all a better guide in ourselves, if we would attend to it, than any person can be."69 Assertion of moral autonomy on the part of Fanny is quite significant considering her dubious status of a dependent in *Mansfield Park*. She is sans beauty that could offset her lack of dowry. Above all, she has been brought up in *Mansfield Park* where all thoughts are supposed to be referred to Sir Thomas Bertram.

*Mansfield Park* is the only novel of Jane Austen where most of the action is confined within the demesne of its eponymous house. Even when characters are away from it, they are constantly thinking of it. The very title, 'man's field' — suggests the abode of patriarchal hierarchy, with kind and stern Sir Bertram, as the head of a well balanced 'happy family' of two elder sons and two daughters, Julia and Maria. Lady Bertram has the distinction of being the most unassuming mistress in Jane Austen's fictive world. Busy embroidering patterns of her
nothingness she basks in her luxurious indolence, "guided in everything important by Sir Thomas, and in small concerns by her sister."70

The opening scene of the novel, setting the clock back by thirty years, introduces us to the economics of the marriage market with three pretty young girls looking for rich husbands. However, as Jane Austen ironically remarks, "there certainly are not so many men of large fortune in the world, as there are pretty women to deserve them."71 Jane Austen comes down heavily on the prevalent practice of clubbing riches and beauty in the nuptial knot. Out of the three sisters, only Miss Maria Ward is fortunate to captivate Sir Thomas Bertram. Miss Ward, whose Christian name is not at all mentioned, six years after the marriage of her sister reconciles herself to marry Rev. Mr Norris. But the third sister, Miss Frances shocks her family by marrying "a Lieutenant of Marines, without education, fortune or connections."72

The right choice of partner is very significant for a woman in Jane Austen's novels as her life is circumscribed by it. Miss Frances, alias Mrs Price has to pay the price of her unwise choice. A large family of eight children, with the ninth on the way, small income, and husband 'disabled for active service' but fond of company and liquor, force Mrs Price to forgo her 'pride and resentment' and turn a supplicant. The abiding hold of family ties is tellingly conveyed by Jane Austen:

*The letter was not unproductive. It re-established peace and kindness. Sir Thomas sent friendly advice and professions, Lady Bertram dispatched money and baby-linen, and Mrs Norris wrote the letters.*73
Sir Thomas Bertram's patronage extends to his wife's family resulting in their proposal to undertake the care of Mrs Price's eldest daughter, nine-year-old Fanny. Jane Austen's deft delineation of Sir Bertram's apprehensions before Fanny's arrival brings alive the stranglehold of class consciousness in landed aristocracy:

...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... Their rank, fortune, rights, and expectations, will always be different. It is a point of great delicacy...

In this "remarkably fine family, the sons very well-looking, the daughters decidedly handsome,"75 Fanny arrives, frightened and abashed. Her 'tractable disposition' and 'good nature' makes her a useful adjunct. Fanny is the only heroine to be introduced to us at such a young age. Edward's kindness in making Fanny feel at home in Mansfield Park helps to create a permanent niche in her heart.

The contrast between Fanny and her cousins is tellingly manipulated to highlight the inadequacies of Julia and Maria. Their peripheral knowledge of history, geography, mythology, philosophy, astronomy, physics etc. stand them in no good stead to face life. Despite their advantages, Julia and Maria lack "the less common acquirements of self-knowledge, generosity, and humility."76 It is a measure of Jane Austen's liberal outlook that she apportions the blame equally on Lady Bertram and Sir Thomas Bertram. Their faulty upbringing of their children is responsible for the wayward behaviour of Julia and Maria later on.
In *Mansfield Park*, Jane Austen a la feminists questions the very basis of patriarchy – family and inheritance. The Bertram family turns out to be not so fine after all. Banishment of Maria from Mansfield Park and acknowledgement of Fanny Price as its mistress is an affirmation of personal identity and authenticity. An individual, man or woman, can transcend the constraints of sex, class, formal education by means of merit and integrity. Fanny asserts her moral autonomy by rejecting Henry Crawford, thereby daring to incur Sir Bertram's displeasure, resulting in her temporary banishment from Mansfield Park. Her three-month long absence brings in its trail cataclysms in Mansfield Park that result in complete restructuring of hierarchy. Disenchanted with Julia and Maria, Lady Bertram can find comfort only in Fanny: "Dear Fanny! now I shall be comfortable."77

Fanny's journey from a grudging and patronising adoption to this warm welcome to Mansfield Park constitutes the action of the novel. Introduction of Crawfords is aimed at highlighting Fanny's merit cloaked in ordinariness. Crawfords – Henry and Mary represent glitter and glee with gold missing in their core. Enactment of the play, *Lovers' Vows* reveal their talent in histrionics. Charismatic Mary fascinates even Fanny with her liveliness and friendliness. Both brother and sister take *Mansfield Park* by storm with their elan and swagger. In this lively group, Fanny pales into dull insignificance. Though fascinated by the Crawfords, Fanny refuses to budge from her perceptions. She disapproves of their staging the play which significantly takes place in Sir Thomas's absence. Even when Edward is roped in to act against Mary, Fanny stays resolute in her disapprobation.
of their plans and her disengagement from the whole exercise which shows that she is not a wax doll or a puppet on a string.

Seminal importance of Mansfield theatricals is incisively unravelled by C. Knatchbull Bevan:

_The point is not that acting itself is morally wrong. Professional actors, whose performances may be considered "good hardended real acting" are in control. For the "hardened" actor the self is forgotten in the role but remains intact to be later resumed. But the Mansfield actors, encouraged by the Crawfords, conflate role and self, so that the role becomes the self. The theatricals are thus an exercise in deracination, cutting away those values which root the characters, morally and emotionally, in their community._

John Hardy interprets Henry's love of acting as his "wish to make all the world his stage." It is only Fanny, who can see through Henry's acting suffused with vanity. Though fascinated by his acting she does not like him as a man. Her refusal is affirmation of woman's right to say no. But Henry's arrogance refuses to take this no from Fanny when he has determined to make a small hole in her heart. Her resistance to his blandishments only increases his determination to woo her. Jane Austen deplores not so much the vivacious vulgarity of Henry and Mary as their insensitiveness, selfishness and blatant vanity.

As opposed to self-effacing, unassuming but firm Fanny, Emma is refreshingly lively and vibrant. She is the only heroine in Jane Austen's novels to be
the 'mistress of the mansion.' Possession of property empowers Emma which she misuses in match-making. Jane Austen firmly believed that property has to be managed with propriety. Emma lacks maturity and education required for a mature perspective and proper management of property. Her behaviour is child-like and the mantle of counselling falls upon Mr Knightley. Emma's vivacity is akin to that of Henry Crawford but she is without guile. Her boundless energy and exuberance are always mis-directed because of want of any gainful employment. She is Mary Crawford sans her disingenuousness. Emma's major shortcoming is her willfulness. Emma's failure of perspicacity, though ludicrous and ironical, does not detract from her goodness. It rather adds to our enjoyment of her delightful misconceptions. She is so single-minded in her plans for Harriet Smith's marriage that she fails to notice Elton's attentions directed at her.

*Emma* is the glorification of an irrepressible female. Twenty-one year old Emma enjoys 'best blessings of existence:' beauty, intellect, material resources, comfortable home and happy disposition. She has had the best of nature and nurture. Jane Austen points out the inherent disadvantages of such an advantageous position in Emma's overbearing and imperious manner:

*The real evils indeed of Emma's situation were the power of having rather too much her own way, and a disposition to think a little too well of herself; these were the disadvantages which threatened alloy to her many enjoyments. The danger, however, was at present so unperceived, that they did not by any means rank as misfortunes with her.*

After Miss Taylor's wedding to Mr Weston, she feels lonely as "Highbury ... to
Mr Knightley, in fact, was one of the few people who could see faults in Emma Woodhouse, and the only one who ever told her of them: and though this was not particularly agreeable to Emma herself, she knew it would be so much less so to her father, that she would not have him really suspect such a circumstance as her not being thought perfect by everybody.\textsuperscript{82}

Mr Knightley like Edmund Bertram in \textit{Mansfield Park} has nothing of 'ceremony about him'. Unlike Henry Crawford, Knightley is a genuine man. Though many critics perceive him as a pedagogue and father-figure, the novel maps out his moral growth. In the beginning of the novel, he is quite orthodox in his views about marriage as reflected in his conversation with Mrs Weston, "on the very material matrimonial point of submitting your own will, and doing as you were bid."\textsuperscript{83}

But after his engagement with Emma, he is presented as extremely sensitive to Emma's feelings. It is a measure of his love and regard for Emma that he shuns talking about Miss Harriet Smith. However Knightley's deep feelings for Emma are not appreciated by her as she is too self-centred to respond or acknowledge his love. He is not the demonstrative kind and patiently waits for Emma to grow in maturity. Knightley closely monitors Emma when she falls in love with Frank Churchill and waits patiently for her to overcome her infatuation.

Emma has no intention to get married. She seems to harbour a fear of commitment and promises her father not to make any match for herself. Emma
has all the male qualities and is adept in dominating others. Knightley indirectly accuses Miss Taylor of having failed in her duty as a governess by letting Emma dominate her. Emma's decision not to get married is partially responsible for her vicarious involvement in match-making and in weaving webs of love affairs between others. Time and again in her novels, Jane Austen emphatically points out the urgency of women giving up their feminine vices of unnecessary meddling in the affairs of others. If women are to make their way up, they have to put an end to their trivial imaginings and fantasies. Jane Austen is on the look out for an ideal woman by portraying different prototypes and testing them in varied situations. She seems to be tentatively experimenting with various permutations and combinations of traits in her quest for an ideal woman. Jane Austen's stress on reserve is her recognition of 'inner space' essential for the growth of an individual's personality.

Emma's keen interest in furthering 'true love' between Harriet Smith and Elton has psychological connotations in terms of her sub-conscious longing for love;

*I have none of the usual inducements of women to marry. Were I to fall in love, indeed, it would be a different thing! But I never have been in love; it is not my way, or my nature; and I do not think I ever shall. And, without love, I am sure I should be a fool to change such a situation as mine. Fortune, I do not want; employment I do not want; consequence I do not want: I believe few married women are half as much mistress of their husband's house, as I am of Hartfield; and never, never could I expect to be so truly beloved and important; so always, first and always right in any man's eyes as I am in my father's.*
Emma's pompous self-adulation smacks of arrogance. When Harriet wonders that charming women like Miss Woodhouse should not be married, Emma laughingly replies:

*My being charming, Harriet is not quite enough to induce me to marry; I must find other people charming— one other person at least. And I am not only, not going to be married, at present, but have very little intention of ever marrying at all....I must see somebody very superior to any one I have seen yet, to be tempted...* 

These answers clearly indicate Emma's vanity. Emma's development in the novel involves cutting down her imperiousness to a tolerable level. In keeping with Emma's bloated ego, the novel is named after her. In fact, this is the only novel to be named after its heroine and, in this sense, finally the heroine seems to have come of age.

The very title of the novel suggests the predominance of a heroine who happens to decide not only for herself but for others as well. Blessed with family name and riches she falls a prey to egotistical tendencies and disregard for the feelings of others. But to gain self-knowledge and human understanding she has to constrain her ego and admit her follies of mis-judgement. Her romantic and assertive self has to learn to rein its imagination. The naive but strong heroine sheds her delusions one by one to gain clarity and knowledge. Emma's strength is derived from the financial resources and status of her family. Jane Austen firmly believes that it is not one's being a man or woman that determines one's superiority or inferiority,
but it is what one makes of one's circumstances and opportunities. Inherited wealth and property do matter to an extent, but the real strength of character lies within. While upholding the import of material environs, Jane Austen recognizes the worth of inner strength. She is realistic enough to acknowledge the importance of material advantages and their role in human relationships. For the wealthy, folly is not always folly. In Emma, her follies make her look delightful.

Emma is existentially authentic for she believes what she is doing and refuses to be influenced by others. She wants to love by proxy as she cherishes her independence and has decided not to enter into the intimacy of marriage. This existential experience is of great importance in the evolution of woman's emancipation. In the beginning, Emma takes fancy to Harriet Smith. In the absence of any worthwhile activity, Emma makes Harriet Smith her mission in life:

She would notice her; she would improve her; she would detach her from her bad acquaintance, and introduce her into good society; she would inform her opinions and her manners. It would be an interesting, and certainly a very kind undertaking; highly becoming her own situation in life, her leisure, and powers.86

Thus, Emma's 'leisure and powers' seek an outlet in the making of Harriet Smith.

Mr Knightley realizes the folly of intimacy between Emma and Harriet. He would rather Emma used her time gainfully in improving her mind:

But I have done with expecting any course of steady reading from Emma. She will never submit to
Mr Knightley apprehends that Harriet's flattery will only inflate Emma's arrogant complacence, while Harriet will put on airs that will make it arduous for her to accept reality.

*But Harriet Smith... I think her the very worst sort of companion that Emma could possibly have. She knows nothing herself, and looks upon Emma as knowing everything. She is a flatterer in all her ways; and so much the worse, because undesigned. Her ignorance is hourly flattery. How can Emma imagine she has anything to learn herself, while Harriet is presenting such a delightful inferiority? And as for Harriet, I will venture to say that she cannot gain by the acquaintance. Hartfield will only put her out of conceit with all the other places she belongs to. She will grow just refined enough to be uncomfortable with those among whom birth and circumstances have placed her home. I am much mistaken if Emma's doctrines give any strength of mind, or tend at all to make a girl adapt herself rationally to the varieties of her situation in life. – They only give a little polish.*

Because of Emma's meddling, Harriet Smith is forced to refuse a good offer of marriage from her ardent admirer Robert Martin. Emma makes Harriet dream about Mr Elton, a clergyman who has no amorous inclinations towards Harriet. Emma uses all her energy to kindle a spark of love and passion between Elton and Harriet. Jane Austen deplores Emma's manipulations, which boomerang. The failure of her mission vexes Emma for the first time in her life. Elton's proposal to Emma jolts her out of her mis-placed convictions. But she still does not admit the folly of her
own mis-judgement. John Hardy, rightly points out that Emma takes this more as a,

...dis-appointment for her own cherished scheme. Though she also feels the bitter disappointment for Harriet, it is a moot point how contrite she for her part is feeling. Indeed, it at first seems that she is distressed at the thwarting of her plans rather than at her own conduct in the affair.89

The admission of Emma's own mis-judgement is qualified and she blames Elton for this wretched mis-understanding. Emma holds Elton's wavering and dubious manners responsible for mis-leading her. Mr Knightley's warning, "You have been no friend to Harriet Smith, Emma,"90 nettles her. Emma, however, does not learn from her experience and gets busy in looking for another suitor.

Emma's persistence in her arrogant mis-conceptions is evident in her opinion of Jane Fairfax. Emma has to pay a heavy price for her lack of discernment. She falls in love with Frank Churchill. But "her feeling for him is no more than the lively notice that an attractive and vivacious girl takes of an attractive and vivacious young man."91 His attention boosts her vanity and blinds her to reality. Frank Churchill has an ulterior motive in encouraging Emma's mis-conceptions. He enjoys at the expense of Emma. Emma's interaction with Frank Churchill is based on flimsy grounds. Jane Austen describes him and Emma's feeling in the following words:

Emma continued to entertain no doubt of her being in love.... At first, she thought it was a good deal; and afterwards, but little... and quite impatient for a letter, that she might know how he was, how were
Frank Churchill plays upon and enjoys to the hilt Emma's jealousy of Jane Fairfax, whom he loves very much and is secretly engaged. He uses Emma as a cover to hide his engagement. In case of, any naive or gullible girl, Frank Churchill's role would be obnoxious. But in this case, Jane Austen indicts Emma as she has already filled her idle mind with mis-conceptions about Jane and Dixon before Frank arrives on the scene. Failure in discernment is quite natural. Elinor in Sense and Sensibility was equally guilty of it. But Emma compounds her folly by her single-mindedness and her refusal to listen to Knightley's advice.

Mr Knightley, who, for some reason best known to himself, had certainly taken an early dislike to Frank Churchill, was only growing to dislike him more. He began to suspect him of some double dealing in his pursuit of Emma. That Emma was his object appeared indisputable. Everything declared it; his own attentions, his father's hints, his mother-in-law's guarded silence, it was all in unison; words, conduct, discretion, and indiscretion, told the same story. But while so many were devoting him to Emma, and Emma herself making him over to Harriet, Mr Knightley began to suspect him of some inclination to trifle with Jane Fairfax.

Jane Austen uses Frank Churchill's intriguing behaviour to expose the self-deception and 'persuasions' of various characters. The conflict in Emma vis-a-vis Frank Churchill betrays her lack of self-knowledge. It is as if she does not
know her heart, wherein Mr Knightley has already made a niche for himself. Emma gradually deviates from her enchantment with Frank Churchill and sees Mr Knightley in a new light as a young and handsome man. She is shocked by Mrs Weston's suggestion of a marriage between Mr Knightley and Jane. Emma's violent outburst betrays her true self:

Mr Knightley marry! - No, I have never had such an idea, and I cannot adopt it now....Jane Fairfax mistress of the Abbey! — Oh! no, no; — every feeling revolts. For his own sake, I would not have him do such a thing. 94

Emma's education is complete only when she becomes truthful enough to admit her love for Knightley. Emma feels the genuineness of Knightley's love through the understanding that grows between them. Elegant Emma becomes a complete woman with the dawn of rationality, a trait not earlier associated with women. In this respect, Jane Austen seems to anticipate modern feminism with its emphasis on reason not emotion.

Jane Austen's emphasis on rationality is continued in *Northanger Abbey* which is a satire on *Silly Novels* by male as well as female writers. Jane Austen is extremely critical of fantasy as a means of escape. *Northanger Abbey* is a critique on Gothic romances which influence the reader by triggering his imagination to such heights that one is sundered from the reality principle. In the journey of life one has to tread on solid ground rather than fly on the wings of fancy. The opening lines of the novel introduce the central female character, Catherine Morland:
No one who had ever seen Catherine Morland in her infancy, would have supposed her born to be an heroine. Her situation in life, the character of her father and mother, her own person and disposition, were all equally against her.95

Jane Austen's concern with ordinary lives of ordinary women is a deliberate attempt to espouse realism and denigrate romanticism. In Jane Austen's time women had no access to formal education. In moneyed menages, pedagogy was a concern of governesses. But Catherine Morland, like Elizabeth and Elinor, is taught at home — accounts and writing by her father and French by her mother. Till she is fifteen years old, Catherine is wild, noisy and boyish in her taste for cricket, baseball and riding. She disdains feminine accomplishments like music and drawing. But this sprightly hoyden undergoes a complete metamorphosis after her selective reading of Pope, Gray, Thomson, Shakespeare and becomes such stuff that heroines are made of. Jane Austen's choice of excerpts from these authors underline the importance of comprehensive education under expert guidance, by pointing out the dangers of haphazard and lop-sided education. Catherine's sensitive mind feeds on literature and ignores books of information "for, provided that nothing like useful knowledge could be gained from them, provided they were all story and no reflection, she had never any objection to books at all."96

Like Fanny Burney's Camilla, Northanger Abbey is a treatise on woman's education. Jane Austen deplores Catherine's sensibility which is avid only for adventure and not knowledge.

She had reached the age of seventeen, without having
seen one amiable youth who could call forth her sensibility; without having inspired one real passion.... But when a young lady is to be a heroine, the perverseness of forty surrounding families cannot prevent her. Something must and will happen to throw a hero in her way.97

The scene changes to Bath where Catherine accompanies Mr and Mrs Allen. Catherine at the time of her entrance into the world is seventeen years old, cheerful, pleasant "and her mind about as ignorant and uninformed as the female mind at seventeen usually is. "98 Jane Austen time and again harps on the ignorance of the female mind. Catherine's chaperon, Mrs Allen does not escape the author's reproof for her 'trifling turn of mind.' Their routine at Bath encapsulates the meaninglessness of their visit. Jane Austen while absorbing many of Fanny Burney's fine points parodies Evelina: A Young lady's Entrance into the World where Evelina was cynosure of all eyes. Catherine marches up and down the Upper Rooms with Mrs Allen without anyone noticing her. Jane Austen praises Cecilía, Camilla, Belinda as works,

in which the greatest powers of the mind are displayed, in which the most thorough knowledge of human nature, the happiest delineation of its varieties, the liveliest effusions of wit and humour are conveyed to the world in the best chosen language.99

But Jane Austen is highly critical of Gothic literature, where,

the substance of its papers so often consisting in the statement of improbable circumstances, unnatural characters, and topics of conversation, which no longer concern anyone living; and their language, too, frequently so coarse as to give no very
favourable idea of the age that could endure it. 100

Jane Austen in *Northanger Abbey* besides satirising Gothic popular fiction is equally severe with duplicitous social mores. Catherine's innocence and directness is thrown into relief by Isabella's guile and equivocations. In Isabella's vacuity of mind, there is enough room for men. The incident where Isabella wants to run from 'the two odious young men' and then goes in pursuit of them ironically exposes her hypocrisy. Isabella's greatest sin is barrenness of affection and integrity. She lacks moral autonomy. Isabella's forsaking of Catherine's brother in favour of Captain Tilney is part of Catherine's self-discovery. As opposed to her, Catherine is blissfully ignorant of feminine artifice. Determined to be better acquainted with the Tilneys' Catherine is very sincere in her compliments and her keenness to know about them.

... and though in all probability not an observation was made, nor an expression used by either which had not been made and used some thousand of times before, under that roof, in every Bath season, yet the merit of their being spoken with simplicity and truth, and without personal conceit, might be something uncommon.101

Without any self-consciousness of having betrayed her feelings, Catherine Morland's heart is all flutter and eyes full of sparkle at the prospect of dancing with Henry Tilney at the 'Cotillion Ball' the next day. Jane Austen disapproves Catherine's emphasis on dress and takes this opportunity to comment on the inefficacy of dress as a means of enticing males:

*It would be mortifying to the feeling of many*
ladies, could they be made to understand how little the heart of man is affected by what is costly or new in their attire; how little it is biassed by the texture of their muslin, and how unsusceptible of peculiar tenderness towards the spotted, the sprigged, the mull or the jackonet. 102

Henry Tilney's traditional Victorian concept of women and marriage is articulated in his comparison of matrimony and dancing. According to Henry, both in matrimony and dancing, "man has the advantage of choice, woman only the power of refusal." 103 Henry is awed by the directness and simplicity of Catherine. He is particularly charmed by the forthrightness of demure and diffident Catherine who does not care for polite affected lady-like manners. Her excited and concerned apology—"Oh! Mr Tilney, I have been quite wild to speak to you," 104 —disarms him. Their rapport is spontaneous. Catherine, fed on books, is herself an open book for Henry Tilney. For Catherine, Mrs Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* and Gothic tales are her reference guides. Her conversation is cloyed with reference to books. The scene where Catherine's reference to a new publication containing murder, rioting and all horrible acts is construed by Miss Eleanor Tilney as factual, illustrates women's want of "observation, discernment, judgement, fire, genius and wit." 105 The scene is of seminal importance, as it points to the hazards of blending the worlds of fiction and reality.

Catherine's lack of education is conspicuous in her discomfiture in Milson Street, the home of the Tilneys. The abiding hold of her fantasy subjugating her rational mind, is centre-staged in her elation over the prospect of visiting Northanger Abbey—
with spirits elated to rapture, with Henry at her heart, and Northanger Abbey on her lips, she hurried home to write her letter.... Her passion for ancient edifices was next in degree to her passion for Henry Tilney. 106

Northanger Abbey is thus emblematic of Catherine's delusions. Her journey to Abbey will result in her enlightenment.

Like the heroines of Mrs. Radcliffé's novels, Catherine is obsessed with secret passages, narrow cells, ruined chapels, traditional legends and awful memorials of ill-fated nuns. As Catherine along with Tilney finally approaches the end of the journey, she is impatient for the sight of Gothic windows. Her imagination hoping for cobwebs, dirt, stone work is disappointed with the modern furnishings. Inspite of this jolt, Catherine's fancy remains undaunted and fixes itself on the wooden chest, containing the precious manuscript, in her room which turns out to be a bundle of washing bills and an inventory of linen. Piqued by General Tilney's tyrannical patriarchal manners and unfazed by the absurdities of her previous fancies, Catherine fixes on him as the cruel murderer of his wife and sets out to explore the un-used portion of the house for evidence to substantiate her fanciful charge. Slyly, Catherine manages to find the late Mrs Tilney's room. Her detective zeal boomerangs on her and reality jolts her out of her fantasy, shamed and shocked

Astonishment and doubt first seized them; and a shortly succeeding ray of common sense added some bitter emotions of shame. She could not be mistaken as to the room; but how grossly mistaken in everything else! — in Miss Tilney's meaning, in
Henry Tilney who is adept at reading Catherine's mind makes her realize her foolishness.

Dear Miss Morland, consider the dreadful nature of the suspicions you have entertained. What have you been judging from? Remember the country and the age in which we live. Remember that we are English, that we are Christians... Does our education prepare us for such atrocities? Do our laws connive at them? Could they be perpetrated without being known, in a country like this, where social and literary intercourse is on such a footing; "Where every man is surrounded by a neighbourhood of voluntary spies, and where roads and newspapers lay everything open? Dearest Miss Morland, what ideas have you been admitting? 

Henry's role in making Catherine aware of reality has also been emphasized by T. Vasudeva Reddy:

...Catherine's perception of the excess of fictional representations of life leads to a process of the recovery of true self in which she is aided by Henry Tilney—a process which highlights the need to check the violence of the Gothic imagination in order to do away with the forces inhibiting the exploratory self which alone can ensure self-actualization.

This stress on 'self-actualization' makes Jane Austen extremely relevant to our study of anticipations of feminism.

Jane Austen in her last novel Persuasion overtly enters the arena of
sexual politics by making Anne reject, irrevocably any reference to books to prove women's famed fickleness.

Perhaps I shall. – 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.¹⁰

Anne's retort to Captain Harville has been cited often by feminist theorists to substantiate their case against male hegemony in the field of letters. Polite but firm Anne attributes the difference in their perceptions to their conditioning:

We each begin probably with a little bias towards our own sex and upon that bias build every circumstance in favour of it which has occurred within our own circle; many of which circumstances (perhaps those very cases which strike us the most) may be precisely such as cannot be brought forward without betraying a confidence, or in some respect saying what should not be said.¹¹

Without any rancour, Anne tries to understand the masculine point of view with imagination, maturity and sagacity and attributes their opposing perceptions to their conditioned bias.

In what could be a lesson to modern feminists to shun trenchant stridency and chauvinism, Anne continues ardently:

God forbid that I should undervalue the warm and faithful feelings of any of my fellow-creatures. I should deserve utter contempt if I dared to suppose
Female ‘fickleness’ or ‘inconstancy’ is symbolic of feminine mystique (I owe this concept to Betty Friedan) which Jane Austen explodes in her novels. In *Persuasion*, the very title highlights a meek, obedient, malleable and tractable feminine stereotype. But this trait of being open to persuasion implies woman's lack of firmness and fabled female prevarication. Jane Austen's last novel is a dialectic of duty and self-affirmation, conformism and moral autonomy. The novel introduces the sea-farers who imbue it with the whiff of naval breeze. Land-locked locale is thrown open to the endless vistas of Admiral and Mrs Croft, Captain Harville and Captain Wentworth. Widely travelled Mrs Croft is used by Jane Austen to off-set intellectual stagnation of most of the women who remain confined to the hearth. A woman is bound by her domestic chores whereas a man is committed to his functional and social roles. Such segregation of functions is bound to develop different characteristics. Anne asserts that it is her Fate rather than her merit.

Jane Austen's delineation of women characters reflects her faith in the mental and moral strength of women. While reflecting on the inter-relationship between Charles Musgrove and Mary, Anne believes with Lady Russell that "woman of real understanding might have given more consequence to his character, and more usefulness, rationality, and elegance to his habits and pursuits." Lady Russell reflects Jane Austen's views that a woman of substance has the power to improve the mental as well as the social stature of her counterpart. Man should try
to shed his pre-conceived notions that women are frail, pretentious and frivolous. Jane Austen indirectly implies that man should free his mind of the past, revise his script of a woman and inter-act with clarity of mind and heart. The false notions of pride, self-esteem and prejudices strike discordant notes in man-woman relationship. Captain Wentworth deplores his pride, mad resentment and his jealousy which had prevented his regaining Anne's hand much earlier. He recognizes his own self as his greatest enemy:

But I too have been thinking over the past, and a question has suggested itself, whether there may not have been one person more my enemy even than that lady? My own self.... This is a recollection which ought to make me forgive every one sooner than myself. Six years of separation and suffering might have been spared.  

Jane Austen wants to bring about a change in men's perception by making them realize, the folly of obsession with pride, self-esteem and possessiveness. Jane Austen's acerbity is at its best in exposing the snobbery of the aristocracy:

Sir Walter Elliot, of Kellynch Hall, in Somersetshire, was a man who, for his own amusement, never took up any book but the Baronetage; there he found occupation for an idle hour, and consolation in a distressed one...  

Jane Austen points out that even men may be incapable of looking after their property. Anne's father, Sir Walter Elliot is "a foolish, spendthrift baronet, who had not had principle or sense enough to maintain himself in the situation in which
In his inability to look after his inheritance, Sir Walter is akin to Fanny Burney's heroines in spending his money recklessly. So much so that he has to rent out his property and move to a smaller place. Fanny Burney's heroines spent their money for a noble and good cause, while Sir Walter wastes his money in idle pursuits. Significantly, the heroes of Jane Austen's novels like Edmund, Captain Wentworth and Knightley are hardly seen at their work place. As Jenni Calder puts it,

Jane Austen's heroes, the men her heroines marry, that is, are clergymen, officers, or country landowners. All these occupations are seen as ways of life rather than ways of work. We do not see Mansfield Park's (1814) Edmund in action in his profession as clergyman, nor Captain Wentworth, in Persuasion (1818) aboard ship. There are a few hints of Mr Knightley's occupation as a land owner, but we see very much more of his social life than of his working life.117

The quest for moral autonomy, central to the bildung of Jane Austen's heroines, is carried on in the other novels under the auspices of a lover-cum-mentor Henry Tilney, Colonel Brandon, Mr Knightley. Notwithstanding the re-assuring presence of their guardians, Catherine Morland, Marianne Dashwood and Emma learn the hard way, through experience. Consequently, Jane Austen does away with the role of a male mentor in Persuasion. Anne lost her mother when she was barely eleven years old. As for her father, Sir Walter,
Sir Walter Elliot is a narcissist and is in love with his own body. His room in Kellynch Hall is full of looking-glasses. Jane Austen is at her savage best when she makes Admiral Croft remark: "I should think he must be rather a dressy man for his time of life.— Such a number of looking-glasses! oh Lord! there was no getting away from oneself." Sir Walter's narcissistic egotism finds its match in his eldest daughter, Elizabeth. Not surprisingly, our heroine. Anne, with her elegant mind and sweet character epitomizes Jane Austen's ideal woman.

Anne, with an elegance of mind and sweetness of character, which must have placed her high with any people of real understanding, was nobody with either father or sister: her word had no weight; her convenience was always to give way;—she was only Anne.

Anne, the oldest of Jane Austen's heroines seems to be the alter-ego of her creator. This phonetic affinity—of Anne and Jane (Austen)—may not be a mere coincidence. To debunk the ideal of femininity, Jane Austen takes away Anne's 'bloom' and prettiness and presents her as faded and thin, a jaded old maid of

Vanity was the beginning and the end of Sir Walter Elliot's character; vanity of person and of situation. He had been remarkably handsome in his youth; and, at fifty-four, was still a very fine man. Few women could think more of their personal appearance than he did; nor could the valet of any new made Lord be more delighted with the place he held in society. He considered the blessing of beauty as inferior only to the blessing of a baronetcy; and the Sir Walter Elliot, who united these gifts, was the constant object of his warmest respect and devotion.
A few years before, Anne Elliot had been a very pretty girl, but her bloom had vanished early; and as even in its height, her father had found little to admire in her, (so totally different were her delicate features and mild eyes from his own); there could be nothing in them now that she was faded and thin to excite his esteem.

Neglected by her 'conceited and silly father' and his darling daughter Elizabeth, Anne turns to Lady Russell for 'kindness and advice,' 'good principles and instruction.' Jane Austen's generous praise of Lady Russell is followed with a qualifying clause:

She was a benevolent, charitable, good woman, and capable of strong attachments; most correct in her conduct, strict in her notions of decorum, and with manners that were held a standard of good breeding...but she had prejudices on the side of ancestry; she had a value for rank and consequence, which blinded her a little to the faults of those who possessed them.

This qualifying clause becomes the principal factor in persuading Anne to put an end to her engagement with Captain Wentworth, whose worth is given a go-by, as is evident from his name. Intelligent, spirited and brilliant, Captain Wentworth falls 'rapidly and deeply in love' with the extremely pretty, gentle, modest, tasteful and 'feeling' Anne. The happy ending of this fairy tale is aborted by Lady Russell's persuasion who is horrified by Wentworth's self-confidence, brilliance, wit and fearlessness: "She deprecated the connexion in every light."

The merits and
demerits of Anne's being persuaded to give up the 'indiscreet and improper' engagement is the core of the novel. Anne justifies her prudent self-denial 'for his advantage' which obviously fails to convince Wentworth of his having been ill-used. This aborted love affair takes away her 'bloom and spirits.' The nice tone of her mind and her fastidious taste preclude the possibility of any second attachment. The intervening years have not lessened Anne's attachment. She keeps herself abreast of Captain Wentworth's naval achievements and is quite encouraged by his continued celibacy. Anne's sweet disposition precludes any bitterness against Lady Russell but deep down in her heart, it certainly has left its imprint. While exonerating Lady Russell and even herself from all blame, Anne feels she could never condemn any young person to "such certain immediate wretchedness, such uncertain future good." Anne's prudence in youth has made her more susceptible to romance. Prudent suppression of her longings in the prime of her youth, has resulted in sizzling romantic 'yearnings'— "the natural sequel of an unnatural beginning."

Jane Austen has all along been against suppression. In Mansfield Park, she had portrayed its reverse effects on Julia and Mary. Sir Thomas's propensity to repress was the outcome of his selfish wish to contain and control his world. Realising the suffering caused by unfulfilled needs, sub-conscious fears and self-abnegation, Jane Austen portrayed the negative effects of excessive emotional self-restraint.

The contrasting behaviour of Elizabeth and Anne underlines Jane
Austen's faith in an individual's ability to mould his circumstances. Virtue or vice is presented as neither congenital nor a matter of sex or class. Anne is able to cope with her sorrow because of her rational disposition. Her equanimity is not born of female fortitude, but out of her analytic ability. Whenever she gets emotionally charged, she composes herself through 'solitude' and 'reflections'. Jane Austen does not present Anne as desensitized, but a sensibly sensitive woman endowed with understanding and a good temper. After a gap of seven years, Anne's 'flushed cheeks' at the thought of Wentworth in Kellynch Hall betray her disturbed feelings:

\[\text{With all these circumstances, recollections and feelings, she could not hear that Captain Wentworth's sister was likely to live at Kellynch, without a revival of former pain; and many a stroll and many a sigh were necessary to dispel the agitation of the idea.}\]

During Anne's first meeting with Captain Wentworth after almost eight years, "a thousand feelings rushed on Anne." But as usual, Anne tries to subdue her feelings by reason. However, all her reasoning fails to lessen the intensity of her feelings for Captain Wentworth and she longs to know his sentiments. Though her sister's unkind gesture in conveying to Captain Wentworth's observation about her being 'Altered beyond his knowledge' mortifies Anne, she is rational enough to realize its veracity. Her sanguine temperament even finds solace in this comment:

\[\text{'So altered that he should not have known her again!' These were the words which could not but dwell with her. Yet she soon began to rejoice that she had heard them. They were of sobering tendency; they allayed agitation; they composed, and consequently must make her happier.}\]
Despite her best efforts, Anne's subversive feelings flow past her defensive barriers of reason, filling her eyes with tears. Anne is deeply pained by Captain Wentworth's "cold politeness, his ceremonious grace." Her pain is tinged with sweetness by an awareness of Captain Wentworth's solicitude for her comfort:

Yes — he had done it. She was in the carriage, and felt that he had placed her there, that his will and his hands had done it, that she owed it to his perception of her fatigue, and his resolution to give her rest. She was very much affected by the view of his disposition towards her which all these things made apparent. This little circumstance seemed the completion of all that had gone before. She understood him. He could not forgive her, — but he could not be unfeeling... he could not see her suffer, without the desire of giving her relief. It was a remainder of former sentiment; it was an impulse of pure, though unacknowledged friendship; it was a proof of his own warm and amiable heart, which she could not contemplate without emotions so compounded of pleasure and pain, that she knew not which prevailed.

Such evidence of Captain Wentworth's 'relenting feeling, some breathings of friendship and reconciliation' retrieves her 'youth and beauty'. Completely absorbed in her new found interests at Uppercross, Anne's familial concern are relegated to the hinterland of her consciousness. Her familial ties are apparently not very strong. Anne's command of her feelings and her judiciousness is evident from the way she copes with her first visit to Kellynch Hall after it has been rented out to Admiral Croft. Though Anne is not indifferent to changed circumstances, she is without the patriarchal chauvinistic pride in family estate and honour:
Anne is rational and conscientious to feel that Kellynch Hall has gone into more deserving hands. Jane Austen highlights Anne's warm and responsive heart by contrasting it with Lady Russell's reproving aristocratic demeanour. Anne is enchanted by the Admiral's goodness of heart and simplicity of character whereas, Lady Russell frowns upon his rugged naval tone.

Notwithstanding Lady Russell's dubious role in wasting seven years of Anne's life, she continues to be Anne's friend and guide. There are scarcely any perfect characters in Jane Austen's fictive world. Even in retrospection Anne Elliot justifies her yielding to Lady Russell's persuasion as "a strong sense of duty is no bad part of a woman's portion."

This conditional 'negative' is a significant departure from making sense of duty an integral part of a woman's life. The novel marks a clear departure from the beaten track. As Darrel Mansell remarks:

\[
\text{And so as her career closes she leaves that well-known road Catherine walked in the first novel. Jane Austen is drawn to the trackless sea, and to those who have braved the sea. She is drawn to open-hearted and casual sailors; Colonel Brandon and Edward Ferrars were hardly that. She is drawn to a sailor's unsettled, irregular and fluid life; a life hardly like that at Mansfield Park. She is drawn to a sailor's craving for raw, unpredictable experience.... Jane Austen is drawn to the beauty there is in having enriched one's life by passing through}\]

In such moments Anne had no power of saying to herself, 'These rooms ought to belong only to us. Oh, how fallen in their destination! How unworthily occupied! An ancient family to be so driven away! Strangers filling their place!'

116
For the first time in Jane Austen's novel, danger has a place in the final happiness of the heroine. Jane Austen's resentment and bitterness at unfairness of women's lot is quite explicit. Anne, while claiming for her own sex the privilege of loving longest, adds parenthetically that her sex is "not a very enviable one, you need not covet it."¹³⁴

Though Captain Wentworth like Knightley, Darcy and other heroes in Jane Austen's novels professes to be bewitched by Anne's perfect 'excellence of mind,' Jane Austen is realistic enough to realize the sway of female beauty, particularly when it is appreciated by one's rival. Captain Wentworth's love resurfaces after the passing admiration of Mr Elliot had at least roused him."¹³⁵ In depicting Captain Wentworth's avowal of love for Anne Elliot after eight years of estrangement, Jane Austen highlights male inconstancy underlying his verbal sophistry:

*He persisted in having loved none but her. She had never been supplanted. He never even believed himself to see her equal. Thus much indeed he was obliged to acknowledge — that he had been constant unconsciously, nay unintentionally; that he had meant to forget her, and believed it to be done. He had imagined himself indifferent, when he had only been angry; and he had been unjust to her merits, because he had been a sufferer from them. Her character was now fixed on his mind as perfection itself, maintaining the loveliest medium of fortitude and gentleness.*¹³⁶

While demanding such high standards from women, men's complacence about their
shortcomings, —anger, unjustness, pride — pinpoints their double standards.

Jane Austen analyses the stereotype feminine trait of being open to persuasion, by implying woman's lack of firmness, a direct challenge to her moral autonomy. But Jane Austen is not against persuasion *per se*, as Anne avers, "a persuadable temper might sometimes be as much in favour of happiness, as a very resolute character." But Jane Austen deplores Elizabeth Elliot's brand of "internal persuasions," which are nothing but pre-conceived and set prejudices.

The novel is a diatribe against sentimentality with Mrs Smith playing a pivotal role. Her realistic humanism precludes cynicism. She can be described as Anne's friend and guide. Her sanguine approach to life, a lively interest in others, and being endowed with the choicest gift of Heaven, of finding gainful employment, help Mrs Smith to remain cheerful in her vicissitudes. Jane Austen considers idleness as the bane of woman's life thereby heralding the modern working woman.

The 'ambiguities' and 'discrepancies' are a tribute to Jane Austen's realistic humanism and are not the illogic of a creative artist as alleged by Patricia Beer:

*There are hints, sometimes strong ones, that she is dissatisfied with the traditional status of woman, but they keep disappearing. They do re-emerge, however, in a different guise: as the ambiguities, discrepancies and illogic of a creative artist, who is presenting experience, including her own, not discussing ideas. As far as the Woman Question is*
concerned Jane Austen could well be described as a latent socialist who helps to make capitalism work and it is more than worthwhile to follow the resulting conflict and even to pin flags on to the map. 139

Roger Gard relates "the idea of persuasion" to Jane Austen's larger concern about the proper role of women.140 He underlines Anne's passive and obliging behaviour by stressing her most lucid and active mind and like Emma, her courage and ability to speak out at the right moment leads to her happiness. In the climactic discussion about men, women and constancy with Captain Harville, Anne's moral idealism comes alive as an active quality, "the rationale justifying her behaviour and refutes criticisms of ineffectual receptivity."141

Jane Austen makes Anne enjoy Admiral Croft's rugged and robust humour while Lady Russell is not amused. Jane Austen's broad mindedness and lack of prudery along with her reticence, impart to her works, a delectable ambivalent tension. "Prudery has no part in Jane Austen's reticences, and, while the outspoken frankness of the Georgians is not hers, neither is Victorian prissiness."142 The conflict between Jane Austen's wishful thinking and her realistic portrayal of experience is Jane Austen's way of expressing her dis-enchantment with woman's traditional role. Jane Austen's work is notable for the questions it raises about moral autonomy, rationalism, decision making, active principle and self-respect of women at large.

The novels of Fanny Burney had tried to awaken women out of their complacency by dwelling on their want of education, resulting in untold suffering.
Men in Fanny Burney's fiction are present as predators. In Jane Austen's novels, though we are aware of the dice loaded against women, yet the scenario does not seem bleak. Spirited and vibrant female protagonists like Elizabeth, Emma and Elinor are presented as capable of striding alongside their male counterparts. Carolyn G. Heilbrun recognizes Jane Austen's innovative perspective and remarks:

"Her quiet miracle was to be able to represent the lineaments of society by an art in which men and women move in an ambience of equality: they are equally responsible, both morally and socially, for their actions, nor are the qualities of humanity which mark the admirable characters in Jane Austen's world distinguished by sex." 143

While Jane Austen recognizes the inegalitarian nature of society in her times, with its concomitant concentration of power in males, she is able to imbue her novels with an aura of equality. Equality is the basis for all relationships, and marriage being the most intimate form of relationship cannot be meaningful without it.

Jane Austen's emphasis on intellectual equality as the basis for marriage is an oblique disparagement of male preference for beauty. Just as Fanny Burney had decried men's penchant for beautiful dull women, so that men could subordinate them, Jane Austen is at pains to make her heroines intellectually equal to their male counterparts. Her stress is on merit, rationality, elegance and moral autonomy. It is this that sets her apart from both her contemporaries and predecessors and makes her a feminist before her times.
NOTES AND REFERENCES


All further references pertaining to Jane Austen's text are from his edition.


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