CHAPTER II

THE FEMININE POINT OF VIEW BEFORE JANE AUSTEN

Since the morality of the Restoration stage had made marriage a topic of ridicule, the women of the age had not exerted a refining influence. Therefore, "Throughout the eighteenth century a contempt for women was still too characteristic of the aristocratic character". Women were not encouraged to develop or display their artistic talent. An attempt at writing or thinking or enquiring would encroach on their time and possibly demean their talent for beauty. The condition of female authors was so deplorable that a Shakespeare's sister might have died with all the music in her. In the days of Dr. Johnson, authorship for women was a miserable experience. Though Dr. Johnson had bestowed a lot of praise on some contemporary female writers, yet he, too, in general, shared the existing contemptuous attitude of society towards women.

At the behest of her step-mother, the silent Miss Fanny

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2. Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (1929), ch. IV.
performed the melancholy ritual of destroying all of her juvenilia in a bonfire. She asked Charles Burney not to let anybody know that Evelina was her work: "... nobody must know that I am the author. Novelists are not highly thought of today." Even as late as January 1800, we find Miss Edgeworth writing to her cousin in a letter: "We have begged Johnson to send you Castle Rackrent. I hope it has reached you. Do not mention to anyone that it is ours ..." Queen Charlotte had "a settled aversion to almost all novels and something very near it to almost all novel-writers". Miss Burney's jealous step-mother thought Evelina only "some trumpery novel quite unsuitable for young ladies".

Women writers had no stable traditions to follow. After the death of Smollett, the last of the notable novelists of the mid-eighteenth century, the novel became a most popular form of art, yet in the process it lost its former finesse to a great extent. It was in a state of "sleeping sickness". However, in the seventies, the women writers were receiving some attention and their prospects were becoming bright. Some women started writing admirably well, though they could not be compared with men like

Henry Fielding and Richardson. In 1773, The Monthly Review observed that "this branch of literary trade" appeared to be "almost entirely engrossed by the ladies". And, again in December 1790: "Ladies seem to appropriate to themselves an exclusive privilege in this kind of writing." It is mainly for this reason that the custom of anonymity for women authors was not so common by 1790, though it certainly lingered on for quite some time.

Although Richardson had elaborately dwelt on female delicacies and female characters, yet his was not a feminine point of view. It was the women novelists who, for the first time, brought into the English novel female tenderness. As J. H. S. Tompkins observes: "Delicacy in a woman writer is the sine qua non." As in life, so in literature, her strength and weakness lay in this quality. For the women writers, woman's strength was in her heart, not in her head: imagination, sympathy, simplicity and spontaneity—these were the qualities usually expected in her. She must have essentially female qualities. The faults of judgment, for instance, could be conveniently

overlooked, if she possessed "sense of the right feminine kind". Her greatness lay "rather in a quickness of apprehension and a delicate taste, than a strong judgment." Along with delicacy, she must have a firm prop of sound moral 'principle'. The frequent reference to this in the novels of the time is characteristic. The Rev. Mr. Villars observes to Evelina:

"Remember, my dear Evelina, nothing is so delicate as the reputation of a woman: it is at once the most beautiful and the most brittle of all human things." -2

His warning is reminiscent of Miss Burney's own remark about 'poor Miss L' when she feels guilty of snubbing her:

"It is, however, impossible and improper to keep up appearance with a female who has lost her character, however sincerely she may be an object of pity." -3

The safety and security of women lay chiefly in a strict adherence to the established moral values. Miss Clara Reeve held vice more despicable in a woman than in a man, as

3. Early Diary, ed. A.R. Ellis (1913), II, p. 73.
according to her, "woman was intended to be a more perfect creature than man". The women, too, took seriously the task of educating men—a role that was allotted to them by men themselves. Even a cynic like Lord Chesterfield found the presence of women the best means of maintaining the level of good breeding. The Reverend James Fordyce declared female excellence the best guardian to keep man away from vice. Many women in their novels are adequately aware of their responsibility. As a matter of fact, they always kept in mind that the main function of the novel was ethical—to ennoble and strengthen the human mind. In short, they desired to instruct and improve the human mind through the novel.

II

The women novelists would often read out their writings to the few members of their families. It was the age when one tested one's novels by reading them aloud. So, family criticism was a powerful force to give it a new direction. Jane Austen wrote about her niece, Anna Austen's work in 1814:

"We have just finished the 1st of the 3 books I had the pleasure of receiving yesterday: I read it aloud—and we were all very much amused, and like the work quite as well as ever." -1

1. SL, L.N. 98, p. 163.
Fanny Burney would read out from her manuscripts of *Evelina* to Susan; later she read from her book to dear "Daddy" Crisp also. She "danced a jigg to Mr. Crisp" when he liked *Evelina*. To Sir Walter Scott, forty years later, she dilated on the incident with great glee. Mr. Crisp encouraged her to write her long letters with ease and spontaneity. "Dash away, whatever comes uppermost," he begged. "If you stop to consider what you say, or what may be said of you, I would not give a fig for your letter."

He urged her to write as her own instincts directed her to do:

"Whomsoever you think fit to consult, let their talents and tastes be ever so great, hear what they say!—agreed! but never give up or alter a little merely on their authority, nor unless it perfectly coincides with your inward feelings."

In the case of Maria Edgeworth, the influence of her father, Mr. R.L. Edgeworth, should not be judged adversely on the sole evidence of *Belinda* (1801). There is no denying the fact that *Castle Rackrent* (1800), written without his influence, is her best novel. She has treated in some detail the probable influence of parental misbehaviour upon children in *Patronage* (1814). Mr. Edgeworth, though greatly attached to her, was a man of a very exacting and masculine

nature. He supervised and corrected her work thoroughly:
"Go on and finish--leave that to me; it is my business to cut
to correct--yours to write on." His egoism is evident from
the nature of the order he left behind about the publication
of his Memoir. He "left order that his own share of the
work was to be printed intact, with all its errors,
inaccuracies and solecisms exactly as he had left it."

Maria Edgeworth confessed that she was greatly inspired and
encouraged by him in her works. "I am sure I should not
have written or finished anything without his support," she
once remarked. She drew upon her own and her father's
experiences of the world.

These women had mostly male mentors or guides—males
with strong manly impulses. Mr. Day, a great friend of
Mr. H.L. Edgeworth, stood for an absolute submission of the
female to the male in married life; his own terms on which
alone he could be induced to offer his hand to any woman, as
written in his declaratory letter to be delivered to the
beautiful Henora Sneyd included, among other things, an
absolute submission to the husband's rule. Maria Edgeworth
wrote jointly with her father, Practical Education (1798),
a work which shows the influence of Rousseau's ideas. She
was the dutiful and "copious daughter" of her father, and
she invariably confided in him. Richard Burney was brought
upon the strictest principles of the school of Rousseau.
Miss Burney's guides were her father, Dr. Burney and Daddy Crisp. They did not impose their views upon her, but, for her, they were definitely some of her important critics whom she was keen to please. Then Sir Johnson, Burke, Sir Walter Scott were among the male friends and critics favourably disposed towards these women writers. Sir Walter Scott in his first letter of invitation to Maria Edgeworth signed himself "Respectfully yours" and called her "Lioness". As he wrote in the preface to Waverley, he was inspired "to emulate Miss Edgeworth's admirable Irish portraits", after reading Castle Rackrent. Dr. Johnson called Miss Fanny Burney the "dearest of all dear ladies". The great man was proud of the "Little Burney". "Sitting by Miss Burney makes me very proud today," he once observed.

The world these women writers sought to portray was still a man's world. In Castle Rackrent (1800), Miss Maria Edgeworth makes her Thady, "Poor Thady" (as he calls himself) relate the whole story. Although Fanny Burney named her three novels—Evelina (1778), Cecilia (1782) and Camilla (1796)—after the heroines, yet in all these stories she depicts disturbing, though not revolting, experiences of the heroines in the world of men. Belinda (1801), Patronage (1814) and her Fashionable Tales (1812), all have a rich, and sometimes imposing, effect of conscious didacticism, the influence mainly got from male novelists of the age.
These women writers' own experiences of the male world were vast and varied. As her father's faithful secretary and a keen listener to many conversations among men and women, Maria Edgeworth was also well-versed in the men's world. At the time of the great Famine in Ireland, she generously helped the poor countrymen. A prolific and diligent diarist, faithful secretary of her father, Miss Fanny Burney was well-qualified to paint the social manners of the times.

The technique followed by these novelists enabled them to present a faithful picture of the society of the time. The sub-titles of Fanny Burney's novels give a direct clue to it. *Evelina* promises to give an account of a young lady's entrance into the world of men, her experiences in the world of complexities and misunderstandings. *Cecilia* proposes to record the 'Memoirs of an Heiress'. *Camilla* seeks to present the picture of youth of the time. The sub-title of the novel *The Wanderer* (1814) is meaningful. Though Miss Burney had no professed critical theory to work upon, yet by intuition she had realized her marked talent for graphic descriptions. It was probably compatible with the female temper to have a strong hold on reality and ordinary experiences of life. Evelina, who is thought to be a portrait of Miss Fanny Burney, writes to Mr. Villars letters full of minute and thorough detail of her experiences. He
also very much appreciates and desires the same:

"I cannot too much thank you, my best Evelina, for the minuteness of your communications; continue to me this indulgence, for I should be miserable if in ignorance of your proceedings." —1

Caricatures and exaggerated "humours" in characters tend to add to the total effect of the picture. Daddy Crisp was right when he remarked: "To do you justice, Fanny, you paint well." Keen-eyed Maria Edgeworth had a close grip on the homelier side of reality and presented it with scrupulous fidelity.

These writers disliked affectation in art as well as in life. Miss Fanny Burney would rather read letters from Frances and Henry than the Vicar of Wakefield (1766), partly because they are real, whereas the Vicar of Wakefield is fictitious. "Those Letters," she writes, "are doubly pleasing, charming to me, for being genuine . . . . They have increased my relish of minute heart-felt writing." She wrote that she was disappointed in Mrs. Roewe's Letters from the Dead to the Living because they betray improbability and inordinate enthusiasm. Mrs. Roewe's

moral enthusiasm, intense as it was, did not appeal to her. "They are so enthusiastic, that the religion she preaches rather disgusts and cloys than charms and elevates." It was the age when most men distrusted enthusiasm of any sort and preferred good-sense. While commenting upon the superior nature of Dr. John Hawkesworth's writings, Miss Burney observed with pity: "... he has a small tincture of affectation." Maria Edgeworth, too, liked naturalness in art and life. In one of her letters she wrote: "It is extremely agreeable to me to see paintings with those who have excellent tastes and no affectation." It is, indeed, 'affectation' that is exposed in the writings of these women writers. Miss Fanny Burney admires sentiment only as long as it is genuine or sincere. In her novels, for the first time in the English fiction, setting becomes essentially functional. She localised London scenes to the extent never done before. Maria Edgeworth loved to describe life more than any thing else. In a letter to her step-mother, she wrote in 1834:

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1. Ibid., p. 9.
2. Early Diary, p. 48.
"Your delightful accounts of Fanny and Lucy (the two invalids of the moment) are more inspiring than all the blue skies that ever I saw. Not that I mean to affront the blue skies, which I like very much in their proper places, poetry inclusive, but they never affect my spirits in the wonderful way they do some folks."

To lend an air of complete verisimilitude to the portraits of different characters, they have been often taken from life itself. Maria Edgeworth has modelled Ormond after her father and drawn Thady from life. Ormond is a cross between Tom Jones and Sir Charles Grandison. In the Patronage (1814) Buckhurst Falconer and his scheming father are living characters. Miss Fanny Burney had seen and heard about some characters; while some were half seen or heard and then developed, and some others wholly invented by her from current social characteristics. Mr. Smith (in Evelina) is modelled, as her sister Susan suggests, after Mr. Barlow; Mr. Villars after her own "Daddy Crisp". So these writers tended to produce types rather than individuals.

Miss Burney has a great historical significance because she serves as a bridge from earlier novelists—Fielding, Richardson, Smollett—to Maria Edgeworth and Jane Austen. In her later novels particularly she copies her masters too closely and to her great disadvantage. She also imitates the style of Dr. Johnson. She loses
control over her material. Her close adherence to conventionality is damaging for her artistic development. More often than not, her characters are stereotyped. Lord Orville turns out to be an idealized elder brother. Fanny Burney fails here. However, when she draws upon her own authentic experience, she is plausible.

In their works these women writers laid emphasis on women and their feminine traits. Moral or didactic strain is a part of their character. Fanny Burney introduces her heroine Evelina in Author's Preface as "a young female . . ., with a virtuous mind, a cultivated understanding and a feeling heart." The underlying intention is also to portray a real and life-like woman, an anti-romantic heroine. She goes on to declare about her novel, Evelina:

"Let me, therefore, prepare for disappointment those who, in the perusal of these sheets, entertain the gentle expectation of being transported to the fantastic regions of Romance, where Fiction is coloured by all the gay tints of luxurious Imagination, where Reason is an outcast, and where the sublimity of the Marvellous rejects all aid from sober probability. The heroine of these memoirs, young, artless and inexperienced, is

No faultless Monster, that the world ne'er saw,
but the offspring of Nature, and of Nature in her simplest attire." -1

Notwithstanding the fact that the world that these women novelists portrayed was not wholly woman's, they focused their attention on woman and her occupation. The emergence of the domestic novel owes much to the contempt expressed for female understanding and her limited range of experience. It was much more an invention of women writers, too. The startling adventures or events did not suit (much to) the female temperament. Calm and conventional domestic life remained their favourite field of interest. In Evelina the point of view remains that of Evelina throughout; out of the eighty-four letters that make up the novel, she is the author of sixty. Maria Edgeworth delineates Irish women in real colours.

Miss Fanny Burney connects the whole fate of her characters "with the central crisis in the life of woman, when the possibility of marriage lies directly in her path". Thus she deals with them in a way that had already been adumbrated in the Pamela of Richardson and the Amelia of Fielding. In the hands of Jane Austen the subject is thoroughly sifted, more strictly reduced to its essentials. Her novels concentrate on the restricted circle of home life.

To conclude, women novelists, especially Maria Edgeworth
and Miss Fanny Burney, brought into English fiction female tenderness and the feminine point of view. Although under the prevailing influence of their male mentors they portrayed man's world, yet they concentrated their attention on woman and her problems. While presenting a vivid account of the manners of the time, they suggested domestic life as a new field for sister-novelists. Jane Austen continued with this point of view, but with a difference. She, too, dwelt at length on women's life—and in a woman's world. However, to analyse her art, one has to study her as a woman and examine her views on women and their problems.