Chapter IV

Jane Austen as a Woman Writer

Jane Austen has become so popular in the recent past so much so that her novels have been resituated in the light of the development of women’s studies. Many of her novels have also been adapted to television serials and films with widespread acclaim. Being a woman writer, writing around the time when women writers were almost unheard of, Jane Austen’s creation of the image of woman in the late eighteenth and the early nineteenth centuries was remarkable. Today, she has invoked many a debate among the modern critics as to where she should be placed as she was far ahead of her time in her choice of theme and the image of women in the British society she has presented.

In this chapter an attempt is made to analyse Jane Austen as a representative woman novelist of her time. Her distinctive place as a British novelist is that despite the dominance of male writing space when she wrote she was the most undaunted woman writer who made a space of women writing tradition by virtue of her talent and originality. As a woman she did not have that kind of freedom and access enjoyed by other women writers and novelists in later generations especially in the twentieth century. Jane Austen did not react or revolt against the male tradition nor did she try to invent female tradition in writing fiction in the mode of a feminist. All she did was to create a female space within the thick male literary tradition. She saw life as a composite of men and women, and as such she presented both from very close range. Creativity for woman was not so much a thing of admiration when Jane Austen wrote. But she as a woman writer fearlessly took up the cudgels representing the voice of women never heard so strongly in the past. Each of her novels is a distinctive female achievement, which shows her clear understanding of life, love and marriage, and their complications. She can be aptly said to be the precursor of what Showalter calls “Feminine Phase”, a time when women got up with pens in their hands. The treatment of Jane Austen as a woman writer is necessary for locating her in the history of women writing tradition.
When Jane Austen started writing in the late eighteenth and the early nineteenth centuries the British literary scene was predominantly patriarchal. The writers, critics, reviewers, patrons, publishers, public readers and press – everything was under male domain. Women writers did not have a space in the literary environment as women, and even as individuals they were regarded as the “greater children” or “property” to be handed down from father to husband or brother. They are however essential to their daily lives as moderators in family, society and sometimes political meetings as appendages to sustain their smooth interaction and livelihood. Therefore for women to come out as writers was to be branded as “unfeminine”, “infamy” or “exposing one’s modesty”. Amidst all these strong restraints women writers were at their peak in what Elaine Showalter calls the Feminine Phase.

The Feminine Phase dates from 1840 to 1880 where “women wrote in an effort to equal the intellectual achievements of male culture, and internalised its assumption about female nature. The distinguishing sign of this period is the male pseudonym, introduced in England in the 1840s, and a national characteristic of English women writers” (Showalter 1978: 35). The plight of women, in general, in those days was conditioned as daughter, wife or widow. Other than these, to come out as individual or woman writer means attracting the attention of “men who were strangers to the family circle, and was thus a breach of feminine modesty. (Irvine 2005: 13). This dread of being defamed as writer might have been the reason why Jane Austen had made use of pen-name Mrs Ashton Dennis or simply M.A.D. Other male pseudonyms used by the eighteenth century British women writers are George Elliot, the Bronte Sisters, Currer Bell, Ellis Bell and Acton Bell, to name a few, also adopted male pseudonyms to suit the literary standard. The society of Jane Austen did not yet consider novel written by women as good literature. They presumed that novels written by women were about women, children, and domestic trivialities yet it was very popular among the ladies of the middle class society as they appealed to them. Writing fiction was in fact male’s and not female’s territory.

Women’s writing is far different from that of men. For instance, the subject and theme chosen by the women writers are different from those taken up by men.
Women’s interest and concern are different from that of men’s by nature. Their world views are also different. As much as men focus on the importance of war, sports, business and all big social events in their writing, so also do women on domestic and homely interest such as child-care, house-keeping, sewing or cooking. The difference in interest does not lessen or increase the value of literature which men have to accept. In fact the difference would be complementing and contributing to the development of the same family, society and country at large just like the two sides of a coin. Jane Austen, with her deft and subtle manner, has elevated the form of novel from that of all-woman to that of everyday-event which is now a subject that can be studied academically as well as to be enjoyed for the sheer pleasure of reading a novel by all irrespective of sex and age-group The need of separate literature for women would not have cropped up if men have encouraged and accepted the interest of women’s writing skill and choice of reading literature.

The subject of war, for example, is not the choice of women writers as it has no personal appeal to them. War is historically not a noble subject to women because “war has not wrenched women from their communities . . . war has not changed women as immediately as it has changed men . . . . War is a horrifying time for women . . . They have nothing to gain . . . war is no more a ‘noble’ subject to women than gambling is to men” (Brown 1979: 152-3). Jane Austen is a keen observer of her society and wants to promote as well as create awareness that woman is part and parcel of a growing society, who has her own set of mind to decide her future course and to be regarded as an individual. Jane Austen’s neglect of the Napoleonic war, for which she has been often alleged by critics, is a proof in itself of a woman’s lack of interestedness in war. She was well aware of the ongoing war as her brother, Frank Austen was in the navy, yet she chose to write about what appealed to her and not what was popular in her time.

The choice of subject being different between men and women is seen in the observation of Rajeshwari Rajan, a modern Indian Austen’s critic, who states that in his Country and the City (1973), Raymond Williams places Jane Austen alongside Gilbert White, the English naturalist, and William Cobbett, the radical journalist who were her contemporaries and neighbours in the countries of
Hampshire and Surrey. She quotes Williams: “In this small locality, overlapping within a generation, there these three people, three writers, who could hardly be more different” (Rajan 2004: 7). Rajan asserts that they would be writing differently according to the difference of class that separate their points of view, interpretations, selection of realities and that while “Jane Austen was writing from inside the house that Cobbett was passing on the road” (ibid.). The way the men observe and write about the society would be different from that of a woman’s perspective. Jane Austen’s concern is about the gentry landed families and so writes only about them while Cobbett might have written about the ravages of the war or that White of the environment affected due to war aftermath.

Jane Austen is a realistic novelist and also a woman preoccupied with ordinary people’s concern, having “a strong affection for family life, and who could write, in the same novel, of ‘all those little matters on which the daily happiness of private life depends’” (Page 1972: 7). Her entire endeavour is to maintain a peaceful atmosphere at home and sees to that her novels bring to light the essence of how to achieve that. What Wollstonecraft has said about the injustice of the tradition remains the same but when we study Jane Austen’s Sense and Sensibility (1811), we can see the way out of that evil which can be remedied by reforming through self realisation of the individuals. Jane Austen’s “daughters” are not thrown out to such “joyless solitude” as Wollstonecraft has stated, for they have a willing relative to provide a home for them. Sir John Middleton, a relative of Mrs Dashwood, a gentleman of consequence and property in Devonshire, has given his cottage near his residence to the Dashwood ladies when they are virtually thrown out from their home. Sir John Middleton’s kind deed is in keeping with the practice of the primogeniture system where a relative takes care of the destitute women. In reflecting the benevolent act of a patron other than that of a sibling, John Dashwood in this novel, she is invoking the filial compassion due to the female relatives by the blood-siblings. She is entreating the male relatives to take greater care of those who are at their mercy. It is not the brother but his wife who dissuades him from assisting his step-sisters and mother – a case of woman against fellow women, which is most
hurtful to Jane Austen. Lack of female bonding is also at times a matter of deep concern in her novels, though she is never overt about the subject.

Jane Austen is not against the system but pleads for the cause of women who would be in dire state if not given the basic needs of shelter and comfort. There is no bias against her counterparts but brings to light the flaw of the system which can be reformed. She has been the immediate beneficiary of her sibling’s patronage. Edward Austen, who later took the name of Knight after the death of his foster parents, was the well-off among the Austen brothers. He took in his sisters Cassandra and Jane along with their mother at Chawton Cottage and they remained there till their last days. Jane Austen, like all other women writers writes about the joys, the trauma, and the plight of women as she experiences in real life. She is trying to bring harmony in the society by exposing the evils which can be remedied by the blending and complementing one another’s wants and wishes through the union of compatible young married couple whose marriage is built on love and respect.

The interest and view of men and women being different, literature written by women writers would definitely be different from that of men writers, so also the readers. Women would naturally be drawn towards reading what appeals to them in the areas which most concern them. Ruth Sherry in her work *Studying Women’s Writing: An Introduction* has come out with some remarkable insights as to whether there should be a different women’s literature. This issue comes out as a consequence of how women’s writing has been regarded by the society, especially the literary men. “In the past, works which focus on women were often thought of as aimed mainly at women readers, while works which focus on men were considered to be aimed at a ‘general’ audience, suitable for reading and study by both men and women. . .” (Sherry 1988: 2). The fact that literature written by women focuses on women characters, on women’s lives and experiences cannot be the basis of differentiating it from that of the writing by men writers. She goes on to assert that the judgement that works about men are “general” while works about women are “narrow” or “specified” tells us something about the way in which our culture has evaluated the relative importance of the experience of men and the experience of
women. As this experience changes, we notice that women writers frequently have given us a more detailed depiction of women’s lives, ideas, emotions and preoccupation, than men have. Perhaps, in works by women, there are relatively few male characters, or they occupy a less central place than women characters do.

In trying to bring about the difference, Ruth Sherry brings out a beautiful illustration from Tillie Olsen’s novel *Yonnondio: From the Thirties* (1974) where the protagonist Anna, as a wife and mother has to perform the minimal basic family life going against virtually impossible odd single handed. The following passage shows how Anna, herself ill, has to manage her children, the sick child as well as to cook peaches during the peak season when it is cheap. An excerpt from the novel as quoted by Sherry runs thus:

The last of jelly is on the stove. Between stirring and skimming, and changing the wet packs on Ben, Anna peels and cuts the canning peaches - two more lugs to go. If only all will sleep awhile. She begins to sing softly – *I saw a ship a-sailing, a-sailing on the sea* – it clears her head. The drone of fruit flies and Ben’s rusty breathing are very loud in the unmoving heavy air. Bess begins to fuss again. *There, there, Bessie, there, there*, stopping to sponge down the oozing sores on the tiny body. *There*. Skim, stir; sprinkle Bess; pit, peel and cut; sponge; skim, stir. Any second the jelly will be right and must not wait. Shall she wake up Jimmie and ask him to blow a feather to keep Bess quiet? No, he’ll wake up cranky, he’s just a baby himself, let him sleep. Skim, stir; sprinkle; change the wet packs on Ben; pit, peel and cut; sponge. This time it does not soothe – Bess stiffens her body, flails her fists, begins to scream in misery. Just then the jelly begins to boil. There is nothing for it but to take Bess up, jounce her on a hip (*there, there*) and with her one free hand frantically skim and ladle. *There, there*. The batch is poured and capped and sealed, all one-handed, jiggling-hipped. *There, there*, it is done. (Qtd. in Sherry 1988: 4)

What one sees in the activities of Anna, “juggling and balancing” between cooking and the care of her sick children at the same time having to sing to lull them to sleep might have taken the male readers by surprise or they might not believe it possible. The women readers however identify with her and empathise with her plight. Like
all mothers, she cannot sit still to rest and tend to her sickness when the need of her family is uppermost in her priority. Olsen brings out the psychological as well as the traumatic experience of a mother pressed to perform the manifold activities without complain or regret and does it efficiently. Such type of emotion and enthusiasm of a women’s role would never attract a male writer to write about it in his work.

The performance of Anna is identical with all women be it in an American, English, Indian or African family. The need of a mother is always kept backstage when it comes to the need of the children and family. Similar to Olsen’s Anna, we have Buche Emecheta’s Nnu Ego in “The Joys of Motherhood” (1979). Between the choices of taking care of her children and to earn money to get rich, she chooses her children as to her “the joy of being a mother is a joy of giving all to her children. Nnu Ego realizes that money and family progress do not go together” (Begum: 2010: 35). A passage of her thoughts as quoted by Begum is as follows:

She had reminded herself of the old saying that money and children don’t go together: if you spent all your time making money and getting rich, the gods wouldn’t give you any children; if you wanted children, you had to forget money, and be content to be poor. Nnuego realizes that part of the pride of was to look a little unfashionable and be able to draw with joy: ‘I can’t afford another outfit because I’m nursing him, so you see I can’t go anywhere to sell anything. (ibid.)

In this regard, it is hard not to mention the African born British novelist Buchi Emecheta, who in all her novels deals with women’s plight in Africa, where a woman at birth is dependent on her family, father, brother, being a patriarchal society in which women are second class citizens. Then, marriage is inevitable for her which means she is again an appendage to her man – the husband. Every married woman in Africa is at first a wife, then a mother of children, who again is to rear and bring up her children while still performing the domestic chores and pleasing her husband. This kind of life of a woman in Africa is different from that of a woman in the western society, where there is no sexual and gender discrimination, as all women get equal share, equal treatment, equal opportunity and equal rights because they are all aware of their position in the society mainly because of education. On the contrary, if we look at central character, Nnu Ego in Emecheta’s The Joys of
Motherhood, she knows the joy of being a mother the hard way. She has been beaten and divorced by her first husband for not bearing him any issue in the first few years of her marriage. She becomes an outcast, a failure as a woman in the eyes of her husband and society for being barren. When she eventually bears a son in her second marriage, she becomes happy as her days of humiliation is over, but the joy is short-lived as the child dies while she goes to sell tit-bits to assist her husband’s income. She almost kills herself thinking that she is a failure as a woman and a mother.

As a traditional woman, Nnu Ego believes “the old saying” and later on sacrifices everything to rear up her subsequent children. Ironically her joy of being a mother, with the hope that her children would be there for her in time of need, is met with disappointment as they hanker after their own aspirations in their new world and neglect her in her old days, leaving her alone to die with no sons by her side. In depicting Nnu Ego’s character, Emecheta is portraying the plight of the African women. The anguish of a woman’s mental and physical state, the self-pity and remorse caused by the tradition are very well captured by her as a woman writer who has experienced such ordeal. The novel exposes the tortures inflicted on women due to the advocacy of polygamy in African society affecting the women on the basis of her procreativity, gender and inheritance which are manifested in the male character of Nnaife, Nnu Ego’s second husband.

Women’s writing is concerned with women’s lives, experiences and problems. It is because of this that women’s writing is different from men’s writing in terms of interest, perception and understanding. No matter how much men claim to know about women’s mind, feeling, body and bodily matters and concerns is a matter that occupies modern research a great deal. The necessity to write about women by women was felt long ago by women writers, because in history women were at the receiving end, and men the producer of female characters in literature, especially fiction. Such female characters as created by men are stereotypes only, not the women of flesh and blood, but the pale outward picture of women as made fit in the male-made model. This is not the genuine picture of what the women feminists depict. Such writings by men for women to consume are called “feminist critique” by Elaine Showalter. And the replacement of this real women characters
created by women are called gynocritics, stuffed with women’s experiences, lives, fluid language that generate a separate genre of women writing tradition.

We can go on to say that novelists before and after Jane Austen, had written many novels centring round women characters yet they are still different in many ways. A number of male novelists have written major novels in which central character is a woman as this phenomenon is common in the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries where the novels centred upon an attractive young woman and her adventures. However, in these works written by men, the women characters are almost always seen primarily in relation to men, and they are usually of interest largely in terms of their romantic and sexual relationships. If we closely analyse the works of, for example, Samuel Richardson’s *Clarissa* (1748) and Thomas Hardy’s *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* (1891), the given observation would not be altogether wrong. Both of them present their heroines as angels but as fallen angels. Richardson’s Clarissa and Hardy’s Tess are virtuous female characters who suffer at the hands of their seducers, society and family for no fault of their own. Both the characters are projected as victims of circumstances - weak and submissive – more sinned against than sinning.

Richardson’s Clarissa refuses to succumb to her father’s dictate to marry the odious Mr Solmes. She loves Loveless, a rake who forces her to flee from the loveless marriage only to disappoint her with his recklessness. She rejects his proposal as he has attempted to seduce her before marriage. When Loveless finally managed to seduce her after drugging her, he again offers to marry her but she refuses as by now she is totally disillusioned. Against her modesty, she is considered a “ruined woman who has willfully contributed to her own dishonour. Her family regard her as a wicked runaway who deliberately chose ruin at the hand of a rake” (Daiches 1985: 707). The notion that if one is disobedient one would be punished is being implied, a moral code of conduct to young ladies.

Hardy’s Tess too has been punished for no fault of her own. She has been seduced by Alec and begets a child from him but refuses to marry him. She cannot marry her seducer for which she is ridiculed and stigmatised by society for having
an illegitimate child outside marriage. The child however died in infancy. Later she meets and marries Angel who abandons her because she has been deflowered before their marriage. Alec compels her to stay with him after convincing her that Angel would not return to her. Moreover the precarious circumstance of her family leads her to succumb to his persuasion. Later when Angel returns to claim her, contrary to Alec’s prediction, Tess kills Alec for deceiving her. Tess pays the price of murder by being executed at the hands of law.

The punishment falls on the female protagonists only and not on the men who are the real perpetrators. Double standard of man is seen in the society as well as in the writing of male novelists unlike those of Jane Austen’s novels or other women novelists. Moral implication on the female victims is very much evident though they have a central place. The mental anguish and suffering of women is hardly depicted. In spite of the authors’ empathy with their heroines in the face of the patriarchal society, they cannot portray the emotional and psychological trauma of the protagonists.

This is where the “difference of view” between men and women comes in. “Difference is redefined, not as male versus female” (Jacobus 1978: 12). Women writers’ literature does not challenge the writing of their counterpart. It is simply an expression of their experience, desire, aspiration and emotion. In venting out their ideas, joys, sorrows or concern they are pleading, exhorting as well as cautioning the readers to learn from what they have experienced, which is why their writing is definitely different from that of men. Jane Austen’s novels consist of a wide range of women characters who live in traditional patriarchal society. Southam rightly comments on Jane Austen as a woman writer writing about “women and exploring their experiences as individuals in their homes, in society and, in particular, in their relationships with men, Jane Austen was welcomed by Victorian feminists as a fellow-spirit” (Southam 1987: 11). They found her characters so sympathetic and refreshing without any hectoring, any overtly feminist interest, and without any mission as done by earlier novels.
Jane Austen in her own merit can be treated as a feminist, as she is associated with feminism because of her central focus on women characters who are attractive, intelligent, strong women who can command themselves to resist the strong dictates of patriarchal society. “Any author who could create an Elizabeth Bennet or an Emma Woodhouse . . . must be promoting a feminist cause” (Looser 1995: 6). In her projection of Elizabeth and Emma, two female characters with contrasting backgrounds, we see Jane Austen’s concept of feminine resistance against the conventional expectation of female submission. Elizabeth belongs to the lower gentry class whose daring act of refusing two prospective marriages, at a time when her family estate is in danger of being forfeited on her father’s death, is viewed by the modern critics as rebellion against men. Emma, the wealthy daughter of a landlord would rather remain single than marry the pompous Mr Elliot, not fearing the dread of spinsterhood in old age. In portraying their strong rejection to marriage, we should know that Austen is not against the institution of marriage as such but at the general concept that women would naturally accept any proposal as that was the only vocation left for them. She would not allow even the poor, helpless, timid heroine like Fanny Price to marry the gallant Henry Crawford as she does not respect or love him. Her concept of certain modes of conduct as against the norms does not mean that she is a rebel against her tradition. What she tries to show is a degree of self judgement based on one’s own understanding of the norms and decorum of the society in relation to one’s own strong personal character guided by good sense, gentility and social acceptability, not just by personal likes and dislikes.

In spite of the low esteem of women’s writing, it is remarkable how powerful they can convey their ideology through their writing. Mention can be made of the earliest eighteenth century feminist who is instrumental in invoking the mind of the society against the social evils that exploited women. When feminist writing is discussed, her contribution cannot be overlooked. And she is Mary Wollstonecraft whose *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) was written about the precarious condition of women in the eighteenth century where: “A woman could not own property, unless as a widow she inherited that of her late husband. Daughters were, legally speaking, themselves the property of their fathers, wives the property of their husbands” (Irvine 2005: 22). She voices her concern when
daughters are not given proper education to equip themselves for any job or are not being properly treated by brothers who are responsible for their welfare after their father’s death. The primogeniture system, besides giving all the property to the eldest son to pass on to the next generation, has a provision for the care of the women by the nearest sibling, a relative or the community. But often the other half of the tradition was discarded by the siblings when their wives control the string of the coffer. Wollstonecraft’s main argument is that women’s social, political underprivileged condition was mainly caused by their lack of education, hence lack of opportunities. Therefore, women’s emancipation was directly linked to women’s awareness as a result of social change and broad outlook.

Although Wollstonecraft was contemporaneous with Jane Austen, the latter was not a beneficiary of the former’s new ideas of women’s emancipation. Jane Austen’s feminism is not very close to the later development of the movement. Her novels are, no doubt, a world where many women characters are seen in playing an active role in matters of love and marriage, meetings, visits, which made life affairs very lively and fresh, such that her world is concerned with development of social and domestic connections through the relationships which are tangled with complexities, difficulties, tests etc. Women’s roles are limited to matters related to their well-being or at times not so conducive to their growing up lives. There are elderly women who take charge of growing up girls, mothers who are not concerned with their daughters, mothers who are madly in search of gallants for their daughters. Wise and not so wise, impulsive girls are everywhere in Jane Austen’s novels. But some of them can be called, in real sense of the term, feminist, because they are not trying to show their typical female identity, and problems they face, the first characteristics of feminism. Then, they do not question or challenge the masculine assumptions about feminine roles of women. Her characters are docile, and protectors of propriety - decorum, morality and good manners – as chief feminine attributes for all her heroines.

In bringing out the feminine attributes of her heroines, Jane Austen is helping her society to have better citizens. What was most needed in her time was the “new emphasis on the need of good manners and morals among the propertied
class. Since they did not rule by police and force but rather by a system of deference and obedience . . . ‘Restraints, control, propriety were vital if society was not to blow up in their face’’’ (Tanner 1986: 17-18). The role of women and her conduct is essential in moulding the mindset of the society. And this is far from feminism. As a novelist Jane Austen did not write against patriarchy, exploring and exposing the social, political, economic and sexual exploitation perpetuated by men on women. All her women creations are closely and intimately bound to tradition and they are models of good conduct, and free moral agents, carrying forth humanist principles that advocate that women are to fulfil the ideals of society, man made. They are angels at home, untouched and saddened by domestic chores, child bearing and child rearing. Very seldom children’s education is discussed in all her novels, so also women’s welfare projects, awareness clubs, guiles against patriarchal oppression and sexism. For every feminist writing is political that subverts patriarchal authority and voice by rejecting feminity, biologism and essentialism. Jane Austen does not give the painful life of women, hence her position as a woman writer is located within the male tradition – she does not create womancentric world, where we can see the real flesh and blood women characters, who are exposed to hardships imposed on her by culture and society, and appertaining to women’s being females, the sexual class where woman’s body is her destiny.

If we examine all Jane Austen’s novels and her women creations it will be far too early to label her as a feminist writer. She is writing as a woman not only about women but also about men. Her women characters are put on the altar of marriage and before that they perform pre-marriage rites, preparing themselves for the grand phase of rite of passage. However, with Jane Austen there was a turning point in the art of fiction writing for she was the first great woman writer who broke the age-old silence of women that became an unbreakable shackle for many women, like Sarah Fielding. Breaking silence may be looked at or considered a step that breaks away from complicit with the existing power structure body politics. We hail Jane Austen because her entry is the success of marginalised with that women’s discourse and lost voice is regained. To accept patriarchal and dominant man literary tradition is to suffer self inflicted colonisation. Feminist revolt did not take the form
of an open war in the beginning, it was a slow movement gaining momentum over the years in the twentieth century.

In Jane Austen’s time it was not possible for a woman writer to be completely unorthodox in the treatment of women characters, whose inner and sexual lives could not be still explored for fear of breaking taboos. For her writing fiction from her woman’s point of view was like walking on a rope or on the razor edge. She could not become radical because she was tradition bound, sex was a taboo subject. Therefore she had to live in the glamour of her British society without penetrating into the opposed psyche of her woman characters. When we study her work we have to know the time in which she lived and wrote. For author like Jane Austen, she never fights for equality or emancipation from the conventional norms but expresses her experiences through fiction so that both men and women may come to a common platform to discuss and share responsibilities to build a bright future without any prejudices against any class, gender, or profession.

Jane Austen’s debatable reputation would be ongoing for ever as she “is one of the most enduring and wide read of our classical novelists and her modernity, or her timelessness of her appeal, is striking. As more intense and searching critical attention is turned upon her work, so much more and more complexity emerges” (Rees 1976:130). She produced finest masterpieces that would have multiple voices and appeals commensurate with time and place. She remains a major voice from the marginal position, and that is a woman writer’s space, unshackled.
Works Cited


