CHAPTER IX

CONCLUSION

In the late Eighteenth Century, the women novelists laid emphasis on woman and her traits in their works. Evelina takes her 'womanliness' with her when she enters the world at the age of seventeen. The stress here is on the heroine's experiences, though the world she moves into is a man's world. However, both in Miss Fanny Burney and Maria Edgeworth the essential feminine point of view is not unadulterated, as their mentors were males.

In some ways comparisons between Jane Austen and Miss Fanny Burney are inevitable and interesting. To some extent, Miss Fanny Burney supplied material for Jane Austen. Both of them concentrated their stories on family and marriage.

However, their experiences were different. At an early age, Miss Fanny Burney was petted by Dr. Johnson, and with the introduction to Mr. Thrale's sophisticated set, her world expanded immeasurably. She was a famous author after the publication of her first novel. Jane Austen was not so fortunate. The early reviews and notes treated her novels rather as light reading or a means of conveying moral truth. Few of the major Romantic and early Victorian critics found her congenial; her reputation grew slowly among a
small group of admirers. It is only after the publication of her Memoir (1870) that the literary world began to recognize her genius.

The two novelists were also different in outlook. Fanny Burney lived in and loved cities, whereas Jane Austen felt at home in a village or town-village alone. Jane Austen, generally, associates her good characters with the countryside and bad ones with London-life. However, while exposing dissipated life in London, Mr. Rev. Villars observes that all life in the city is not baneful. Then, Fanny Burney imitates conduct books and Richardson's patterns of novels. Not infrequently her heroines are a passive embodiment of virtue, ultimately to be protected by men. Again, Jane Austen's outlook is progressive and original. She does not follow Richardson or Courtesy Books too closely. The material provided by her predecessors is imaginatively assimilated into her feminine vision.

Unacquainted with the literary wits of the time, Jane Austen was still influenced by their writings. As Richard Sampson points out: "Not they, but their books influenced her—their writings, not their company and conversation." She probably got some hints or subjects from


male writers like Richardson, Fielding, Swift and Smollett. But it is to women novelists whom she looked most for method or manner. And, while taking a cue from sister-novelists, she excels them all in her achievement. Whereas Clara Reeve writes tolerably well in the romantic vein and Maria Edgeworth in the characteristically Irish strain, no woman novelist equals Jane Austen in the portrayal of life-like and living women characters. Miss Maria Edgeworth is too avowedly didactic and Fanny Burney too copious and imitative. In Jane Austen, moral and realistic trends are harmoniously blended. Charlotte Lennox in the Female Quixote (1752), brings about the exquisite qualities of Lady Arabella by contrasting her with her spiteful and silly cousin, Miss Glanville. The method is followed by Fanny Burney: she provides striking contrasts to her well-bred characters. But Jane Austen's art of characterization of women goes much beyond this when she uses the contrastive mode of study.

I

The late Eighteenth Century attitude towards woman was rather conventional. It was sentimental and passive or sympathetic and compassionate. Generally women were regarded as inferior. This view stands manifested in all the aspects relating to woman: viz. marriage, social status, family life and so on. This is reflected in the novels of
the time. The hero tends to be a 'perfect' man whereas the heroine is a Cinderella.

The traditional views of life and society were challenged at the turn of the Eighteenth Century, chiefly by the disciples of Rousseau and Godwin. The writers underlined passion and revolt as their cardinal principles. Mary Wollstonecraft deplored the inferior attitude towards women and pleaded for equal rights.

Conservative novelists and moralists reacted sharply to this school of thought. In her *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education* (1799), Hannah More condemns novels of the school of Rousseau. Maria Edgeworth satirised the romantic-revolutionary novelists in her short novel *Angelina* (1801). Elizabeth Hamilton's satire entitled *Memoirs of Modern Philosophers* (1800) is also written with a similar intention. These women novelists pleaded for traditional values.

The Feminist Movement made some progress in the late Eighteenth Century England. However, in the distant southern countryside, where Jane Austen mostly lived, its influence probably was not very powerful. Thus the emergence of feminism is not much in evidence in Jane Austen. She was not, like Mary Wollstonecraft or Barbara Leigh Smith or Miss Beale, "preoccupied with abstract idea about female rights, roles and wrongs." She portrays an intelligent
heroine. In her novels, "intelligence can admit defection, never deep rebellion." Jane Austen prefers reason to passion, sense to sensibility. According to her, woman is considerably capable and influential in her own right. She establishes woman's strength by concentrating on woman's world and emphasising her feminine characteristics.

II

In her Country-house Comedy, Jane Austen studies woman in relation to the family. She has great regard for family relationships. When these are ignored or held in low esteem, she is highly displeased. Whenever a woman fails as a member of the family, she becomes the target of Jane Austen's irony.

Jane Austen's heroines are agreeable and lovable creatures who embody feminine traits. They are amiable and attractive, and invariably well-meaning and unassuming, open and affectionate at heart. Indeed, as Emma once observes: "There is no charm equal to tenderness of heart." Although their reactions in words are not spontaneous, yet they react spontaneously and naturally to circumstances. According to Jane Austen, a right-minded woman must have the chief feminine characteristics. Women with formal schooling are likely to neglect feminine delicacy and accomplishments. So no heroine, except Anne Elliot, attends
any school.

On account of their mental agility, her heroines have considerable perception. Mr. Bennet acknowledges Elizabeth's "quickness" of mind. In Emma, this faculty is mainly given to the hero--the heroine being of erring nature. This critical awareness is not anywhere perfect or complete. Neither Elizabeth Bennet nor Anne Elliot can claim to be infallible. Perfection belongs to heaven above. Jane Austen confines herself to this world. Her heroines also speak a clear and unambiguous language. Even when confused, there is clarity and method in their confusion. It is this perceptive awareness, actuated by moral principle, steady grasp and amiability, which imbues them with a unique halo.

Endowed with tenderness, sympathy and tolerance, the basic prerequisites of a woman novelist, Jane Austen often presents her characters with delicacy and charm. This is both her weakness and strength. Whereas her many men are woman's men, her women are just themselves and hence impressive. Not infrequently the women bores are foolish, but they possess womanly accomplishments. These bores indulge in a number of follies--all of them are in line with female nature. It gives them a remarkable freshness and a new dimension. In the dramatic situations, they become interesting and, hence, unforgettable.
Jane Austen's outlook towards men and women in her novels is balanced and realistic. It is not in line with the scope of her novel-pattern to concentrate much on men, though many of her men characters have solidity and individuality of their own. Nor does she belittle the competence or capability of men. Men like Mr. Knightley, Mr. Darcy, Henry Tilney and Captain Wentworth are lovable figures. She thought men considerably competent and hard-working; her own brothers must have strengthened this conviction. Anne Elliot upholds this conviction and conveys it to Captain Harville:

"I should deserve utter contempt if I dared to suppose that true attachment and constancy were known only by woman. No, I believe you capable of everything great and good in your married lives."

(P, p. 236)

Henry Tilney clinches the issue:

"In every power in which taste is the foundation, excellence is pretty fairly divided between the sexes."

(NA, p. 28)

In fact, for Jane Austen the provinces of males and females are distinct and different. Man, being made of sterner stuff, is destined to work hard and weather all the storms of the world. His tastes, habits and hobbies are
all manly—shooting, angling, farming, reading newspapers, business, etc. The proper field of woman is the home. She possesses peculiarly female characteristics: soft-spokenness, talkativeness, a proclivity for handwork, etc. There is no clash between the two sexes—each might shine in his or her own field. Whereas man's forte is strength, woman's is tenderness.

It is the union of manly and womanly traits that leads to a healthy and harmonious domestic life. It is woman's womanly aspect that will win her lasting affection and admiration. Jane Austen's heroines will always fascinate us because they embody this aspect so beautifully.