

**Jane Austen**  
**Anxiety over Authority**

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## Introduction

By God, if wommen hadde writen stories,  
As clerkes han withinne hir oratories,  
They wolde han writen of men more wikednesse  
Than all the mark of Adam may redresse.<sup>1</sup>

This comment by the astute Wife of Bath, can be compared with Jane Austen's protagonist Anne Elliot's response to Captain Harville in Bath when she tells him that

"Men have had every advantage of us in telling their own story." (P, 221)

Gilbert and Gubar also echo this view when they say,

When he [Chaucer] gave the Wife of Bath a tale of her own, he portrayed her projecting her subversive vision of patriarchal institutions into the story of a furious hag who demands supreme power over her own life and that of her husband : only when she gains his complete acceptance of her authority does this witch transform herself into a modest and docile beauty.<sup>2</sup>

Critical appraisal of Jane Austen's novels has been enormous and comprehensive. But the views have been divergent and have ranged from anti-feminist or conservative criticism to feminist interpretations. However, in the current trend governing Austenian criticism, her status as a 'feminist' has been a matter of some controversy.

Gilbert and Gubar, Margaret Kirkham, Claudia Johnson, Maaja Stewart and Mary Poovey belong to the feminist group, arguing that Austen entertained pro-feminist views and that her female characters enjoy power, authority and strength. The characters that have been deliberately deprived

of them carry some message which the author had chosen to highlight. Johnson sees Austen as a feminist who disguised her true feelings and thoughts because of the limitations which society then imposed on women. Gilbert and Gubar advocated such a view about Austen as well as about other women writers like Emily Dickinson, Charlotte Bronte, Emily Bronte, Mary Shelley and others. Claudia Johnson states that Austen's novels clearly show –

... a consciousness of how the private is political and a sensitivity to the problem women writers encounter living and writing in a male-dominated culture.<sup>3</sup>

The purpose of [her] study ... [Johnson says is] ... to reconceptualize the stylistic and thematic coherence of Austen's fiction by demonstrating how it emerges, draws, and departs from a largely feminine tradition of political novels ...<sup>4</sup>

On the other hand, the conservative school argues that Austen was not a feminist and that she never meant her heroines or female characters to be too powerful or domineering. This approach is represented by Marilyn Butler, whose objective,

... is to show that her manner as a novelist is broadly that of the conservative Christian moralist of the 1790's; that she continues to write as a Christian, with minor modifications only to accord with the prevailing manner ...<sup>5</sup>

She divides Austen's heroines into those who are "Right" in terms of "conservative orthodoxy" like Fanny and Anne and "Heroines who are Wrong" in the "... more spiritual-looking errors of pride and presumption ..."<sup>6</sup> like Elizabeth and Emma. In 1975 Marilyn Butler argued a new case:

Austen's acceptance of the 'orthodox' views of the English moralists was not neutral; it was a sign of her commitment to Burke and political reaction.

Margaret Kirkham vehemently opposes Butler and holds her views to be mistaken because they fail to take account of the extent to which Wollstonecraft in *Vindication*, and the whole line of English feminism from Astell to Austen, relies upon eighteenth century argument about ethics and uses it to promote the idea that women are accountable beings of the same kind as men. Kirkham further says,

Marilyn Butler's *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* remains a most stimulating and informative contextual study, but her conception of the war does not make sufficient allowance for the many and varied battles which made it up.<sup>7</sup>

She goes on to opine that F. R. Leavis's placing Austen as inaugurator of the great tradition of nineteenth century fiction of moral (social) concern also needs further consideration, for there are marked differences between her and those considered by Leavis as her successors. Her moral interest as a feminist was not shared by George Eliot, Henry James or Conrad. Her view of English society was not influenced by Carlyle since she was dead before he had begun to exercise an influence. She points out that

The underlying argument of the Austen novels – and they are novels in which argument matters – is entirely in accord with this. It looks old-fashioned now, but it should be noted that Austen is often most radical, as a *feminist*, where she sounds most out-dated (and most like Mary Wollstonecraft)<sup>8</sup>

Between the two extreme views on Austen as pro-feminist or anti-feminist, critics like Alistair M Duckworth and Tony Tanner argue that she was not completely a feminist or an anti-feminist, but a skeptical progressive and a social critic who is pessimistic about the possibilities of social improvement. Duckworth in the 'Preface' states that he has,

... sought to identify in her ... novels an authentic commitment to a social morality and a continuous awareness and exposure of attitudes destructive of social continuity ...<sup>9</sup>

Tanner too, regards Austen as a socially conscious writer who was very aware of the issues faced by women then.

As I hope will be apparent by the end of this book, ... Jane Austen does both expose and criticise the ideological assumptions which ground her society.<sup>10</sup>

Amongst the other prominent critics, Lionel Trilling believes that Austen is humanely sympathetic in her treatment of human beings, while Marvin Mudrick holds that Austen was not so humanely inclined and was even inhumane towards some of her characters like Maria Bertram and Mary Crawford of *Mansfield Park*. Trilling's criticism makes Austen more optimistic about social change and harmony, whereas, Mudrick makes her more pessimistic. But in Austen's works Gilbert and Gubar saw how,

Austen demystifies the literature she has read neither because she believes it misrepresents reality, as Mary Lascelles argues, nor out of obsessive fear of emotional contact, as Marvin Mudrick claims, nor because she is writing Tory propaganda as Marilyn Butler speculates, but because she seeks to illustrate how such fictions are the alien creations of writers who contribute to the enfeebling of women.<sup>11</sup>

In these broad categories of Austenian criticism, critics like Gilbert and Gubar, Kirkham, Johnson, Butler, Mudrick, Judith Lowder Newton, Duckworth, Tanner amongst others – no matter what their stand have been - have directly or indirectly examined the issue of power and authority in Austen's novels and some of them have made use of the terms 'power' and 'authority' too. My reading of Austen has made me aware that her views on women's relationship with power and authority was never static but changed and matured with years as is seen in the development from *Pride and Prejudice* through *Emma* to *Persuasion*. This research will outline these changes, whom she considered worthy to wield power and authority, and how at times these were mishandled. It will also analyze the all important effect of education and finances on the acquisition and exercise of power and authority. The attempt will be to show that she primarily advocated the need for limited and restricted authority for both sexes based on the intelligence and ability of women to handle it, rather than of excessive power for either. Without necessarily approving of the fact, the novels however, show men wielding greater power than women and also the fact that both the sexes are capable of grossly misusing it. The thesis will also examine how Austen's heroines come to exercise limited authority with their husbands though its degree may vary from marriage to marriage, thus

illustrating the point that women even in patriarchal society did possess the ability to wield power and authority.

It is this urge to exercise power and authority that turns human beings into likeable or disgusting characters. Austen's female characters have been categorized under 'angel', 'monster' or 'human' depending on their need to control their lives and that of others, their desire to exercise masculine power and authority and the way they ultimately handle it (terms adopted from Gilbert and Gubar). It is on the intricacy of power relationship and depending on their ability to use or abuse it that they have been so classified. The motive behind the author's own requirement to delineate such characters will also be explored, and how some of them hint at certain hidden aspects of their creator's psyche and her thought process.

In this thesis on power relationships between the sexes in Austen, reference has been made to different kinds of power and authority and how Austen expresses her anxiety over the imbalance inherent in these relationships. Here 'authority' means the right to command and control significantly other people's lives as well as one's own. This authority is vested in a member or members of the family or community and is dependent on certain factors such as his position in the family and society, his occupation, economic status and intelligence. 'Power' is used in a complementary sense with 'authority' and means to control and influence

others. 'Authority' is a more social term than 'power' for it is granted or attributed to an individual by others, whereas, power is potency which can be acquired with or without the agreement of others, like the power of money or of physical strength. Authority or power is determined by the same factors, which in turn determines the type of authority exercised by different persons. Thus, we have intellectual, moral, legal, customary, economic, paternal, social, and patriarchal authority. These powers are mentioned in the essays of Tanner, Johnson and Newton. For instance, Newton in her essay deals primarily with economic authority and she tries to establish how women like Elizabeth Bennet are not powerless because they lack economic authority.

The strongest form of authority that an individual can acquire is legal authority, for law and not convention backs it. A stronger form of social authority, it usually resides with males or widows in its stronger form and only in severely limited form with women, children and other dependents. Legal authority being a force in itself can function without intellectual or moral authority. Consequently it is easily misused. Paternal, patriarchal and economic authorities have to be backed by legal authority. Thus, on the strength of legal authority, Lady Catherine can abuse her power and authority in *Pride and Prejudice* and General Tilney misuses his patriarchal and paternal authorities grossly in *Northanger Abbey*.

The society in the novels is patriarchal: power held by men is transferred through men. Paternal authority is somewhat similar because here authority resides with the male and the father, but it differs in that it can be exercised only by a father or father-figure and not otherwise. These two authorities without economic authority and some intellectual authority can be significantly ineffectual. Patriarchal and paternal authorities are based on inheritance and belong only to men, unlike intellectual and moral authorities, which depend on the intelligence and sense of morality in either gender. Ineffectual in themselves they have to be backed by economic or social authority. Moreover, they are interdependent on each other for the influence and exercise of one without the other can lead to abuse of authority. But together moral and intellectual authorities can significantly challenge economic, parental, social and some legal authority. Thus, Elizabeth Bennet and Fanny Price can successfully resist economic pressures, parental and social authorities both within and without the family and thereby exercise the right to choose their husbands.

Women can acquire authority in general significantly through the use of intellectual and moral authority as Elizabeth and Fanny do in *Pride and Prejudice* and *Mansfield Park* respectively as also other heroines of Austen, except Catherine Morland. Likewise men and women without intelligence and morality can have their authorities diminished as do Collins, Wickham

or Mrs. Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice* and most other secondary characters in the various novels.

Economic authority can be exercised by few and primarily by males, widows or heiresses. It means controlling one's wealth and especially of one's dependents. Widows can exercise economic power, while women whether married or unmarried may exercise little economic authority themselves because they did not have any legal authority over their money or property. Economic authority can sometimes override social, paternal, intellectual and moral authority and even influence legal authority. Another factor that significantly influences the wielding of economic as well as other forms of authority is education. However, within the patriarchal set-up women are deprived of proper education and are therefore easily led to adhere to the age-old culture of subordination to the males in their society. This disadvantage of women will be discussed in an individual chapter. Similarly the notion of economic power and authority and the disparity between men and women will also be discussed in another chapter.

Membership in a particular society automatically bestows a kind of authority on a person, though the degree may vary according to circumstances. For example, a father will possess more social authority than a son and married women more than the unmarried ones as does Lydia Wickham over Elizabeth Bennet and Mary Musgrove over Anne Elliot in

*Pride and Prejudice* and *Persuasion* respectively. Such an authority is sanctioned by custom rather than by law. Though not a source of power in itself social or customary authority is akin to paternal authority and can often be affected by other forms of authority.

The thesis examines the use and abuse of the various authorities and their effect on the characters in inter-personal relationships. The attempt will be to show that the novels suggest the need for limited authority which results in a resolution of the tension between different powers, as when Fanny's moral authority moderates Sir Thomas's legal and economic powers when she refuses to marry Henry Crawford. Austen, however, takes care to point out that this may not always be possible for a less intelligent person. Thus, it is shown that neither the Bennets nor the Grants can share limited authority because they are intellectually incompatible. Despite this the novels maintain a balance by assigning authority among intelligent people. Because of this balance tyrannical power in any single person is kept under control. Also the initially powerless heroines are given a measure of control over their own lives. Thus, Sir Thomas in *Mansfield Park* is made relatively less powerful and a more benevolent figure of authority at the end and Lady Catherine's power too at the end of *Pride and Prejudice* is significantly restricted. In the end Austen gives Elizabeth, Emma, Fanny,

Elinor and Anne much more control over their own lives than they had at the beginning.

The various novels have demonstrated that despite the economic, societal and various other forms of impositions, protagonists from Elizabeth to Anne have always possessed authority – which is to be differentiated from power. However, devoid of attributes like financial independence which contributes to power, they possessed an authority without power. They possessed authority of a moral kind derived from native intelligence and their strong sense of justice and ethical behaviour. By endowing her heroines with moral authority, Austen places them on a higher plane than the other characters. This in a way seems to compensate them for their lack of other sources of power. The plot of the narratives is so structured that some of these heroines or survivors are portrayed as superior human beings, even superior to most men because of their moral authority.

To endow some of her heroines with superiority over most men, was in itself a daring step, unthinkable of in eighteenth century England. This naturally necessitates along with her position as a one of the earliest female novelists to write about these issues with utmost caution and sensitivity. Her concern and unconventional views over power and authority and other feminist topics were hence expressed in an indirect manner. Austen's deep awareness of the restrictions to which women were subject to and the

delicate position of a woman writer made her write with great propriety and often resorting to irony as a means to express her views. This emerges as the hallmark of her style throughout her narratives.

Besides being an artistic device, irony for Jane Austen became a vehicle of personal defence, which protected her from the wrath of the society and at the same time enabled her to say what was unsayable in public. After *Northanger Abbey*, whose publication was suppressed by publishing houses, for her open criticism of sexist bias in literary works and in reviewers; Austen learnt to camouflage her real feelings in such a manner. She henceforth chose to tell the truth through riddling irony that were either eluded or misinterpreted, except for a few ingenious readers who could read between the lines. Paradoxically she soon acquired a literary reputation among those who either did not understand, or did not think it wise to show too much understanding of the moral riddles posed in her works.

This same anxiety resulted in her emphasis on propriety bordering on prudishness is also evident from the way she lived her life. From the concealed manner in which she wrote in her drawing room covering her work with a piece of lace at the slightest intrusion, her appearance and the way she spoke and carried herself, was deliberately so cultivated that she was never suspected of being an author. People found her to be fair, elegant

and handsome but certainly not an author, except for her closest acquaintances who knew about her pre-occupations as a novelist. Her personal obscurity was deliberate and "... more complete than that of any other famous writer ..."<sup>12</sup>

To those who knew about her pre-occupation – not an occupation – she was quick to add that it was not an attempt at literature but just an accomplishment by a lady. Too aware of the trouble in which she would find herself in, if she tried to assume the airs of a *littérateur* or an author, Austen perpetuated this idea among her acquaintances. Indeed, feminists like Mary Wollstonecraft had to face the wrath of patriarchs, for being a rebel and in transgressing the limitations that were imposed on the female writer. If anything, Austen publicly held her own works to be too light, bright and sparkling to be considered as serious literature. In spite of these public protestations Austen was very much an author with a mind of her own, and one is inclined to agree with Margaret Kirkham when she says:

The lady novelist might publish anonymously, might declare her aversion to the glare of public notice, might assure the world of her lack of learned qualification and her dislike of 'masculine' women, but if she went ahead all the same and published, her actions belied her words. ... for at this period to become an author was, in itself, a feminist act.<sup>13</sup>

Women writers in eighteenth century England wrote under very oppressive conditions. The submissive and docile ones - who never thought of themselves as capable of any good like Maria Edgeworth and Jane Austen, were actually the ones respected by their society and their sex,

because they did not project themselves as literary women. Whereas, those who tried to establish their image as a literary woman and as an intellectual, like Mary Wollstonecraft (Horace Walpole referred to her as a 'hyena in petticoats') were abhorred not only by the males but even by their own gender. Women were considered as 'Cyphers', and literary women in particular were 'Cyphers' in a greater degree, they were eunuchs, because they had to be unsexed, stripped off their gender since they assumed a calling that had traditionally belonged to men.

Austen was well aware of this derogatory attitude and was herself critical of her contemporary fellow authors and thinkers. True, she made no outward observation on the treatment meted out to female writers, yet we have her comments on writers and writings in general both open and disguised in her novels; some of which will be cited in the course of this dissertation. For instance, the names and works of Sir Walter Scott and Lord Byron occur in *Persuasion*; Wordsworth, Burns, Richardson, again Scott and perhaps even Dr. Johnson without directly mentioning his name are referred to in *Sanditon*. Though she is critical of some of these works she nonetheless absolves herself by stating that it is the people who are at fault for letting themselves be wrongly influenced by them. Thus, in *Persuasion* it is Benwick who suffers from a weak mind and in *Sanditon*, Sir Edward suffers from "... a perversity of Judgement ... [for] not having by Nature a



very strong head" (*S in NA vol.*, 358). She detachedly reflects through her protagonist Anne,

... it was the misfortune of poetry, to be seldom safely enjoyed by those who enjoyed it completely; and the strong feelings which alone could estimate it truly, were the very feelings which ought to taste it but sparingly. (*P*, 98)

Although Austen does mention the works of her contemporary female writers, poets and novelists, she is conspicuously silent about the radical Mary Wollstonecraft, her treatise or her novels – with or without admiration. Indeed, we cannot but be suspicious that Austen was consciously avoiding making any mention of Wollstonecraft in her works. It is worth noting that Austen's novels were first published in the aftermath of the anti-feminist reaction which followed Mary Wollstonecraft's death and the scandalous revelation of her libertine lifestyle - a time when open discussion on feminist ideals was almost impossible. Despite the lack of direct evidence that she had read any of Wollstonecraft's works, it will be pointed out in the dissertation that there are clear instances that she had been considerably influenced by her feminine ideas which have been obliquely hinted in her narratives.

Jane Austen was born in December 1775 and was thus sixteen when the *Vindication* was published. She grew up and became a novelist in the following decade when the Feminist Controversy, in which fiction played an important part, was at its height. Many critics have noticed that feminist feeling and feminist ideas are easily apparent in her novels, yet the full importance of the Controversy, as exercising an influence upon the development of her work and its publication, has not been made apparent, nor has it been taken sufficiently into account in considering the way Jane Austen was presented to the public after her early death.<sup>14</sup>

Given the position of the female writer it was not for nothing that Austen's family went out of the way to protect her. Her brother Henry Austen went to great lengths to emphasize that Austen's literary accomplishments were more accidental than deliberate and this was perhaps done to fulfill the requirements of her age, although it was her literary distinction which had presumably earned her the honour of a cathedral burial. He stresses on the lack of incidence in her life and her preference for a retired, domestic existence.

He knew that given the prejudice of the time, his sister's personal reputation might not escape embarrassing comment were the full force of her irony to be understood. No matter how blameless her life, a woman known to have avoided marriage and to have held independent views of a feminist kind might not be kindly or respectfully treated.<sup>15</sup>

After elaborately praising her on her "... perfect placidity of temper ..." ("Notice" in *P* vol., 4-5), on her qualities of forgiveness, kindness, impeccable manners and a "... temper ... as polished as her wit ..." ("Notice" in *P* vol., 4-5), Henry Austen arrives at the important statement that,

She became an authoress entirely from taste and inclination. Neither the hope of fame nor profit mixed with her early motives. ... so much did she shrink from notoriety, that no accumulation of fame would have induced her, had she lived, to affix her name to any productions of her pen. In the bosom of her own family she talked of them [works] freely, ... But in public she turned away from any allusion to the character of an authoress. ("Notice" in *P* vol., 4-5)

We have Austen's own acknowledgement of her preference to limit the scope of her works and her self-conscious question, about it,

How could I possibly join them on to a little bit of ivory, two inches wide, on which I work with a brush so fine as to produce little effect after much labour? ("Postscript" in *P* vol., 6).

This speaks most forcefully of her awareness of this confinement to which a woman author was restricted to in her society. To go beyond these limitations would not be tolerated. She no doubt made the most of this little bit of ivory and worked on it to the point of perfection. Working within the confines of the conventions of domestic comedy, she nonetheless succeeded in enlarging its scope so that they carried philosophical, socio-cultural and political resonance far beyond its surface meaning. While restricting herself to such curbs she exhibits the problems and dilemmas of her sex, in the most detached manner possible, without any partiality or prejudice towards either sex, admitting that outside the two inches of ivory lies the uncharted domain of the male writer. That despite this knowledge, Austen could write with such impartiality – without fury and rancor against men, but always maintaining a calm and poised tone is the hallmark of her intellect, genius, and sophistication.

Traditionally painting on ivory was considered to be a lady-like occupation. Significantly Austen established herself securely and comfortably within this self-imposed restriction and effectively portrayed the vulnerability (to the wider world) and confinement imposed on her sex within that limited space of two inches. Although she sought to retreat

inside this cocoon which she had woven so lovingly and caringly, yet this same cocoon failed to protect her from external attacks. Indeed, the earliest of criticisms against her were precisely because she sought to shut herself from the world at large and hide herself in her burrow.

Fellow-writers from Sir Walter Scott to Charlotte Brontë, Edward Fitzgerald, Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Edgar Allan Poe, Mark Twain to Emerson and D.H. Lawrence, have all criticized her works for going no further than the parlour, the confines of tame meadows and cottages and beyond the lives of three or four families. They have deplored the lack of passion, of fresh air, of open fields, revolutionary ideas and rebellious thoughts. However, the judgment against Austen's so-called trifling reaches its culmination, in the fact, that Mark Twain did not even bother to spell her name correctly. In a letter to Howells, her staunchest American defender, he notes her as 'Jane Austin' whom he had found totally unreadable. Both Emerson and Mark Twain had preferred suicide rather than a natural death for her – so contemptuous they were of her writings. Today, after the extensive research, discussion and debate that has gone into her works, and now that they have been acknowledged as endearing and enduring classics we see that these critics had failed to read the story within the story.

However, there were some

... perceptive nineteenth-century critics of Austen – Whately, G.H. Lewes, Richard Simpson – found themselves comparing her with

Shakespeare as a humourist and as a faithful portrayer of human nature. And it was her great achievement that she brought the central argument and subject matter of English feminists from Astell to Wollstonecraft under the humane influence of Shakespearian comedy ...<sup>16</sup>

Even modern writers like Angus Wilson have accused Austen of a characteristically English, middle-class, philistinism.

Significantly Virginia Woolf underscored the fact that

Jane Austen wrote like that [without a room of her own] to the end of her days.<sup>17</sup>

while throughout making a point in her seminal essay *A Room of One's Own* that:

... a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction; ...<sup>18</sup>

The difficult problem of how the woman literary artist ought to see herself as novelist and literary critic, and as feminist, re-emerged in the early twentieth century with Virginia Woolf and her own Modernist conception of the literary artist. She made Austen her chief exemplar of the individual female talent. In *A Room of One's Own*, which rightly takes the status of a classic literary essay for feminist criticism, Virginia Woolf sees Austen as the exceptional example of the female artist with androgynous mind. Some feminist critics believe that while it is not a wrong stand per se, but in doing so it simultaneously ignores everything which connects Austen with the feminist thinking of the Enlightenment. Woolf states,

What genius, what integrity it must have required in face of all that criticism, in the midst of that purely patriarchal society, to hold fast to the thing as they saw it without shrinking. Only Jane Austen did it and Emily

Bronte. ... They wrote as women write, not as men write. Of all the thousand women who wrote novels then, they alone entirely ignored the perpetual admonition of the eternal pedagogue-write this, think that.<sup>19</sup>

Woolf's treatment of Austen is completely unpatronising, and she sees Austen as a major novelist comparing her with Shakespeare.

I read a page or two [of *Pride and Prejudice*] to see ; but I could not find any signs that her circumstances had harmed her work in the slightest. That, perhaps, was the chief miracle about it. Here was a woman about the year 1800 writing without hate, without bitterness, without fear, without protest, without preaching. That was how Shakespeare wrote, I thought, looking at *Antony and Cleopatra* ; and when people compare Shakespeare and Jane Austen, they may mean that the minds of both had consumed all impediments ; and for that reason we do not know Jane Austen and we do not know Shakespeare, and for that reason Jane Austen pervades every word that she wrote, and so does Shakespeare.<sup>20</sup>

Going back to the condescending attitude, it was also shared by Rudyard Kipling and Henry James. For a better understanding of the status of the female writer and the psychology of her male counterpart, it needs be mentioned that none other than Henry James, whom Kipling has called the "lawful issue" of Austen, had considered her genius as coincidental. Kipling himself was irreverential and ridiculed Austen for her over-emphasis on propriety and elegance. To quote from Kipling's "The Janeites", Jane Austen 'did leave lawful issue in the shape o' one son; an' 'his name was 'Enery James'<sup>21</sup>. Here he is referring to Austen's influence on Henry James which finds obvious reflection in his novels. Interesting to note that Henry James while appreciating her works simultaneously considered her authorship more as a happy coincidence rather than as a sign of her genius.

That Henry James of all others, who owes so much to this literary predecessor, should treat her works as nothing more than as an eighteenth century woman's fanciful engagement to while away her hours, points at his own sense of discomfort and anxiety about this legacy from a woman writer.

It

... radiates James's anxiety at his own indebtedness to this "little" female precursor who, to his embarrassment, taught him so much of his presumably masterful art ...<sup>22</sup>

Henry James despite his indebtedness was condescending towards Austen and reluctant to give any artistic merit to her literary productions. Indeed, male authors like him preferred to stick to this belief owing to their sense of male superiority. This attempt at underestimating the contribution of women writers, and even of one to whom he had been indebted, is indicative of the attitude of male writers for generations.

These writers pointed out the paucity of subject matter and the narrowness of scope in Austen's novels since those were the times of the French Revolution. The ideals, 'Liberty, Equality and Fraternity' left indelible marks on the literature of the times and were instrumental in ushering in the Romantic Age in English Literature. In contrast Austen's stories of three or four well-to-do families in the countryside were untouched by these changes, as she had intentionally refrained herself from venturing into those male-dominated areas which were to become the

subjects for Dickens and Thackeray. However, it would be wrong to assume that Austen was untouched by these ideals. These principles seem to be at work in the delineation of her intelligent heroines who are provided with a more equal authority, a greater control and freedom over their own lives. Political and ideological issues were also mentioned but it was done in an oblique manner and the irony was impossible to miss, as these lines from *Sanditon* prove,

“Trafalgar House – which by the bye, I almost wish I had not named Trafalgar – for Waterloo is more the thing now. However, Waterloo is in reserve ... we shall be able to call it Waterloo Crescent” (*S in NA vol.*, 336).

This is trivializing a historic-political event but done without transgressing the limitations of a woman.

Emerson had criticized Austen for belittling domesticity. In her works he finds sterility in artistic invention accompanied by an obsession for marriage. A common misconception amongst Austen’s readers and some of her critics is that her novels are overly concerned with marriages. One cannot deny the significance of marriage and that it forms an important aspect of her works because that singular event in a woman’s life provides her with the only respectable option for her in the given society. Austen’s critical views on equating the career of the governess with that of a slave in *Emma* are only too well-known. Without any means to gain financial independence women’s education and upbringing were motivated by the

prospect of a good marriage which would provide them with respectability and also a measure of financial security.

Austen's portrayals of such marriages were undertaken with the view to present the reality of the women's situation in her society. The criticism directed against Austen on this account is that she presents the eighteenth century society from too feminized a viewpoint, as Kipling does in the "The Janeites". But this issue cannot be dismissed in the manner that Kipling does because the concerns expressed through this perspective are brought about by the suppression of the female psyche in the male dominated society. Being a product as well as a victim of such a society it is only natural that such a perspective is given prominence by Austen, the sensitive writer. In doing so she extends her efforts to comprehend the intricate workings of patriarchy as she saw it, which is inseparably linked with the complicated power play between men and women.

Despite the Romantic surge which her contemporary times witnessed, she focused her attention on these issues. Feminist critics hold that eighteenth century female writers who believed on the equality of the sexes found themselves partly or entirely alienated from the Romantic Movement. Austen's lack of interest in the Romantic upheaval only reveals her understanding of the contemporary conflict on the feminist issue. This has

been cited as the reason behind her detachment from the important and controversial currents of thought and literature in her time.

Jane Austen's feminized, pro-feminist or anti-feminist approach in her novels portrays the then society with its social hierarchy, manners, conventions and culture from a woman's restricted perspective, the only one available to her as an eighteenth century woman. This perhaps explains as to why her male characters are often flat and particularly so when juxtaposed with the more vibrant female ones. Further, the absence of the men's world from the domain of her fiction, can be attributed to her pre-occupation with the women's world. Austen presents this issue of power and authority in such a manner which can engage the interest, sympathy and understanding of even a modern reader today. The attempt in this research will be to examine Austen's anxiety in the context of the society of her times and also to examine their relevance with the current trends in feminist critical approaches.

## Chapter VI

### Conclusion

#### Beyond Authority

Here was a woman about the year 1800 writing without hate, without bitterness, without fear, without protest, without preaching. That was how Shakespeare wrote, I thought, looking at *Antony and Cleopatra*; and when people compare Shakespeare and Jane Austen, they may mean that the minds of both had consumed all impediments ; and for that reason we do not know Jane Austen and we do not know Shakespeare, and for that reason Jane Austen pervades every word that she wrote, and so does Shakespeare.<sup>1</sup>

Virginia Woolf has rightly commented that Jane Austen had successfully “consumed all impediments” of her eighteenth century society to acquire a timelessness that only one “without hate, without bitterness, without fear, without protest, without preaching” can attain. Austen was able to circumvent the restrictions imposed upon a women writer of her times and finally overcome her anxiety over authority within the constraints of a patriarchal society. This is suggested in the conclusion of her novels like *Pride and Prejudice*, *Emma* and *Persuasion* where she strikes a balance between the power and authority wielded by her male and female protagonists, and thereby tries to resolve the anxiety over authority faced by women. This is amply borne out by the analysis of the various novels. However, it can be seen that it was not an easy task to surmount authority and propose any kind of balance in power sharing in a society like hers. In order to achieve this she had to negotiate between the paradoxes, anxieties,

conflicts and contradictions which have been examined in the preceding chapters.

Since this thesis centres around anxiety over authority in Austen's novels and to an extent in the author herself; it is perhaps only appropriate, that the discussion in **Chapter I** opens with an issue that throws light on both these aspects. Hence the choice of delineating her characters on the basis of the angel, monster and human at the very outset. In doing this Austen's ambivalent attitude towards the different characters has been adequately demonstrated. Such categorization done in proportion to their adherence to patriarchy, is in itself a criticism of patriarchy. But through her human characters Austen strikes her characteristic balance within the limitations of patriarchal society. In the process of doing this one is privileged to have an insight into the author's bent of mind in dealing with the subject.

A natural corollary to this categorization of Austenian characters is an analysis of their outward mode of behaviour which has been examined in **Chapter II**. This has afforded an insight into the hidden motivations of the characters revealing why they behave in either openly selfish manner or try to couch selfishness in apparent selflessness. There are also certain characters who display selfish and selfless traits at the same time. This chapter by taking up the correlated yet distinctive issues of selfishness and

selflessness, attempts to show how deeply rooted is the anxiety of Austen regarding power and authority which is reflected in the psyche of her characters. It also provides a fresh perspective towards the power play between the genders, for often selfishness and selflessness becomes interchangeable as a means for securing authority for women. The tension between the genders over power and authority is highlighted in these two chapters by exposing the personality and behaviour of the weaker female sex.

The two following **Chapters III** and **IV** deal with two very seminal matters without which our understanding of anxiety over authority in the author and her works would remain incomplete. These are the vital issues of education and finance which have a very crucial role to play in the shaping up of any society. Women could acquire power and authority only through male patronage because their inadequate education and lack of financial rights made them dependent on men. The third chapter dealing with education, reveals the crippling effect that a biased and prejudicial system of education for girls can have on them. Such an education failed to equip them with rational thinking and ultimately created only an angel or a monster character but rarely a human one. It also bred selfishness or selflessness in women in their attempt to gain acceptance in the eyes of the menfolk. This kind of education imparted to women in the eighteenth

century rendered women dependent rather than independent and this is the core of Jane Austen's criticism of such a discriminative education system. However, she projects this criticism mainly through the behaviour of her characters and in a manner that concealed more than it revealed.

The fourth chapter on finance entitled "On the Power of Wealth" deals with the effect of money which very often becomes the determining factor for contracting marriages and breaking up relationships. Though the law did not prevent women from inheriting money and property, she effectively loses control over it the moment she gets married, when the reverse is not true. While for a man, a woman's wealth means an enhancement of his power and authority, but for a woman the wealth of a prospective husband means security for life. Thus we can see that power play surrounding wealth affected both the genders in different ways. This alone was responsible for creating a lot of unpleasantness over authority often leading to gross misuse of it.

In spite of their position of power and authority men on account of money and education often failed to exercise this authority properly. **Chapter V** is about Austen's scathing criticism of patriarchal figures both young and old, and how their inability to wield authority judiciously, affects the well-being of the entire society and is a primary factor creating anxiety over authority among women. The implication of male response to power

and authority is intrinsically connected to the topic of this dissertation and hence this chapter. The author consistently deals with the issue of this unhealthy influence over society at large in all her major works. Though she was aware that such an imbalance in power and authority between the genders can never be completely resolved within patriarchy, she nevertheless condemns certain traits in the fiercely patriarchal figures and contrasts them to the more benevolent protagonists of the novels discussed here. Perhaps, it is from this point onwards that Austen is trying to map the route to that ideal stage where power sharing between the genders would one day become possible.

This idealistic vision can be drawn from some of the conclusions to her novels in which she portrays an ideal power sharing between the sexes and a significant curbing of misuse of power by menfolk. Moreover, such sharing brings out the best in a person and helps nurture a relationship where a woman is treated as a human being and an equal. However, Austen arrived at such a conclusion while being acutely aware that this state of affairs would perhaps be possible only within the world of her fiction. This made her restrict her idealistic endings only to her chosen female and male protagonists. Nonetheless, this handful of protagonists did not achieve this balanced state without a struggle. This is most apparent in *Emma* and *Pride and Prejudice*.

Emma Woodhouse and Elizabeth Bennet are “The child of good fortune!” (*E*, 406), the luckiest human characters who come to wield more power and authority than the angel characters. *Emma* opens with the delusions of the protagonist about her power and authority which is eventually reined in by her husband’s influence – a process that is set in motion long before they marry. She herself is aware of Mr. Knightley’s role in the shaping of her character:

‘... I had the assistance of all your endeavours to counteract the indulgence of other people. I doubt whether my own sense would have corrected me without it.’ (*E*, 419)

Despite all her fallibility and her part in certain “... very bad wrong things ...” (*E*, 434) Austen clearly emphasizes at the end that she will come to wield tremendous power and authority as the lady of Donwell Abbey. In a way the entire story can be perceived as preparing her for that role. Her position and power as ‘Mrs. Emma Knightley’ would exceed what she had exercised as ‘Miss Woodhouse’; though she had earlier been under the mistaken notion that as a rich single beautiful intelligent spinster she could exercise significant power and authority over others – a notion that was encouraged by her father.

The eventual union of Emma and Mr. Knightley is cleverly woven into the progression of the plot and for which adequate mental and psychological justification has been provided. Emma is designed to be “...

faultless in spite of all her faults ...” (*E*, 393) for Austen restricts them to corrigible ones. She remains essentially right in her judgments and feelings on matters of greater import. Neither a picture of perfection, nor foolish, a manipulative shrew or one who is now reformed and submissive, Emma possesses genuine qualities of head and heart that qualifies her to be Mr. Knightley’s wife. In keeping with her worth Mr. Knightley accords her respect and recognizes in her an equal - one who is suited to become his partner in life.

‘... Nature gave you an understanding:- ... You must have done well. ...’  
(*E*, 419)

This in itself is an acknowledgement of her fitness to be the mistress of Donwell. He sees her as a human with faults but does not overlook her powers of mind in which he has absolute faith. Emma’s essentially sound head and heart make it possible for her to share an equal relationship with Mr. Knightley who emerges as the one responsible for affecting this power sharing.

Emma is a perfect match for Mr. Knightley in his active, intelligent, non-moralistic concern of the poor and needy. But the author clearly distinguishes that Mr. Knightley is superior and Emma herself is aware of it. However, Emma’s moral growth remains incomplete till she learns to accord the respect proper to Miss Bates. Although not obviously

disrespectful towards Miss Bates – who comes close to the version of a devoted daughter,

She [Emma] had been often remiss, her conscience told her so; remiss, perhaps, more in thought than act; scornful, ungracious. (*E*, 341)

She does not call on the Bateses as often as she ought to, as she finds it “... a waste of time – tiresome women ...” (*E*, 155). But having once realized her mistake, that “... it should be so no more ...” (*E*, 341), she is resolute to develop, “... a regular, equal, kindly intercourse ...” (*E*, 341) with her. This reveals her growing awareness of her social responsibilities as a woman and as Mr. Knightley’s wife. Despite such obvious faults Emma influences Mr. Knightley. Thus, his initial opposition against Emma taking Harriet under her care, yet he later admits:

‘... I am now very willing to grant you all Harriet’s good qualities ... Much of this, I have no doubt, she may thank you for.’ (*E*, 431)

Significantly Emma’s marriage is different from others,

... must not [be] class[ed] with Isabella and Mrs. Weston, whose marriages taking them from Hartfield, had, indeed, made a melancholy change: but she was not going from Hartfield; ... (*E*, 423) –

instead Mr. Knightley would change house till circumstances permit otherwise. In the end Mr. and Mrs. Knightley are the guardians of their society and shoulders the responsibility of its wellbeing.

Austen’s portraiture of Knightley (note the significance of the name) as the ideal English gentlemen is very close to the figure of a knight, not only because he comes to the rescue of women but owing to his superior

qualities. It is a little ironic but he saves ladies in distress, tactfully shower kindness on the Bateses, saves Harriet from embarrassment when she is insulted by Elton at the ball and is lovingly protective towards Emma. Unlike Elton or Frank Churchill he treats women with genuine respect be it a rich spoiled young lady, an orphan, a half-blind old widow of a clergyman, an aging spinster or an illegitimate young woman. They truly are in need of him, especially in a society where the Church is represented by the Eltons and the aristocracy by the Churchills.

Not a believer in false vanity, Mr. Knightley despite being the owner of Donwell wears thick leather gaiters of a working farmer, does not pay much attention to his looks, discusses matters of "... business, shows of cattle, or new drills ..." (*E*, 430) and is Mr. George Knightley not Sir George. In this he is the exact opposite of the character that Austen would develop in the following years - Sir Walter of *Persuasion*. Firmly rooted in reality he prefers for his company his bourgeois neighbours – the Coles, Mr. Perry, Mrs. Goddard, and is capable of appreciating the superiority of John Martin. Through him Austen mocks the romantic notions of chivalry and the aristocrats with their aversion to work and their incurable habits of flattery and deception in sexual relationships. Austen through him makes a subtle mockery of that class of literature that treats Baronets and Dukes as gods. Mr. Knightley emerges as no God, but a picture of perfection - simplistic,

real and admirable. Emma is more fortunate than Elizabeth Bennet for unlike Darcy, Mr. Knightley is the author's most perfect hero.

In *Emma* the irony as well as the redemption lies in that Emma despite all her shortcomings belongs with the guardians of England in so far her powers are concerned. This should ideally be the situation of a woman deserving it. In Donwell not only are vegetable farming, drains and fences, farmers and servants given due attention, but so are the education of daughters and the welfare of poor aging spinsters. In future it promises the continuation of such a tradition as it is looked after by people with sound heads and good hearts.

Emma is not only the co-inheritor of her father's house but also an improver of the society. Critics like Margaret Kirkham consider Emma's relationship with Miss Bates as the central moral issue of the novel, which questions her ability to wield power and authority. But this is opposed by Angus Wilson, who considers such a requirement as a depressing compromise. To attain this higher moral level is particularly challenging for Emma when one perceives that Miss Bates is rather foolish, absurd and at times irritating with her over-talkativeness. Miss Bates proves to be a rather difficult barometer to test the protagonist's ability for correct social response.

Kirkham argues, that Austen's famous use of her 'indirect free style' in *Emma* enables her to reveal Emma's inner consciousness, thoughts and even errors. On the contrary Marilyn Butler says that this style proved to be an embarrassment unsuited to the moral purpose of the story. Kirkham contradicts by saying that Austen uses it to show that:

... for all their [female protagonists] mistakes they have the capacity for stringent rational reflection and it is through the exercise of this capacity that they learn to judge aright of their own conduct and that of other people, including those in higher places, carrying greater authority than themselves. ... Austen uses it to show not only the intimate personal feelings of her heroine but their argumentative, hard-headed minds, and she needed such a technique because, in the age in which she lived, a young woman's ability to think rationally, ... was likely to be the most private - because least acceptable - aspect of her mental life.<sup>2</sup>

However, like in Austen's other novels, Emma's post-marital life remains elusive and lacking in concrete details. It is left open-ended with a fairy-tale conclusion where Emma's aim in life "... were fully answered in the perfect happiness of the union." (*E*, 440)

In *Pride and Prejudice*, Darcy's power and authority are evident from the beginning, as also Elizabeth's powerlessness although she possesses intellectual and moral authority. Given Darcy's wealth and status, his importance with his family, friends and neighbours; his headship of an old family and his intelligent, sensible, rational, ethical nature, his position is formidable. As the master of Pemberley he has control over the lives of many. As opposed to Darcy, Elizabeth (like Emma) suffers from the delusion that she has power because she is more intelligent than most. True

her intelligence gives her an edge over others, but her mistake lies in that she confuses intellectual and moral authority with power. Besides her very limited exposure to the outside world undermine her authority. She remains without economic, societal, customary, legal and other powers till she marries Darcy and becomes the mistress of Pemberley.

Elizabeth's intellectual and moral authority reaches a peak when she turns down Collins's and Darcy's wedding proposals. Significantly her courage and confidence are never affected by her powerlessness. But the flaw that leads to her humiliation arises from pride and arrogance born out of a sense of superiority and over-confidence. Both Darcy and she suffer from them, but interestingly they can see these faults only in each other and not in themselves. Their authority grows in strength only after their pride is hurt during Darcy's failed proposal at Rosings. This is an eye-opener which enables them to improve. From this point they start regaining the authority they had lost due to their pride and prejudice. Darcy admits to Elizabeth:

'... I have been a selfish being all my life, in practice, though not in principle... such I might still have been but for you, dearest, loveliest Elizabeth! ... You taught me a lesson, hard indeed at first, but most advantageous. By you, I was properly humbled. ...' (*PP*, 328)

His powers, however, even during his ignorance and arrogance were unaffected and remained intact. But not Elizabeth's who attains authority when she learns to see people for what they are.

Acquiring economic, legal and other societal and customary powers after her marriage, Elizabeth plays an active role in complimenting Darcy's abilities in carrying out his responsibility towards the society. His reserved manners are compensated by Elizabeth's witty nature and she even goes on to "... take liberties with her husband ..." (*PP*, 345). Amongst Austen's female protagonists she wields the maximum amount of power and authority, at par with Emma.

Though not cordial at first Elizabeth and Darcy's relationship begins on an equal footing as she refuses to be over-whelmed by his wealth or consider herself as inferior. Darcy through humiliation learns to treat her as an equal and acknowledges her higher intellectual and moral authority. Also she influences him in maintaining a cordial relationship with her inferior relatives and friends; although she herself was happy at the prospect of being

... removed from society so little pleasing to either, to all the comfort and elegance of their family party at Pemberley. (*PP*, 342)

Darcy is also a good brother who ensures the happiness of his sister Georgiana, concerned for the well-being of his friends, respectful towards his parents as he keeps his father's favourite room unchanged which even includes a miniature of the traitor Wickham. Although Darcy and Elizabeth

... could never receive *him* [Wickham] at Pemberley, yet, for Elizabeth's sake, he assisted him farther in his profession. Lydia was occasionally a visitor [at Pemberley]... (*PP*, 344).

Elizabeth shoulder's her authority equally well as her husband's. She brings about Darcy's reconciliation with his aunt Lady Catherine and ensures that "Pemberley was now Georgiana's home; ..." (*PP*, 344) where her sister-in-law's

... mind received knowledge which had never before fallen in her way. By Elizabeth's instruction ... (*PP*, 345).

Elizabeth has a positive influence on her younger sister too:

Kitty, to her very material advantage, spent the chief of her time with her two elder sisters. In society so superior to what she had generally known, her improvement was great. (*PP*, 343)

Despite that "Miss Bingley was very deeply mortified by Darcy's marriage; ..." (*PP*, 344) they ensure the preservation of a cordial relation with her. Together Elizabeth and Darcy ably exercise the power and authority vested on them as the guardians of their society.

As opposed to Emma and Elizabeth whose prospect of becoming a perfect lady is set in motion from the start, in *Persuasion* Austen describes a heroine who refuses to become a lady but is shown as most worthy of wielding power and authority. Yet she will never exercise power like Emma or Elizabeth. Anne is the central moral intelligence of the novel and even when Wentworth is wrong, she is steadfastly put in the right. Unlike Emma, Elizabeth, Marianne and Catherine, she can comprehend the problems faced by her gender and shows maturity from the beginning which other heroines acquire only at the end.

From the very beginning Austen makes it obvious that Anne possesses the highest moral and intellectual authority but no power. Even as a young girl of nineteen her sense of judgment was shown to be higher than Wentworth's. Thus, Austen squarely puts the blame on Lady Russell and Wentworth for breaking the engagement. Wentworth acknowledges later,

'I did not understand you. I shut my eyes, and would not do you justice.'  
(*P*, 247)

By putting Anne (also the only protagonist to receive a school education) in the right, Austen reverses the role of the heroine as a pupil and the hero as a teacher, a concept that is found at work in *Northanger Abbey* and *Emma*. Notwithstanding her ability to guide others – usually attributed as masculine qualities – she is so thoroughly feminine that none can accuse her of the slightest degree of masculinity.

Though Darcy comments in *Pride and Prejudice*,

'... detection, could not be in [women's] power, and suspicion certainly not in [their] inclination ...' (*PP*, 134).

Yet Anne watches, listens and judges. Only Wentworth heeds her words.

Ironically

... never since the loss of her dear mother, [had she] known the happiness of being listened to ... (*P*, 48).

Anne is the only Austen heroine who makes thoroughly feminist pronouncements and speaks to Captain Harville about her sense of exclusion from the patriarchal society. Though it sounds as if her views on

the bias towards women and literature were directly picked out from Wollstonecraft's *Vindication*, none can accuse her of being unsexed. She speaks without bitterness, rancour or contempt (like Austen), but states her views as if they are the most commonly acknowledged fact. Her soft, gentle nature disarms all criticism while revealing the strength of her character and the correctness of her judgment. She speaks in a way as if she were speaking to a brother or a sister or one within her family, but she does so with Wentworth's friend and fellow-officer Captain Harville. In that famous conversation Austen emphasizes that Anne and Harville speak from the same platform, as equals without any gender discriminations. This puts her on a higher level of intellectual and moral authority than her fellow companions.

Austen goes beyond giving Anne an equal status with men - she accords her the role of a guide - an area considered as an exclusive male domain. Significantly it is from her that Captain Wentworth learns the limits of masculine assertiveness and she influences his relationship with Lady Russell. She advises Captain Benwick about literature and life. Yet she is never self-complacent and strongly believes that she was right in obeying Lady Russell as an inexperienced girl of nineteen although the latter was wrong in giving her advice. She was bound to her by loyalty and filial piety as she occupies the place of a mother, friend and confidante. But by not

being duty-bound to her father, Austen underscores that her decisions are as much based on affection as on prudence and rationale. Anne's behaviour is similar to what Wollstonecraft had said regarding the proper duty of a child towards an affectionate though mistaken parent.

Through Anne, Austen reaches a new height regarding the relationship between man and woman, for not only is she treated as a moral equal but as even superior to men. Thus, Wentworth despite all his achievements in his naval career is mistaken in his assessment of women. Austen here reverses the role of the couple in Sir Walter and Lady Elliot from the one in her earliest novel *Pride and Prejudice*. Where Mr. Bennet ends up with a foolish wife, Lady Elliot here is married to a foolish baronet. But where Mr. Bennet resorts to making jokes at his wife's expense, Lady Elliot an "excellent woman, sensible and amiable" (*P*, 10) tries to improve Sir Walter for seventeen long years. Anne, Lady Elliot and Lady Russell are shown as more capable of handling authority than their male counterparts. *Pride and Prejudice* however, provides us with Charlotte and Mr. Collins, where the intelligent wife tries to overlook his faults and encourage his good qualities.

In *Persuasion*, Austen goes a step further than *Emma* – the heroine's status as a moral being is defined more elaborately, and this has been done in terms of her relationship beyond her family, particularly in her

relationship with other members of her sex. Her moral independence and higher ethical and intellectual authority is both thematically and technically crucial. It is worth noting that in *Emma* and *Persuasion*, which follow each other in quick succession, the influence of both the father and the sister are construed as harmful. In such a situation the protagonist reaches outside her family for emotional and moral bonding. For Anne she finds them in Lady Russell, Mrs. Croft, Mrs. Smith and even in Nurse Rooke. Anne's relationship with Lady Russell, Mrs. Croft and Mrs. Smith have been given a lot of attention, whereas, it has been emphasized that she does not own any obligation towards her sisters. Blood relations here are not put above genuine 'sisterhood'. Thus, Anne puts her visit to a former school friend Mrs. Smith above her loyalty towards her uncaring father and later even takes up the responsibility to secure her assets. In this she has Lady Russell's support while her father opposes it. Lady Russell despite all her obvious flaws commands Anne's respect, just as Mrs. Croft is looked up to, her unfemininity notwithstanding.

Unlike her predecessors, the author has preferred the open blue seas and fresh air for Anne. Naval life is meant to provide her with an alternative – an escape – from the corruption of the land and the conservative aristocracy both of which are closely linked to patrilineal affinities. The

navy promises resurgence for Anne although Sir Walter has an aversion for it because it elevates

‘... persons of obscure birth into undue distinction, and raising men to honours which their fathers and grandfathers never dreamt of; ...’ (*P*, 24).

Anne is fortunate because Captain Wentworth though no member of this rigid class system has by dint of his merits made a fortune that puts him at par with the landed gentry in terms of wealth.

However, navy contributes in the growth of women unlike the landed system. When left behind sailors’ wives are bound to fend for themselves; they learn to be practical, efficient and self-reliant women as Mrs. Harville. On the other hand Mrs. Croft exhibits that navy does not entirely exclude women as most landlocked vocations do. She does not fumble with the names of countries like other women and having crossed the Atlantic four times she strongly believes that

‘Women may be as comfortable on board, as in the best house in England.’ (*P*, 68)

A companion, an equal and a partner to Admiral Croft, she guides the horse chaise when her husband fails. Anne perceives this as a good representation of what comes close to an ideal marriage. Mrs. Croft points out that the difference between “a fine gentleman” and a navy man lies in that the former treats women as if they were “... all fine ladies, instead of rational creatures ...” (*P*, 69). Among the elderly couples, the Crofts and the

Harvilles present glimpses of an ideal power sharing that is found only among Austen's protagonists. Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner in *Pride and Prejudice* also illustrate this.

In this last novel Austen differentiates between those dowagers who attempt to gain power by exploiting traditional male prerogatives, as opposed to Anne and naval wives where men participate in and value domestic life and women complements by contributing to public events. With this the author steps towards establishing an emerging egalitarian society in her novels. The traditional female\_tasks of childbearing, child rearing, managing the household etc. which are both dreary and dangerous (as Austen perceived in her juvenile works) no longer confines the naval wives, as they experience a sense of liberation hitherto un-experienced by women within the land-locked social system. For Anne her marriage will indicate the union of traditional male and female spheres, where her relationship with Wentworth will be more like that of friends. Friendship and not male domination is evident when Wentworth despite having good reasons and a good rationale is willing to be influenced by Anne in reshaping his relationship with Lady Russell.

There is no denying that like Anne, Wentworth too possesses intellectual and moral authority but like her he is not perfect. He can be prejudiced and biased, as when he tells his sister,

'I hate to hear of women on board, or to see them on board; and no ship, under my command, shall ever convey a family of ladies anywhere, if I can help it.' (P, 68)

Admiral Croft accuses him of lack of gallantry and Mrs. Croft admonishes him for his poor impression about women. Nonetheless, when called for Wentworth had

... brought Mrs. Harville, her sister, her cousin, and the three children, round from Portsmouth to Plymouth. (P, 69)

Here like Austen's female protagonists Elizabeth, Emma, Marianne and Catherine, it is Wentworth not Anne who undergoes the humiliating experience of revising his views. Unlike Anne, Wentworth is unsure of his feelings and flirts outrageously with Louisa thereby giving rise to misconceptions. Later he is shocked when the meaning of his behaviour is revealed to him. Although for a wife his foremost requirement is a woman with "A strong mind, with sweetness of manner," (P, 62), he is himself unaware that he is describing Anne and not Louisa as he had himself understood.

In *Persuasion*, Austen allots a new role to her heroine and gives her a new kind of power and authority, hitherto un-experienced by any of her female protagonists. Though endowed with less power and authority than Elizabeth Darcy, Emma Knightley and Marianne Brandon, Anne is better off than angel characters like Fanny Bertram and Elinor Ferrars. Her powers however will be very different since she would not inherit anything like

Pemberley, Donwell, Delaford, Northanger Abbey or Kellynch-hall, no landed estate or headship of a family.

Yet undeniably Anne is Austen's chosen one for she gets her man who in turn recognizes her worth and treats her with love, equality, respect and friendship in an age when women were treated as inferior to men. Austen through them advocates her faith in restricted authority between a couple. But here it falls a little short of the ideal, for it is only with Wentworth that Anne can have her full power and authority. The conclusion and tenor of this last novel is different; for here Anne's fate is contrasted to Elizabeth's. Perhaps, the greatest difference lies in that Anne departs from Kellynch. Through this Austen projects the future of the landed society as dark, whereas, she is hopeful of the new naval society which treats women with more respect, equality and understanding than the landed patriarchy. For the author this is a big step which enabled her to overcome her anxiety over power and authority.

*Mansfield Park* too, presents an instance where the deserving and intelligent heroine does not come to acquire the power that she deserves. But unlike in *Persuasion*, here the place of the hero has been substituted by the patriarch Sir Thomas. Though Fanny marries Edmund, yet gaining the approval and love of Sir Thomas matters more to her. His undiminished powers at the end ensures that Mansfield retains its old dignity derived from

its orthodox trappings. When Tom and not Edmund – despite all his higher claims - succeeds Sir Thomas, Mansfield might degenerate, although Austen clearly mentions that,

Tom, who gradually regained his health, without regaining the thoughtlessness and selfishness of his previous habits. ... He became what he ought to be, useful to his father, steady and quiet, and not living merely for himself. (*MP*, 376-77)

But this appears more as a dismissive comment, forcing a happy ending about which the author herself is unconvinced.

The possible degeneration notwithstanding, Fanny becomes a part and parcel of Mansfield, of the landed aristocracy by marrying Edmund. She endorses the system while being aware of its defects. As Sir Thomas's favourite her power and authority is significantly enhanced. Yet it falls short of her potential as she marries the younger son who will not inherit Sir Thomas's position and title. Despite Gilbert and Gubar's comment that Fanny will be another corpselike wife like Lady Bertram, it does not appear to be so, since she is not mentally, intellectually and morally deficient like the latter.

Fanny is fortunate to marry Edmund for like a true Austen hero he accords her the respect due to the fairer sex. Edmund's respect for women is evident when Mary Crawford questions him as to whether Fanny has 'come out' (*MP*, 49). He responds:

'My cousin is grown up. She has the age and sense of a woman, but the outs and not outs are beyond me' (*MP*, 49)

His comment echoes Wollstonecraft who says in *Vindication*

... what can be more indelicate than a girl's coming out in the fashionable world? Which ... is to bring to market a marriageable miss ...<sup>3</sup>

Edmund's refusal to understand the question is a mark of his ability to respect his cousin, which is in direct contrast to Mary Crawford's conceptions about a woman which do not include recognition of adult human qualities.

Even when Fanny moves to Thornton Lacey for a brief period after her marriage, as Edmund joins the parsonage there, Mansfield continues to influence her actions. In the end Fanny's becomes what she had always wanted to be -

... the daughter that he [Sir Thomas] wanted. (*MP*, 385).

Mrs. Norris and Maria's banishment as well as Julia's fall from grace proportionately strengthens her position in Mansfield. In the end she is no longer the poor niece whom nobody gave any importance (except Edmund), the beck-and-call girl of her aunts or the subject of discrimination of her uncle. It is when she becomes *the* favourite with her uncle that her intellectual and moral authority is firmly consolidated. Ultimately so much does she matter to Sir Thomas, that it seems as if he and not Edmund is the husband:

... now, on really knowing each other, their mutual attachment became very strong. After settling her at Thornton Lacey with every kind attention

to her comfort, the object of almost every day was to see her there, or to get her away from it. (*MP*, 385)

Fanny exercises power and authority over her younger sister Susan too, whom she brings from Portsmouth. She takes charge of her upbringing as well as Lady Bertram's comforts. Only in Susan do we see the revival of her former self, when as a young girl of ten she used to take charge of her younger siblings at Portsmouth. This suggests her ability to be a good guardian, better than Sir Thomas. On the other hand, Edmund behaves like an elder brother to Fanny with his loving care and protection, an attitude which is likely to remain unchanged though he marries her. He however, fully appreciates her superiority of person and always values her sense and judgment. This gives her authority and influence over him.

Contrary to what Kirkham says, *Mansfield Park* does not present the ideals of 'liberty, equality and fraternity' in the feminist sense. Although Fanny has been given more than an equal moral status – she can have an equal relationship only with her brother William, not Edmund. The paradigm of equal, affectionate relationships between men and women is always held up as an ideal, having implications beyond the literal meaning of 'brother' and 'sister', but it cannot be so with a cousin who is as senior as Edmund, and certainly not when he is also her husband. Although Kirkham argues that the purpose of their marriage was to establish the right relationships between men and women, which is only possible in a marriage

between cousins. In Austen this equal relationship is more plausible between brothers and sisters than between husbands and wives, yet the marriage between the cousins Fanny and Edmund does not result in an equal relationship as Kirkham would have us believe.

Her marriage to Edmund allows the reader to hope that she will know felicity in her adult married life.<sup>4</sup>

but this does not happen as equals within their marriage.

Her marriage to Edmund gives her happiness but little power and authority because as the wife of a clergyman, her social, economic, legal and customary powers will be insignificant. Most of her power and authority will be derived through Edmund but as Sir Thomas's favourite they can be quite substantial. Her restricted authority in conjunction with her husband is less satisfactory than between Emma and Knightley, Elizabeth and Darcy and Anne and Wentworth.

Elinor Dashwood like Fanny does not acquire the power and authority that she is capable of wielding. But unlike Fanny who has authority as Sir Thomas's favourite, Elinor only has the love and affection of her extended family. However, there is satisfaction that their higher qualities are appreciated by their spouses. Edward Ferrars "admired" (SS, 323) her superior qualities of head and heart. Yet all Elinor has is influence and some amount of authority. Even as an elder daughter her status is not much different from Marianne's. But with marriage Marianne acquires higher

economic, legal, customary, social authority than her's, simply because she is 'Mrs. Brandon':

... entering on new duties, placed in a new home, a wife, the mistress of a family, and the patroness of a village. (SS, 333)

Marianne as the wife of a country gentleman will have authority, influence and some power.

Yet in the end it is established that on Elinor and Edward rests the well-being and harmony of the society as well as of Marianne. That Elinor and Edward shoulder their responsibility efficiently is evident as her family come to spend half of the time with them, and it is under her roof that the marriage between Brandon and Marianne finds encouragement.

With Edward, Elinor is an equal and a partner in life. It is owing to her sensible advise that he seeks his mother's forgiveness earlier than he had intended to. Between them they fulfill Austen's ideal of restricted authority. Nonetheless, the end is less satisfactory since the monster characters of Mrs. Ferrars, Lucy and Fanny wield and misuse tremendous economic, social, legal, customary and other powers while those with higher intellectual and moral authority like Elinor and Edmund are deprived of them. Because of this the ending of *Sense and Sensibility* is less satisfactory than the conclusions of *Emma*, *Persuasion*, *Mansfield Park* and *Pride and Prejudice*.

*Northanger Abbey* too presents a conclusion where the good is weaker than the evil, as General Tilney continues to be powerful. Henry is

lucky for he enjoys economic powers from his profession although he is only a younger son. This allows him to marry Catherine despite his father's initial opposition. But unlike Austen's other protagonists Henry and Catherine are not equals. Henry dons the role of a teacher, guardian and guide to his wife. He is patronizing towards her and does not take her opinions seriously. He is a typical man of his times and thus inferior to Mr. Knightley, Edward, Edmund, Darcy and Wentworth who recognize female authority within the English social structure. The only argument in Henry's favour is that Catherine is not as intelligent as the other heroines. She stands out for her gullibility, innocence and ignorance.

Given Henry's condescending attitude Catherine's happiness appears uncertain although she will never be another Mrs. Tilney whose happiness was always in doubt. She as a clergyman's wife will occupy the parsonage of Woodston and not be the mistress of the Abbey. Significantly Henry and Catherine are not entrusted with maintaining the harmony and balance of society, as other Austen favourites. The ideal of restricted authority remains inapplicable in this early novel. It is interesting to note that *Northanger Abbey* was begun in the same year – 1797 – that Austen had completed *Pride and Prejudice*. While the latter presents the most fulfilling version of restricted authority; it is ironic as to why Austen had decided to almost immediately reverse the ideal in *Northanger Abbey*.

*Lady Susan* which was written in 1795 - just a year before *First Impressions* later rechristened as *Pride and Prejudice* was started - presents the victory of dictatorial power. Except for this earliest novel all her other novels have advocated the need for power sharing. But Lady Susan grossly mishandles her position, doing whatever she wants and causing a lot of unhappiness to her daughter. Also by way of breaking engagement, snatching away lovers, causing separation and grief she brings unhappiness to the lives of many, thereby exercising an unhealthy control over the lives of others. She even dictates her daughter's letters -

... they were written under her Mother's inspection, ... (*LS in NA vol.*, 270).

Here it is not this monster heroine but the unattractive Mr. and Mrs. Vernon who shoulder social responsibility, looks after Frederica and encourages her marriage to Reginald De Courcy. In contrast Lady Susan willfully shirks her motherly responsibilities.

Since *Lady Susan*, Austen shows rapid maturity as a novelist and her perception of society and women undergoes major changes. Significantly characters like Lady Susan would figure marginally - overlooked, ignored and despised in her succeeding novels for their deliberate mishandling of power and authority. Lady Susan anticipates widows and aunts - monster characters like Lady Catherine, Mrs. Norris, Mrs. Churchill, Mrs. Ferrars and others.

It is worth noting that *Pride and Prejudice*, *Sense and Sensibility*, *Northanger Abbey*, *Emma*, all have as their predominant theme the taming of the shrew, while *Mansfield Park* uses it as a sub-plot. Feminist critics like Kirkham and Gilbert and Gubar observe that it provided Austen,

... with a blotter or a socially acceptable cover for expressing her own self-division. Her acknowledgement and acquiescence to masculine values in her plots allows her to consider her own anxiety about female assertion and expression as a writer and express her doubts as a woman and as a writer.<sup>5</sup>

The theme where rebellious, stubborn, imaginative women like Elizabeth, Emma and Catherine are tamed undoubtedly flattered patriarchy. Ultimately they are brought under control by the more sensible and mature men they come to love. But Elizabeth, Emma, Elinor, Fanny, Anne or even Lady Susan do not give us the story of complete female submission. Thus, it cannot be asserted – as some critics have claimed – that through her female protagonists Austen advocated the need for female submission for female survival. As opposed to it, the feminist school holds that this story is a camouflage behind which Austen could hide her real intentions within the culture that negates and literally shuts-up women.

Her contemporary society defined a married woman's status as suspended or "covered" : "the very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended during the marriage," wrote Sir William Blackstone, "or at least is incorporated and consolidated into that of the husband: under whose wing, protection and cover, she performs everything."<sup>6</sup>

In such a society women will always be subordinated. In all her novels the happy ending includes male protection for the heroine which nonetheless

enabled them to exercise power and authority. Such a privilege denied in their paternal houses is made possible in their husband's house, under their husband's loving care and protection. Pemberley, Donwell Abbey, Delaford, Woodston and Thornton Lacy allow the heroines an escape from their father's house while protecting them from the dangers of society. By doing this Austen held up the advantages of some degree of female submission as in the cases of Elizabeth Bennet, Emma Woodhouse, Catherine Morland and Marianne Dashwood against rebellious imaginativeness. But by highlighting the moral and intellectual superiority of her female protagonists Austen ultimately holds the view that they too should be allowed to exercise power.

The issue of female imagination vis-à-vis female submission resurfaces over and over again in her mature works. An integral part of female submission entails restraining their imagination as well as their articulation. For example, Catherine learns to do this as she matures and this can be noted in all of Austen's rebellious heroines. Through them Austen shows that authority can be achieved by the females without being too vocal. Marianne's imagination leads her lively affections which involve her in an improper amorous involvement with Willoughby – one that is almost self-destructive. As opposed to such behaviour a mature Marianne learns to remain silent even when,

... a thousand inquiries sprung up from her heart ... she dared not urge one ... (*SS*, 305).

With similar awareness Elizabeth Bennet too keeps secrets and indulges in double speak. Thus, she refrains from telling her parents Darcy's role in rescuing Lydia nor does she tell Jane about Mrs. Gardiner's letter. Also the real intention behind Lady Catherine's visit is never disclosed to her mother. Nor does she answer Lady Catherine's repeated questions. Later she wants to make fun of Darcy but controls herself when,

She remembered that he had yet to learn to be laught at, and it was rather too early to begin. (*PP*, 330)

Emma too undergoes a similar experience. Thus, when her misgivings are removed she learns to remain silent and keep secrets about Harriet. Learning to restrain oneself and maintain silences are a part of acknowledging one's position in patriarchal society.

Austen too had used the art of concealment and double talk on sensitive topics and maintained silence about the reconciliation of heroines and heroes. Thus, details are wanting about the union of Fanny and Edmund, Marianne and Colonel Brandon, Emma and Knightley, Catherine and Henry etc. Between Fanny and Edmund we are only given half a sentence:

... exactly at the time when it was quite natural that it should be so, and not a week earlier, Edmund did cease to care about Miss Crawford, and became as anxious to marry Fanny, as Fanny herself could desire. (*MP*, 383)

This announcement is too brief and ironic since Edmund treats his inferior little cousin as a sister early in Vol. I and does not fall in love with her until the final chapter.

For Emma, her acceptance of Mr. Knightley is equally short,

What did she say? – Just what she ought, of course. A lady always does. – She said enough to show there need not be despair-and to invite him to say more himself. (*E*, 391)

Regarding Catherine and Henry, Austen has been abrupt too –

... before they reached Mr. Allen's grounds he had done it [the proposal] so well, that Catherine did not think it could ever be repeated too often. (*NA*, 198)

For Lady Susan the only words allowed are:

Frederica returned to Churchill with her Uncle and Aunt, and three weeks afterwards Lady Susan announced her being married to Sir James Martin. (*LS in NA vol.*, 271)

The same manner is repeated for Elizabeth and Darcy although we are given details clarifying the circumstances leading to their union. For Elinor and Edward –

His errand to Barton, in fact, was a simple one. It as only to ask Elinor to marry him ... (*SS*, 316)

with the author's comment that more than this "... need not be particularly told." (*SS*, 316-17) As for Marianne and Colonel Brandon, Austen's theory of reward is openly acknowledged:

They each felt his [Col. Brandon's] sorrows, and their own obligations, and Marianne, by general consent, was to be the *reward* of all. (*SS*, 333)  
[Italics mine]

Perhaps Austen is reticent about these unions and gives scant details about their married lives because she herself had been skeptical about their marital bliss. Only in her last novel, a gentle romantic narrative, does the author dwell at some length on Anne and Wentworth's union.

Austen's heroines discover that they have little control over the lives of others. They achieve it by learning the art of modesty, discretion, silence, fortitude, serenity, patience and endurance. Emma's words are true for most of Austen's conceited heroines:

Seldom, very seldom, does complete truth belong to any human disclosure; seldom can it happen that something is not a little disguised or a little mistaken ... (*E*, 391)

Often the heroines and their foils, Elizabeth and Jane, Emma and Jane, Fanny and Mary, Elinor and Marianne face dilemmas before they finally master new strategies for survival. Their maturity brings along happiness and fulfillment though they achieve this through humiliation and loss. Elizabeth, Emma, Catherine and Marianne learn to be sensitive towards the happiness of others because they know that only then they can be ideal wives and mothers. This moral awareness enhances their stature in family and society and distinguishes them from the many self-centred ones that abound in Austen's narratives.

Though Austen underscores the need for some degree of submission in women, yet they bow down to those men only with high moral and

intellectual authority. Unlike George Eliot she did not have faith on the idea of great men. Rather her good men think liberally and believe in equality for women. Her heroines too do not consider their husbands as great or overly good. They love and respect their men not worship or idolize them. In her later novels in particular, as opposed to what Marilyn Butler has held, Austen does not become more conservative but rather more radical in her outlook and more subtle in her criticism. This is particularly true of *Mansfield Park*, *Emma* and *Persuasion*. Thus, Fanny, Emma and Anne agree to marry only when their prospective husbands recognize their superior intellectual and moral authority. This is perhaps true of all her female protagonists except Catherine Morland. Mr. Bennet despite being a defective father rightly comprehends that Elizabeth's husband must "respect" her as his "partner in life" (*PP*, 335). In an "unequal marriage" (*PP*, 335) she will never be happy. The inequality in question is not of fortune or status, but where the husband would fall short of intellectual and moral authority. He rightly understands his daughter:

'... I know that you could be neither happy nor respectable, unless you truly esteemed your husband; unless you looked up to him as a superior...'  
(*PP*, 335)

But it would be wrong to assume that Austen endowed her female protagonists with extraordinary lives. True, their lives are better than most women and their marriages provide them with fulfillment. Yet the oblique

feminist barb is sharp for despite being at par with the heroes – even more so in the cases of Anne, Elinor and Fanny – they are not allowed by the laws of the age to wield equal power and authority. This constitutes the brilliance of Austen's use of irony presented both explicitly and implicitly. Through Anne, Elinor and Fanny who are relatively devoid of power and authority, she presents a scathing criticism of patriarchy. This is ironical because Fanny and Elinor are the strongest advocates of patriarchy although they are deeply aware of its defects. Yet they never question or contest it. Austen clearly understood that patriarchy could be best attacked not through the monster or human characters but through the angels. The words of criticism uttered against patriarchy by monster characters like Lady Catherine, Mrs. Ferrars, Mrs. Bennet, etc. eventually turn out to be the author's ploy to mock the respective speakers.

Her mature works like *Pride and Prejudice* through later novels like *Emma*, to her last complete novel *Persuasion*, show that Austen's progress as a writer clearly demonstrates her growing involvement with the question of power and authority for women in a patriarchal society. All throughout her criticism of patriarchy has been subtle and guarded, except the one instance where she endows absolute power and authority to her protagonist Lady Susan. But this turns out to be an untenable situation because Lady Susan is a monster character and Austen's final stand on power sharing is

achieved through deserving human characters like Elizabeth and Emma. These loving human protagonists, although made the central intelligence of the novels, are made to curb their presumptuousness and develop a toned down personality more suited to their position and are endowed with real authority.

In such a balance and harmony of shared authority and restricted power Jane Austen conceived what could come nearer to an ideal marriage, an ideal relationship between a couple and an ideal state of power sharing. Through this Austen had attempted to find an answer to the abuse of power and authority – for most marriages as she perceived, as also most relationships between the two sexes, were about suppression and dominance. She does this primarily through her human characters who come closest to enjoy the true ideal of restricted authority. Austen through them shows preference for benevolent patriarchy. Austen initially displayed skepticism towards her human characters in wielding authority but eventually restores them to a better position in the structure of power sharing. Because of this her position as a feminist has been subjected to severe criticism but Austen was true to her conscience in her writings and was not afraid to take a stand which she thought was best suited to the society of her times. She is not against women wielding authority per se, but given the inadequate education, lack of financial independence she seems to

indicate that undue power and authority may be withheld from such women. Her awareness of the imbalances between the genders did not make her shut out society or seek an escape into an idealistic world, or become resentful towards it. She was at times optimistic and this is seen in the restricted power play between Elizabeth and Darcy, Emma and Mr. Knightley, as also to an extent between Anne and Wentworth and Elinor and Edward. The Darcys like the Knightleys ensure harmony in society along with Austen's other ideal couples. It is through such power play that the author demonstrates how society can successfully overcome the abuse of power. This in effect becomes a form of literary protest against and resistance to existing social malice. Though only a woman and with no other weapon except her pen, Austen was nevertheless successful in creating a body of works that spoke forcefully on behalf of suppressed womanhood. Through the realistic portrayal of her characters in real life situations of her time she is able to create a vision of an idealistic patriarchy which would allow her to progress beyond her anxiety over authority.