

CONCLUSION

Our interest in Jane Austen today lies in the fact that she subverted the limitations imposed on her by society and also undermined the values she was supposed to uphold. At one time she was considered to be an unambiguous writer who reassured the reader about the order and stability of society, confirming in the process the norms of patriarchy. To day we cannot ignore the fact that the apparently placid texture of her novels conceals a tension between protest and acceptance, rebellion and conformity held in equilibrium by the controlling device of the narrative. Not only Jane Austen confers credibility upon the new genre i.e. novel so long despised by and large but she also was quite unapologetic about the female orientation of her work and the fact that it did not seek to instruct. She introduced into her novels some of the ideological debates of her time, which questioned the implied assumptions behind the gender-based codes of conduct. For example, in Elizabeth Bennet's refusal of Mr. Collin's marriage proposal and his reaction to it in *Pride and Prejudice*, we witness an essentially serious confrontation between two ideologies of marriage and two opposing images of women.

Rationality and individualism were the leading concepts of the age but neither was seen as particularly relevant to women, who were not educated to be individuals but only to fill social and familial slots. The skills that they were expected to learn were those that would secure them a husband, who would confer identity and status. The education of young women was a major topic of discussion in the eighteenth century, and the books on conduct with practical advice on social skills and moral value did a lot to codify and disseminate ideas about a woman's role in society. The degree to which women ought to aspire to physical strength was a fairly controversial issue in Jane Austen's time. Through her creations of several robust and forthright heroines (Catherine Morland, Elizabeth Bennet, Emma Woodhouse), her negative representation of affected women who exploit their weakness to gain power (Isabella Thorpe, Louisa Musgrove, Miss Bingley) and her privileging of strength and forbearance over helplessness (Elinor and Marianne Dashwood), Jane Austen contributed to a continuing debate about frailty and cunning as necessary feminine characteristics and part of woman's legitimate armoury.

Despite the popular image of Jane Austen as a conservative, in the debate on women's education and upbringing she repeatedly took a radical stand. The behaviour of Elizabeth Bennet runs counter to most norms laid down by the Conduct Books. She is independent, unaffected and intelligent. Her unabashed walk through the muddy countryside to see her sick sister violates the code of female propriety. Again, the rejection of the standard notions of femininity is evident in the early chapters of *Northanger Abbey* where Jane Austen in mock despair laments that Catherine Morland who preferred rough boys' games to elegant occupations such as watering a rose-bush or feeding a canary was quite unsuited to the role of a heroine: 'She was moreover noisy and wild, hated confinement and cleanliness and loved nothing so well in the world as rolling down the green slope at the back of the house' (2).

The two decades (1798-1818) during which Jane Austen wrote were a transitional period in English literature, in which the eighteenth century concern with the social context of human beings gave way to the romantic emphasis on the isolated or the alienated individual. The romantic 'self', we now recognize, was all male and the woman could only be seen as the 'other'. Jane Austen takes the woman as

individual and places her in a social setting, faced with a choice that is private and personal. A recurrent theme of her novels is the heroine's resistance to the efforts of the patriarchal community to force her into a social role at the cost of her own identity.

In Jane Austen's novels there is a constant tension between a woman's need to exercise choice in order to define herself as an individual and society's demand that she should conform to. As a social institution marriage implied subservience and for the imaginative woman it did imply a curtailment. In many (subsequent) novels where the protagonist is a woman, marriage, while being the desired goal, also triggers off an uneasy sense of anti-climax. Yet no satisfactory alternative was available.

There might have been a measure of self-dislike in Austen's feelings towards people whose ways must have reminded her of herself. Had she not moved within the genteel world, accepted many of its conventions and values, and above all wanted to achieve the type of female success that was normally sought, she would hardly have reacted so strongly. What we see then, in letters written after 1800, as Austen moved into her mid and late twenties, is the transformation

of an 'insider', meaning a person with the outlook of her class, into an 'outsider', a person who, at least in certain respects, became a critic of genteel female society and its typical ritual and ceremonies.

Jane Austen only wrote about what she knew at first hand, her characters are not very different from one another. Richard Simpson, a distinguished nineteenth century Shakespearean scholar held the view that Jane Austen never had the advantages of personal acquaintance with professional literary men or women. She derived very little from books. Simpson was also first to point out the apparent insulation of her novels from the large events of her contemporary world: 'She lived and wrote through the period of the French Revolution and the European war without referring to them once except as making the fortunes of some of her naval characters' (Ed. J. Halperin, 30, 1978).

Marks of transitionalism are prominent enough in the novelist in her dealing with characters. The heroes of the late novels are not urbane or ineffectual but serious, principled, socially responsible, publicly active and instruments of rational salvation. By the same token the

heroines of the late novels had different characteristics. Just as Emma Woodhouse mended her ways, so was the world of Austen's late novels reformed. It was a world whose sense of order, atmosphere and underlying value structure at once represented the profound change in English life during the Revolutionary Age and the personal change that gave Austen a new awareness of herself and her society. It was a world that anticipated the coming of the Victorian Age.

After the convulsions of the Seventeenth century, life in England became more settled and stable as political compromises were made. Several generations of violence led to greater circumspection, and the lessons of science furthered rational modes of thought, the pomp and heroic grandeur of one age yielded to the propriety and correctness of another, just as metaphysical speculation gave way to the more careful probings of empirical investigation. The thinkers of the age were content to ask less in order to understand more clearly, and felt a flush of confidence over scientific achievements and the age of progress that followed there from.

England was shaken politically by the French Revolution and drawn into a struggle for survival that lasted almost to

the end of Austen's life. Although Jane Austen's characters are rooted in social actuality, she does not conceive of a society as being in any sense problematical, as making issues by reason of the changes it was undergoing in her time. In the present state of opinion about the novelist there is little disposition to accept this. On the contrary, a large part of the interest of her work is now thought to lie exactly in the sensitivity of her response to social change. To examine Austen's response to social change, however, inevitably means considering the impact of the French Revolution on her life and writing. Her lifetime exactly coincided with a decisive period of change, when the old, hierarchical society of England underwent struggles for survival, but nonetheless emerged from the Revolutionary period profoundly altered. If Austen was not just alive in her times but alive to them, as Lionel Trilling maintains, one must understand the times if one is to understand both her and her novels.

Marilyn Butler in her *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* (1975) sees Austen's novels not as a record of provincial insularity but revealing the author's social engagement and responses to the problems of the Revolutionary age. It is often said that Jane Austen in the countryside remained

isolated from the great events of her time. But she was not isolated from reading novels; she was rather an avid reader of them. This very habit or interest in reading helped Austen gathering experience of the social and political surroundings of the time. She had an ability to pick up the vibrations of a society that was in the throes of change and to incorporate them in her fiction. Fleishman held that Jane Austen brought out but the qualitative change that occurred in English society in a transitional period—the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries. To our mind it occurs that Jane Austen evokes the changes through a careful choice of themes and a highly diverse set of *dramatis personae*, whose dialogue and actions reveal her own stand on some key contemporary issues.

A close study of her novels reveals an invaluable way to have a sense of what it was like to go through a critical period of social change. Austen's response to change reflects her own social position as a member of the English gentry. She was not an unthinking representative of her class but viewed that class critically. According to one school of thought, Austen was a subversive, hostile to her class although not its declared enemy, while another school

regards her as a pillar of the Establishment and even a reactionary. In fact, she was a person who was deeply affected by the historical impulses of her age and at the same time sought to understand change and its consequences for her class. The rise of a new economic order that ultimately altered every phase of life also made an impact at the time of Austen's birth in 1775. England played a major role in these changes-in the war with American colonies, the bitter struggle for political reform, and the industrial breakthrough of the 1770s. It has indeed been a matter of great interest throughout the dissertation to examine, taking into account various aspects, Jane Austen's traits of transitionalism and radicalism in her narratives. In the mid nineteenth century traces of radicalism in the form of overt articulation of womanhood is found in the authors like the Brontee sisters and even in George Eliot. But still in a much earlier period (late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries) Jane Austen emerged as an author having her radical views on woman question. The modern view to that direction gets sufficient grounding. Of course, modern critics dismiss the theory of radicalism in Jane Austen compared to the other authors' of the time when critics like Marilyn Butler, Mary Poovey and even E.Said are of the opinion that as early as late eighteenth century

Jane Austen upheld the assertiveness of the womanhood. Her novels thematize feminine consciousness which found considerable articulation at a moment in history when social changes in this regard were only beginning to make an impact. It is an indication of Jane Austen's artistic greatness that she perceived these changes and successfully incorporated them into her narratives from a radical's view point.