Jane Austen's Radicalism in the perspective of a changing Society.

All the six major novels by Jane Austen (1775-1817) spread over a period of about eight years. It suggests that the novels were written close upon one another over a relatively short period. The works should really be divided into two distinct groups--the early and the late. **Sense and Sensibility, Northanger Abbey, Pride and Prejudice** were all begun in 1790s and belong to Jane Austen's first phase pf development. By contrast, the other three novels--**Mansfield Park, Emma** and **Persuasion** belong wholly to the novelist's maturity.

Jane Austen's rise to prominence occurred not so much in her own time as in the late nineteenth century when a literary canon was being constructed around the inherently unstable configuration of moral seriousness and political disengagement. She was eminently fitted to take her place in an age of transition (eighteenth century giving place to the nineteenth), She proved to be a serious observer of a fast changing society being questioned and partly altered by change of feeling in her own class. A vigilant watcher

of the ongoing life of the people of her time that passed by or due to come, Jane Austen acted sharply. She perceived three things. First, she realized that the manners and the culture to which she had been accustomed in her father's house were by no means universal; secondly, that much lower standards might often be observed in large country houses among powerful land owners, and thirdly, that these great folk did not seem to be aware of their shortcomings. In their opinions they were still a superior class, still better bred than any body else. To all these Jane Austen bore witness in her novels. Modern critical studies on Austen indeed aim at tracing her relationship to contemporary social and political situations. Her narratives also uphold a literary campaign for the sensationalist fiction that endorses conduct subversive of respect and established morals.

Jane Austen had the good fortune to be born at a time when 'the moral interest compelled upon her by life' as has been observed by F.R. Leavis in his **The Great Tradition**(1948,1). She belonged to two different centuries (eighteenth and nineteenth) and this is very well evinced from the two different angles of vision that determine her transitionalism and radicalism. In our present study on

Austen and her works we will try chiefly to highlight the aspects of transitionalism and radicalism scattered over her narratives.

Jane Austen in her novels hints at the feminist controversy of her time in the most important historical context. Marilyn Butler regards Austen's stance as moral in the eighteenth century sense of the word. In her view, 'Jane Austen is by common consent an author remarkably sure of her values. She skewers a moral solesism as confidently as a verbal infelicity' (Butler,1975,1).

For Austen, reason and restraint should play an important role for production and maintenance of these values. This is noticeable in her plea for rational restraint on sexual passion. This tendency to argue like radical moralist about sexual conduct can be taken as a mark of her shift in outlook resulting from the change of time.

The sense/sensibility question which Austen made sure to throw up was the crucial one for the thinkers of the eighteenth century. They thought Sense or Reason, a better guide to moral principles than sensibility or feeling. They also held that women were no less capable of rational

judgment than men. It was through her novel **Sense and Sensibility**, published posthumously as a work of art 'By a Lady', that she upheld this issue. By her use of the phrase 'By a Lady' Jane Austen wished to stress her gentility, perhaps her intention was to state her sex with the expectations that her view on the sense and sensibility question would be understood by a female one. Hence 'By a Lady' was the best means of declaring a female viewpoint. Jane Austen has a specific interest in the Head/Heart question and this is dealt with by the unfolding of the stories of Elinor and Marianne. Jane Austen was apparently anti-Romantic in the Romantic Age. But what she did was herself carrying over from the preceding age values reformulated on reason to be attached to the ways of lives of the people of the new century. Hence the antithesis in the title **Sense and Sensibility** might be considered not merely as synoptic formulation of the theme of this particular novel, but as a focal point in Jane Austen's perceptions of the way men and women should dispose themselves in their social relations. B.C.Southam in his Introduction to **The Critical Essays on Jane Austen**, in fact, confirms this Austen canon as he observes, 'A recurrent theme in Jane Austen's writing is the need to distinguish

between reality and illusion, to explore and discriminate among conditions of true-false vision' (Southam, 1968 xv).

However, Jane Austen as a radical does not simply contrast the two attitudes, conditions or set of values. She actually portrays man's and woman's inner progress from one condition to the other. Faith in the possibility of the progress constitutes the core of her transitionalism and radicalism and her perception of human individuals as wayfarers on a journey towards 'Sense and Sensibility' reflecting her deeper commitment to life and art.

Jane Austen clung to some rational traditional values when at the same time she was ready to switch over to the way of the changed external background but she does not use it for any of her heroines. The world in which the novelist lived was the world of the English gentry. It was the world in which girls went to boarding schools, picked up the usual accomplishments, read novels, attended assembly hall dances at Basingloke and Bath in the best finery. In her letters to Cassandra, her sister, there are references as we get from the book **Jane Austen, her life and letters, A family** Record by W. Austen Leigh and R.A.Austen Leigh--'All my money is spent buying white gloves and silk Persian (Letter

5),' and also in another letter (9) she wrote 'I have had my superb surplice. I am sorry to say that my new coloured gown is very much washed out, though I charged everybody to take great care of it.'

But the quietness and stability of her world were shaken by the French Revolution. Austen's sailor brothers Francis and Charles made her aware of the naval struggle between England and Franc, and through her brother Henry, an officer in the Oxfordshire militia, she was conscious of England's attempt to build a stronger army. Anyway, Austen knew about the repressiveness and climate of fear that gripped the country during the 1790s.That she did so is evident from two passages in **Northanger Abbey**, one of which alludes to the spectre of violence and the other to the abridgement of hallowed English liberties and the use of spies in the campaign against internal Jacobinism. Claudia L.Johnson in her book **Jane Austen- Women, Politics and the Novel** observes, '**Northanger Abbey**, arguably her earliest, should be the most densely packed with topical details of political character, enclosure, riots, hothouses, pamphlets, and even anti-treason laws authorizing the activities of 'voluntary spies'(41).The 'riot' and 'spies' passages are consistent with this larger aspect of the

novel. What is interesting is how Austen chose to show off the reality they exposed.

To examine Austen's response to social change inevitably means considering the impact the great revolution (French Revolution) had on her life and writing. Her lifetime exactly coincided with a decisive period of change, when the old hierarchical society of England came under heavy attack, struggled for survival, made various adjustments but anyway emerged from the Revolutionary period profoundly altered. Lionel Trilling was right in maintaining that one must understand the times if one is to understand both Jane Austen and her novels of transitional and radical aspects. Austen novels are strictly and fundamentally the reflections of changes-social and political. They deal with the psychological and moral problems to which these changes give rise. The period between 1775-1817, the span of Jane Austen's life, was punctuated by challenges to conventional social roles and responsibilities. In England the decisive cause of this change was not just the French Revolution but the behaviour associated with capitalism.

Although brought up within the values and tastes of the eighteenth century, Jane Austen's concern with the

individual links her with the emerging values of the nineteenth century. She has little respect for bourgeois men such as Mr.Wickham and Mr.Collins as evinced in her most celebrated narrative **Pride and Prejudice**. Her respect is for the autonomous woman who has a power founded not in money or status but in her own intrinsic wit. According to Judith Newton, Jane Austen's representation, 'The autonomous woman is to some extent a contemporary fantasy and it is never the less valuable for suggesting that women do not need to submit to male ideological domination even if the economic and legal structures place most in male hands' (1981,72).

Again, it is indeed worth admitting that the fascination of repulsion provides a valuable avenue into Austen's motivations and our own reasons for exploring the elements of radicalism and transitionalism in her novels. Marianne Dashwood and Elizabeth Bennet are attractive because of the unconventional and rebellions traits in their characters. The opening sentence in **Pride and Prejudice** - 'It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife' (1) appears to make it clear that it is the mind of Mrs. Bennet, and the collective wisdom of the rural gentry, that is being

ironized. Indeed Mr. Bennet conspicuously distances himself from the 'Truth universally acknowledged' by his wife. The evidence of the full context indicates that the undermining of the authority is for Jane Austen an attack on socially sanctioned stupidity.

At some period of her life, Jane Austen seems to have formed a strong prejudice against rich people, titled people and great landowners. To justify this, reference can once again be drawn from her celebrated novel **Pride and Prejudice** in the manner-'A clergyman like you must marry' says Lady Catherine de Bourgh to Mr. Collins, choose properly, gentle woman for my sake; and for your own, let her be an active, useful sort of person, not brought up high, but able to make a small income go a good way' (89).

On occasions, marking her radical outlook on society Jane Austen attacked the privileged classes. In nearly all her narratives a vital element is the imperviousness of the people in the society, their complete incomprehension of any standard of values which might exist beyond the narrow compass of their park palings. At places as scattered throughout the novels, Jane Austen has left elements of transitionalism as well. M.Mukherjee's re-reading suggests-

> The two decades during which she (Jane Austen) wrote most of her work (1798-1818) 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 in a social setting faced with a choice that is private and personal (Mukherjee,1995, 26-27).

Jane Austen's outlook was influenced by her experience at Stevenson in the midst of her family and friends, but it was also shaped by the large eighteenth century world. In this context Warren Robert's observations made in the Introduction to his book **Jane Austen and the French Revolution** (1995) justify our contention:

> She was thirteen in the summer of 1789 when forces were unleashed in France that set nation and every nation of the western world on a different course. Life was no longer the same and never would be again, so great were the

transformations that flowed from this crucial historical moment (3).

However, Austen should be seen both against the background of the Revolutionary Age in which she lived and as the representative of a stable order that has experienced its revolution. In her novels social reality was the soil in which the characters were rooted. Personally she was acutely conscious of the social and political changes taking place in her time. A large part of the interest of her work is now thought to lie exactly in the sensitivity of her response to social change.

From the early work to the latest Austen found fault with certain facets of female life in her own middle-class society. Heroines in her novels play piano, sing, draw do needle work and dance. What Austen criticized was not the accomplishments themselves but the female attitudes to them. Girls were not taught these skills to develop their intellect. The novelist sharply criticized the importance given to clothes. Actually, the false values that accompanied the female accomplishments encouraged girls to stress appearances. Mrs. Allen in **Northanger Abbey** is an example of the middle-aged woman who was empty-headed but

much concerned with appearances. She had 'the air of a gentle woman, a great of quiet, inactive, good temper and a trifling turn of mind...Dress was her passion'(7).

Another middle-aged woman in the same novel was Catherine's aunt who told her that 'Dress is at all times a frivolous distinction and excessive solitude about it often destroys its own aim'(22). Catherine was unable to follow this advice, 'lying awake at night thinking about a new gown.' As if to drive home her point about clothes Austen said that perhaps a man's advice, such as that of Catherine's brother, would have been more useful, 'for man only can be aware of the insensibility of man towards a new gown'(36).What this sentences from the text reveals is Austen's view that woman's reason for concerning themselves so much with clothes was to please men and that they were mistaken in doing so. Men scarcely noticed or cared and women would be mortified if they knew 'how little the heart of man is affected by what is costly or new in their attire'(47).

Jane Austen felt that gentle females cared too much about appearance and clothes, making them their worst enemies, and she subjected to the countless influences placed on

girls to make attracting men their main goal in life. From the beginning to the end her novels are filled with flirtatious females, all of whom are flawed for that reason. Accomplished young ladies whose main goal was to please men with their skills and catch their attention with clothes did not develop their minds. Superficial and without mental resources, they were fated, once they achieved their objective of marriage, to a life of emptiness.

Without disturbing the smooth surface of her novels, Jane Austen managed to introduce into them some of the ideological debates of her time which questioned the implied assumptions behind the gender-based codes of conduct. For example, in **Pride and Prejudice** Elizabeth Bennet's refusal of Mr. Collins marriage proposal, we witness an essentially serious confrontation between two ideologies of marriage and two opposing images of women. Mr. Collins cannot believe Elizabeth's rejection of him. He must interpret it as her 'wish of increasing love by suspense according to the usual practice of elegant females'(9). Again, Elizabeth's highly irritated reply, 'Do not consider me now as an elegant female intending to plague you, but as a rational creature speaking the truth

directly from her heart' (91), points to crucial dilemma of the intelligent woman in the late eighteenth century England, both in fiction and reality.

All through the eighteenth century the Augustans like John Locke generally stressed the importance of reason in human behaviour. Coming towards the end of the century, Jane Austen must have imbibed this Augustine heritage. Each of her six novels presents in some form or other the deep seated contradiction between the rational norm in the eighteenth century society and the standards to which women were hypocritically expected to adhere. The period Jane Austen was born in, was marked by the feature that logic and abstract thought were foreign to women. While men were constantly being conditioned by history, influenced and modified by new ideas of individualism and empirical pragmatism, women were confined within strict limits. The skills they were expected to learn were those that would secure them a husband who would confer identity and status. The degree to which women ought to aspire to physical strength was a fairly controversial issue in Jane Austen's time. Even as this controversy persisted Jane Austen came out a radical through the creation of several robust and forthright heroines like Catherine Morland, Elizabeth

Bennet, Emma Woodhouse. Her negative representation of the affected women who exploit their weakness to gain power is explicit in Isabella Thorpe, Lousa Musgrove and Miss Bingley. With her privileging of strength and forebearance over abject helplessness as in Elinor and Marianne Dashwood, Jane Austen contributed to a continuing debate about frailty and cunning as necessary feminine characteristics and part of women's legitimate armoury. Rousseau went on to argue that God compensated woman for her physical weakness by giving her beauty, subtlety cunning to captivate men.

Our interest in Jane Austen today lies in her ability to subvert the limitations imposed on her by society and to undermine the values she supposed to uphold. We cannot ignore the fact that the apparently placid texture of the novels conceals a tension between protest and acceptance, rebellion and conformity. The rejection of the standard notions of feminity is evident in the early chapters of **Northanger Abbey**, where the novelist refers to the fact that Catherine Morland who preferred rough boy's 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' (25).

Jane Austen disapproved of excessive emotionalism. Contrast between vitality and sense on one hand and disability and sentiment on the other appears in **Sense and Sensibility** (between Elinor Dashwood and Lucy Steele), in **Pride and Prejudice** (between Elizabeth Bennet and Miss Bingley) and in **Persuasion** (between Anne Elliot and Lousa Musgrove). Although the question of class distinction is not a central issue in Jane Austen partly because most of her characters belong to roughly the same class, she was familiar with the fictional ethos, 'Where a conspicuously weak constitution was both an assertion of a delicately nurtured past and a presumptive claim to a similar future' (Ian Watt,1957, 168).

Hers being a period of transition (end of the eighteenth century and beginning of the nineteenth), Jane Austen also witnessed outside fiction, in the world of ideas, a growing awareness of woman's right and woman's need for rational education. It was at this juncture that Mary Wollstonecraft came out with her **Vindication of the Rights of Woman**

(1792). Jane Austen found a community of concern in what was discussed and debated by John Locke and Wollstonecraft. The special issue on Jane Austen brought out by the journal **Woman and Literature** (ed.) Janet Todd in 1982 and in 1983 Margaret Kirkham's **Jane Austen: Feminism and Fiction** placed her right in the main stream of the intellectual tradition of Enlightenment feminism. Margaret Kirkham argued that Jane Austen supported many of Mary Wollstonecraft's options including her criticism of Rousseau's view of women's education:

> Mary Wollstonecraft shows as much embarrassment about the necessity of attacking Milton, for both she goes against major inspirational figures with whom, apart from their exclusion of woman from the benefits of liberty, under the Law of Reason, she could have been in sympathy. All the same she does not shirk the task of revealing the flaws in Rousseau's argument, starting with a false interference drawn from the physical differences between men and woman (Kirkham, 1983, 46).

For Rousseau, 'Woman ought to be weak and passive because she has less bodily strength than man; and hence she was

formed to please and to be subject to him' (Wollstonecraft, 1792 , 173).

Rousseau had thought that men and women should not be educated in the same manner, for 'the education of woman should be always relative to men'. Wollstonecraft has difficulty in keeping her temper, she even indulges in little irony:

> But granted that woman ought to be beautiful, innocent and silly, to render her a more alluring and indulgent companion; What is her understanding sacrificed for?... only according to Rousseau's own account, to make her the mistress of her husband for a very short time? For no man ever insisted more on the transient nature of love' (Wollstonecraft, 1792, 187).

In the perspective of the changed political, social and economic situations, Jane Austen modelled her novels. The England in which Austen lived was changing in response to the new burdens of the Revolutionary Age. The French Revolution by itself initiated a political debate and it is not unlikely that Austen was a participant in such debate. The traces of the elements of transitionalism and

radicalism in the author abound in the novels. The social argument in **Mansfield Park** is just a continuation of the same from the two previous novels. Austen it is true, did not use that argument into an eighteenth century framework, but placed it in the unstable world of the nineteenth century. By the time Jane Austen wrote **Mansfield Park,** (published in 1814) she lived fully in the nineteenth century. Her style of thinking and writing underwent a sea-change that swept over England as a result of the French Revolution. **Mansfield Park,** according to Q.D. Leavis is 'The First modern novel in England' (collected Essays, 40). The Crawfords are spiritually inferior. Fanny Price, the heroine, possesses all the good qualities but only in limited and secondary ways. She is, really speaking, the leading edge of Jane Austen's transitional enterprise. She is also made to provoke feelings in the critics and scholars that range from constrained and dutiful pity and admiration to positive repulsion. Fanny is a repressed young woman 'born to struggle and endure', with whose girlhood we have been led to sympathize. In her **Jane Austen and the State** Mary Evan's analysis of **Mansfield Park** carries with it a radical reading. Austen emerges as a radical by virtue of the fact that she exposes the cracks in the structure of the establishment, questioning the

aristocracy's fitness for government. Sir Thomas Bertam appears as the exponent of a repressive regime. In this regard Evans points out that 'excessive repression merely serves to harbour subversive fantasies and undisciplined desire' (1987,72).

The novel reveals a society where the reliance on male authority and the regulation of behaviour lead to anarchy and Mary Evans pursues this to conclude that the society itself, as depicted by Austen 'is based on a system of equal wealth and property distribution, which requires redress' (74). From this perspective Austen can be seen as belonging to an alternative tradition, which Butler describes as one 'Which attacks patriarchal privilege and appeals for democratic access to the processes of government through the figure of Fanny Price' (1975, 224).

Emma too bears enough testimony to Austen's transitionalism and radicalism are beautifully touched upon in **Emma**. In her handling the theme of marriage in the novel, she presents Emma Woodhouse as an exceptional character. In an age when marriage was looked upon as something not a matter of rejection particularly for a marriageable woman, Emma Woodhouse is the only Austen heroine who openly rejects

marriage. Harried is found to be surprised at Emma's unwillingness to marry, 'Dear me but what shall you do? How shall you empty yourself when you grow old' (73-74). In **Emma**, really speaking, Austen introduces us to a heroine who, even under an enormous, all- pervading social pressure re-affaims her own 'self' not to be easily found in her age. The world of **Emma**, is a revolutionalized world in which traditional notions of rank and caste are challenged by new social forces that express themselves through universal rivalry. Thus, a natural mode of behaviour for individuals in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century England (Jane Austen's world) is not the quiet, disciplined morality of Fanny Price, but the self important, acquisitive mode of behaviour of Mrs. Elton in **Emma**.

While examining Jane Austen's attitude to the life and society of her time from a radical's perspective, we should touch upon the fact that in **Emma** the preservation of class hierarchy becomes an important issue. Marriages instead of being means of social and spatial mobility become devices for rigid reconfirmation of class and space enclosures. Harriet's marriage with Mr. Knightley's tenant farmer means that 'the intimacy between her and Emma must sink'.

However much Mr. Knightley might value Robert Martin at work, he recognizes that socially they must not interact 'His rank in society I would alter if I could which is saying a great deal, I assure you, Emma'(358).Of course, the long-awaited resolution of the mystery surrounding Harriet's birth is resolved when 'She proved to be the illegitimate daughter of a tradesman' (365). This puts Emma into shame in her attempt to connect her with the 'gentleman' in her social circle: 'The stain of illegitimacy unbleached by nobility or wealth, would have been stain indeed' (308).

As a radical in her outlook, Jane Austen is never happy with setting the background of her novels only against 'the three or four country homes' as once she declared. Rather her novels show an understanding of the world outside the quiet of the countryside. Indeed, considerable sections of **Sense and Sensibility** , **Mansfield Park** and **Persuasion** are set not in rural isolation but in urban centres. The world which her characters inhabit is not, therefore, as isolated or as confined as some readings of her work might suggest. On the contrary, by the standard of the late eighteenth century, her characters are the citizens of the world. They are demonstrably familiar with fashion, with the artifacts

of urban culture with developed and sophisticated manners and also with the debates of contemporary social and political lives.

The last of her major novels is **Persuasion.** It marks out Austen's trait of transitional approach to her narratives. In **Persuasion** the heroine marries outside her social class. She not only glories in being 'a sailor's wife' but also happily becomes a part of gradually expanding fraternity of sea-faring people who do without the stability of a fixed home. Considering the importance of the houses in Jane Austen's earlier novels the relinquishment of a fixed home in **Persuasion** seems to be a major departure.

Jane Austen's radicalism is clearly understandable in her critical discussion of Sir Walter Elliot's behaviour towards Admiral and Mrs. Croft and Captain Wentworth. Lady Russell stands condemned for having too great an enthusiasm for rank rather than talent and enterprise. The changing attitude of Jane Austen to life and society of the period of transition, however, is best summed up in what Claudia L Johnson observes about **Persuasion** :

> Wistfully and romantically unfulfilled in the twilight of her life, the author Jane Austen

> grows tenderer on romantic subjects she had disparaged in the confidence and severity of her youth; with her own opening out into a world of emotion, eighteenth century 'objectivity' yields to nineteenth century subjectivity (Johnson 1988, 144).

A radical in the period of real transition (last half of the eighteenth century and the first half of the nineteenth) Jane Austen was in the habit of going against whatever was unjust and partial. She lived at an age when pen was an exclusive male instrument for expressing inner thoughts and ideas and women were denied it. Jane Austen rose to the occasion and made an allout effort to bring the role of women folk to the forefront. **Persuasion** is an example in this regard. In its penultimate chapter Anne Elliot, the heroine is made to say rather vehemently: 'Men have had every advantage of us in telling their own story. Education has been theirs in so much higher a degree; the pen has been in their hand. I will not allow books to prove anything'.This sort of outburst is just an uncharacteristic adamancy that the novelist has put into her character. This is also an uncharacteristic reaction of a woman author at

that period of time that the literary history of England has ever witnessed.

To an inquisitive reader of Jane Austen, it is more than a reality that despite her womanly predicaments to be a writer, she could, with all radical outlook, take herself to the level of success. She drew the attention of the critics and captivated generations of readers. She had all the necessary gifts for a great success particularly as a woman novelist of merit. Jane Austen was deeply involved in and cognizant of the major ideological debates of her time. The crucial debate with which she was concerned was the issue of morality and in particular the question of how individuals should assess their personal responsibilities and inclinations in the light of their material circumstances. The novelist offers her readers a radical morality and far from endorsing the given values of late eighteenth century capitalism, she was in many ways critical of them. Two central themes of Austen's fictions are her attempts to elucidate a morality that is independent of the material values of the capitalist market and the claims that she articulates for the quality of men and women and the right of women to moral independence and autonomy. In respect of morality in the late eighteenth

century and early nineteenth century Austen represents not a conservative but a liberal tradition, a tradition opposed to the extension of patriarchal authority. Products of the period of transition, Jane Austen's characters also lived at a crucial point in English history, the point at which a society already essentially Capitalist was undergoing transformation into an industrial one.