Social and economic conditions and position of women in contemporary society.

We get an impression that well-bred society must have taken a great stride forward in the latter half of the eighteenth century not only in moral standards out also in social and economic fronts--in the cottage, in the farm, in the manor house and at the court. The aristocracy and the landed gentry, however, had not felt the impetus for improvement which animated the class immediately below them, the class of the unlanded gentry into which Jane Austen was born. At some period of her life, probably very early, Jane Austen seems to have formed a strong prejudice against rich people and great landowners. References to this aspects are very much there in the pride of the Pemberley, the arrogance of the Rosings, the instability of Mansfield, the tasteless splendour of Southerton, the snobbery of Kellynch etc.

The period between 1775-1817, the span of Jane Austen's life was punctuated by challenges to the traditional hierarchy of English class society and conventional social roles and responsibilities. According to Nicholas Marsh 'Jane Austen's novels, are a special case in respect of the society they present' (Marsh, 1998, 94).

It has been found that in the event of changes in human behaviour there was not gain without loss. In the early Victorian Age in England the women who went to work in the factory though lost some of the best things in life, gained independence. The income that they had, made them self-supporting. According to G.M.Trevelyan in his **English Social History** , 'the upper and middle classes grew richer and as the rural gentry fell more under the influence of town life, it became a matter of social pride that the young ladies should be taught by a governess in the school and also do as little domestic work as possible' (Trevelyan,1984,501). This aspect in the women life has been clearly referred to in Jane Austen's novels. The women coming from the smaller gentry and upper bourgeois class read poetry, engaged themselves in gossips and also sometimes were found waiting for the attention of the gentlemen. Women's lives, however, were by no means so limited. Elizabeth Bennet in **Pride and Prejudice**, Jane Austen's one of the most renowned narratives has been depicted as walking three miles in muddy weather to arrive at Netherfield 'with weary ankles, dirty stockings and a face glowing with warmth and exercise' (56).

Jane Austen's radicalism greatly consists in her socio-economic view of the life of the people of her time. As time went on, there came more gentlemen upon the ground than the ground could support. Naturally, it became necessary that sons should do something to support themselves. Of different avenues for the youth to earn livelihood, mention may be of the Navy with regard to Jane Austen's world. Two of Jane's brothers were officers in the Royal Navy. Here we can once again turn to **English Social History** wherein the author says,

> The naval officers were now the sons of gentlemen of modest means(Nelson was a poor parson's son),sent to sea as boys, and combining what was best in the 'tarpaulin's' experience and training with the manner and thought of an educated man. Fanny's brother, William, in Mansfield Park and Captain Wentworth in Persuasion stand for all that was most attractive in the type (Trevelyan,1984,512).

Of course, she can see as clearly as any intelligent observer of the socio-economic world that income is to maintain life and a certain level of income is essential to maintain a way of life that allows for the employment of

servants and reasonably acceptable accommodation. But more than this, she realized that income maintains not just the material world but also the social world, without that sufficient income there is no access to social networks, to assembly, to literature and to even limited mobility. Edward Copeland in his essay on Money in **The Cambridge Companion to Jane Austen** (ed.) by Copeland himself and Juliet Mcmaster observes, 'This essential economic fact attaches itself firmly to Jane Austen's fiction and to her life...especially money as spendable income, is love-tipped arrow aimed at the hearts of Jane Austen's heroines and her readers' (Copeland, 1997,132).

The equation of money in men and beauty in women is obviously an axiom Jane Austen is exposing to criticism by her literal acceptance of it. Beauty is however, negotiable and variable factor and can be compensated for by money. The woman impoverished by unequal inheritance laws, needs financial security in marriage. A man with uncertain assets is found to be willing to settle for a woman with money, regardless of her looks. But while in women the pursuit of financial stability through marriage is to a certain extent accepted as a necessary urge, in men it results in a loss of credibility. This progressive view of the novelist is

beautifully illustrated in **Pride and Prejudice**. Elizabeth Bennet playfully points out this double standard of morality to Mrs. Gardiner who has earlier cautioned her in the name of prudence against marrying Wickham, 'The sudden acquisition of ten thousand pounds was the most remarkable charm of the young lady' (134). We have also Mrs. Bennet who is regarded as one of the more absurd and comic figures of English fiction and her preoccupation with marrying off her daughter is the mark of a somewhat inadequate intelligence. But in view of the economic exigencies faced by the unmarried daughters of the eighteenth century, Mrs. Bennet's concerns of the eighteenth century, do not seem to be entirely ridiculous. If Mrs.Bennet is slightly crazy, perhaps she is so because she perceives more clearly than her husband the possible fate of her daughters if they do not marry. Given that she has five daughters, it is little wonder that at times Mrs. Bennet is less than rational. But what we can deduce from historical record is that with very exceptions (Emma Woodhouse, being one),women in the eighteenth century England, be they members of the gentry, the urban middle class or the rural people, needed to marry in order to guarantee for themselves economic support. Of the heroes in most of her novels she seems to be quite practical in handling this aspect. The chances of marriage

were subtly calculated on the basis if the portion settled on the girl, a fact that Jane Austen hinted at in the very beginning of Mansfield Park by pushing the calculation to an absurd exactitude. The lacuna in the unspoken law by which the market economy of marriage worked is realistically laid down in the manner, 'But there certainly are not so men of large fortune in the world as there are pretty women to deserve them' (1).

Mr. Knightley in **Emma** challenges Emma's treatment of Miss Bates, Jane Austen makes the remark that 'She (Miss Bates) is poor, she has sunk from the comforts she was born to, if she lives to old age, must probably sink more' (68). Lack of income here is given a reality from the novelist's perspective. Jane Austen's noted precision about money and income demonstrates an understanding of the process through which social life is maintained and constructed. What she realizes and is able to show is that wealth can never create virtue or integrity. It can reasonably be argued that Austen with her insight into human behaviour in relation to social pattern of the time is not a critic of material gain, 'She is a fierce critic of material greed and ruthlessness' as has been observed by Mary Evans in her book **Jane Austen and the State** (1987,18). In this vein the

novelist attacks the aristocratic assumption that the rich and aristocrats' is the prerogative of moral leadership. The aristocracy in Jane Austen as much as in Richardson's **Clarissa** is viewed with scepticism and detachment. She is not just expressing doubt about the aristocracy's ability to provide moral leadership, she also is asking question about the nature of social hierarchy, about the proper extent of social power and about the nature of ambition in a competitive and socially divided society. Lawrence Stone has challenged the belief that there was an 'open' elite in Britain in the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth. What he is able to show is what in sense Jane Austen knew the wealthy, the significantly rich and powerful landowners of pre-industrial England maintained their social position in terms of both status and material power. However, the rejection of the aristocracy is condemned in **Persuasion**. This happens in Austen's critical discussion of Sir Walter Elliot's behaviour towards Admiral and Mrs. Croft and Captain Wentworth. In the same novel, Lady Russell stands condemned for having too great an enthusiasm for rank rather than talent and enterprise. Thus, in a period of transition, Jane Austen in the vein of a Radical praises order and consensus in her novels while by contrast individual attempts to gain social ascendancy

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and privilege through suspect means are exposed and criticized.

Thus, from our survey of the novels it can be pointed out that there are three themes through which Austen expresses a significant radicalism about the values of the market economy and the social and political relationship emerging in the early nineteenth century. The first is her understanding of the part that material factors should play in human relationships. The second is her claim for the moral equality of sexes and the third is her emphasis on the importance of maintaining social harmony and consensus through mutual accommodation and not through coercion. Jane Austen, therefore, represents that tradition in English culture which has consistently been in opposition against arbitrary aristocratic and patriarchal privileges from the seventeenth century. She opposed arbitrary aristocratic and patriarchal privileges. She has also endorsed and maintained values that are not derived from the marketplace. It is this tradition which in Jane Austen's own day opposed the slave trade and supported the extension of the Government.

Jane Austen's creative life was an era of political upheaval so too was it an important epoch in the history of feminism. Slowly but steadily a feminist movement began to unfold in the eighteenth century as it was argued that woman was not the intellectual inferior of man. A woman's sphere should not be confined to the home and its attendant duties and that her position as wife should not make her the subordinate of her husband. With the publication of **A Vindication of the Rights of Woman** in 1792 by Mary Wollstonecraft the feminist movement quickly gained strength and found new adherent. The surge of interest in the position of women led to a heated debate between the feminist cause and political realism.

Jane Austen all through her narratives, was more or less concerned with the moral nature of woman and her role in society from this point of view. This makes a great deal of difference to the way in which her stand as a radical novelist about sexual conduct can be taken as a mark of her shift in outlook resulting from the change of time. This again, is a testimony to her features of transitionalism. She was in agreement with the rational feminist point of view which was shared to some extent by women of widely different backgrounds. In fact, Austen's feminist interest

like other contemporary novelists, too, had to reckon with this myth passed as 'truth universally acknowledged (Butler,1985).

Austen's radical vision of life in a period of transition found it difficult to reconcile a description of the heroine's married life with demands of fiction. Her playful subversion of some of the conventions of the popular novel in **Northanger Abbey** resulted in the non-publication of the manuscript in her life-time, even though a publisher paid for it. Whatever may have been her fictional stand on marriage as a happy ending, one gleans from her letters her view on the subject in real life. She wrote to her favourite niece Fanny in 1817:

> Oh what a loss it will be when you are married. You are too agreeable in your single state, too agreeable as a niece; I shall hate you when your delicious play of mind is all settled down into conjugal and maternal affections (L18).

In **Sense and Sensibility** Marriane Dashwood's setting down as Mrs.Brandon after marrying the man she had once considered 'old enough to be my father' nearly defeats the convention of happy ending by appearing almost like a

cut across other political divisions. The contemporary controversy about the woman question leaves an impressive mark on the title page of her first novel **'Sense and Sensibility'**-by a Lady. The novel, as a new species of writing deals with Head/Heart question just like Man /Woman question.

As a radical, 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 novel 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 this respect Austen's handling the theme of marriage in her novels needs due consideration. All six of her novels end with one or more marriages. For women with no inheritance to fall back on, marriage was a desperate economic need specially in a society that afforded very little opportunity or sanction for middle-class women to earn a living. Marriage was indeed the single event of significance in a woman's life. Butler in her book entitled **Romantics, Rebels and Reactioneries**, 1985 places on record her observation in the following manner:

> Trapped in the specifically male literary constructs of a patriarchal society, Jane Austen,

punishment for her earlier transgression. In **Northanger Abbey** the boisterious young girl Catherine Morland who 'hated confinement and cleanliness' is changed into a creature inhabiting enclosed space. She does not read romances but moral essays 'appropriate to her silence and sadness.' Even if we grant that such a change in any case is inevitable because adulthood for woman is a fall from freedom, marriage nevertheless intensifies the setting of boundaries and thereby a socially determined role is imposed. Again, the change of the impudent and spirited Elizabeth Bennet in **Pride and Prejudice** into a grateful and acquiescent Mrs. Darcy might evoke a similar sense of disappointment. In all fairness one must admit that none of Jane Austen's heroines is relegated to a marriage of total subservience and she achieves for them, as far as possible, within the given parameters of fictional and social practice, more equal and sensible partnership than can be seen in the marriages in other novels. This change in the manner of Austen's dealing with the materials and her radical attitude against the conventional way of life of the middle-class woman folk are enough to highlight the transitional and radical aspects in the author. Contrary to the then pattern of male dominance, Austen's heroines just tried to exert their views, likings in the world of

matrimony. Emma Woodhouse in **Emma** champions the personal choice, 'A woman is not to marry a man merely because she is asked or because he is attached to her and can write a tolerable letter' (47). There is no doubt that an assertion of woman's right Jane Austen tried to establish as for back as some two hundred years. From **Emma** the assertiveness was extended further in **Persuasion** when in the end of the novel Jane Austen lets her heroine take the initiative in eliciting a response from the man,

> You should not have a suspected me now; the case so different, and my age so different. If I was wrong in yielding to persuasion once, remember that it was to persuasion exerted on the side of safety, not of risk. When I yielded, I thought it was to duty; but no duty could be called in aid here (163).

Anne Elliot's avowal of the constancy of a woman's love is overheard by Wentworth, at first perhaps by chance, but she decides to continue her declaration within his hearing and in effect, confesses her love to him. This straight forwardness on the part of a woman, surely points to Jane Austen's radical thought being projected through her characters in the narrative. In her novels Jane Austen also

presents 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. Though marriage is an imperative and the desired goal for a woman, it triggers off an uneasy sense of anti-climax. Still no satisfactory alternative was available. In the letter to her neice Fanny, Jane Austen regretted the prospect of losing a liveliness through marriage, but she did not forget to add-'yet I do wish you to marry very much because I know you will never be happy till you are (L12)'. In this perspective of the compulsion of marriage in a woman's life, Jane Austen was bold enough to show even a sort of option or willingness to remain single. Emma Woodhouse was not afraid of remaining single because although a poor old maid was a pitiful creature 'a single woman of good fortune is always respectable(Emma74)'. Emma's declaration also echoes the same attitude ' I would rather be a teacher at a school than marry a man I did not like'(74).

Jane Austen's novels by themselves bear the impression that the writer had a deep concern for the protection of women and children and for the articulation of their rights and views. Unlike some Victorian novelists Jane Austen does not argue that women are helpless victims. On the contrary, she

maintains that they are active makers of their fate. But what she does show is the vulnerability that leads to the paradox of both their inadequate protection and their excessive restriction and assumption about female dependence. Jane Austen's ideal world is one in which individuals would be assured of the mutual fulfillment of obligations and responsibilities, a world in which poverty would be recognized and alleviated and injustice righted. Unlike the later novelists Jane Austen does not set out blue prints for society, which translate the individual into the passive instrument of social ideals. On the contrary, she argues that individuals and communities of individuals make society what it is.

Austen novels are about the gentry and she is the gentry's greatest artist. Her principal characters always belong to the gentry. The heroines of her first five novels all marry country clergymen or gentlemen with landed property. The sixth Persuasion is not, as it is seen, a complete break from this pattern even though Anne Elliot marries a sailor. The point in each case is that the village community's leader, the true hereditary gentleman is sought. It is this social concern which is new with Jane Austen, the product of her uneasy times.

In England the gentry had steadily acquired complete legal ownership of the land. Life for the gentry, however, was not thoroughly stable and unchanging. Of course, on his own estate and in his village the English gentleman enjoyed a position of unique autonomy. By the mid 1790s Jane Austen arrived at her maturity and present order seemed threatened from within and from without. New social conditions at home created in large measure by the landed classes' own dynamism, were beginning to change the whole basis of England's old system, largely because they changed the role of the aristocracy itself. A product of her age, Jane Austen also was exposed to the all pervasive change of the time. Therefore, traits of the change are prominent in the writer depicting the lives of characters in the narratives.

It was very much within Jane Austen's knowledge that landed classes were much more likely to undo the old system for themselves than to have it overthrown by others. England in the eighteenth century had arrived at the point of take-off into self-sustaining economic growth. The landowners went into mining, roads, canals and the building of towns. They also revolutionized agriculture with new machinery and

methods and enclosed the common land. These new economic activities, so different from the traditional role, gradually made inroads into the gentleman's self-image and the attitude of the landlords had changed. It is clearly of the greatest importance to the study of Jane Austen as a writer of the gentry that it was in her adult years between 1795 and 1817 that the older obligations of the gentry towards the poor were one by one disclaimed.

Long-term economic wisdom was not, however, in Jane Austen's line of thinking. Daughter of a clergyman, her reading in the sermons and conduct books must have given her old-fashioned notions of social cohesion and obligation when in her own country of Hampshire she could see the grounds for criticizing her class. As if, the widening gaps between the rich and the poor were not enough, Jane Austen could also see physical signs that the traditional relationship between the orders was changing and the old cohesive village breaking up. In short, the Hampshire village in Jane Austen's life-time was in a centrifugal phase as a community; the classes grew wider apart in wealth and physically moved away from one another. In the perspective of the changed political, social and economic situations Jane Austen modelled her novels.

Jane Austen is as critical of the current practice of her class as she is an admirer of the ethical theory that sustains it. In **Pride and Prejudice** Mr. Darcy is the most socially elevated of all the Austen heroes, and he is proved to be a model paternalist, a fact which influences Elizabeth profoundly in his favour. Despite Lady Catherine's objections, Elizabeth is justified in asserting that Darcy has not offended against the class system in proposing to her since birth and not riches is the true determinant of class, 'I am a gentleman's daughter. So far we are equal'(344). Jane Austen becomes more severe about the faults of the gentry in her later novels. Her last three novels written between 1813-1816, the years of England's final victory against France, are not only more concentrated, they also contain a far more specific critique of the gentry in its functions. **Mansfield Park** is a whole-hearted story of gentry's value. The Chapel stands as the symbol not only of the Christian principles of the family and household but also of the theoretical basis of the Constitution, the alliance between aristocracy and Church, the throne and the altar.

Jane Austen's view of education for women in relation to their position in society draws our due attention in this

chapter of the dissertation. As a radical Jane Austen treated women education in altogether a different vein. Her characters are, in fact, seen in the process of using what nature and education have bestowed upon them. So it is necessary to perceive what kind of education is being offered. The entire debate about woman's education in the eighteenth century hinged upon the question of whether that education should make the woman a better individual or merely a pleasing companion for man in his moments of leisure. Most of the Conduct book writers emphasized the need to teach girls embroidery, a little painting, how to tinkle away pleasantly at the piano and other drawing room arts. Almost all of them warned against excessive reading and advised girls 'to carefully conceal in their conversation any knowledge or learning that they may happen to possess,' although at least one of them felt such caution to be actually unnecessary. However much a woman might read, she will, generally speaking, found to leave less of what is called learning than a common school-boy because the female mind in general does not appear capable of attaining too high a degree of perfection in the areas of abstract knowledge. A conversation between Lady Catherine and Mrs. Collin in **Pride and Prejudice** for

example, brings out Jane Austen's ideas of standardized social finish for women:

> Mrs. Collins, you must send a servant with them. You know I always speak my mind, and I cannot bear the idea of two young women travelling post by themselves. It is highly improper. You must contrive to send somebody. I have the greatest dislike in the world to do that sort of thing- young women should always be properly guarded and attended, according to their situation in life (205).

Jane Austen concerns herself with the education of the landed gentry and the professional classes. This is a very large and representative part, probably the majority of the educated population of her day. Whatever her own education may have been, there is no need to take literally her claim to be 'the most unlearned and uninformed female who declared to be the authoress' and she was most likely a daughter in a highly literate family to be better educated than most. She reveals very precise and powerful opinions on this matter as upon so many others. She does so not by overt statements but by what are implicit in situations and

remarks for the reader who is informed enough to appreciate them.

Jane Austen's own morals and those of her novels are strict. She has as firm a grip on the situation of the 'fallen woman' as of the governess. She is closer to the eighteenth century out of which she comes than the nineteenth which she enters--that eighteenth century in which the prosperous and even socially acceptable kept mistress who had played a considerable part in classes below the aristocracy. Jane Austen's own themes do not make it often relevant for her to deal with sexual relation between men and women outside of courtship and marriage but like many other topics she is aware of their existence and expects her readers to be. Within her novels only one girl lives with a man unmarried and only one wife commits adultery. The foolish Lydia Bennet(who runs off with Wikham from Brighton) in **Pride and Prejudice** owing to her situation and probable eventful fate, is an object of indirect condemnation of the growing strictness of society's code which could drive the girl once seduced, into the increasing trade in prostitution. The characters who desire the conventional fate for Lydia are the least estimable ones and Jane Austen derives a good deal of

astringent humour for them. The neighbourhood of the Bennets reacts thus to hearing that Lydia is married,

> To be sure it would have been more for the advantage of conversation, had Miss Lydia Bennet come upon the town; or as the happiest alternative, been secluded from the world, in some distant farm house (297).

Now, let us come to dwell upon the position of woman in respect of novel as a literary genre and Jane Austen's views on the subject from her radical and transitional stands. The last quarter of the eighteenth century when Jane Austen (1775-1817) was born and grew up, happened to be a period of unprecedented expansion for the English novel. It was also a period when the respectability of the novel as a genre was at its low ebb. In this context Jane Austen stands out as a very unusual figure. Not only did she confer credibility upon the 'despised' genre but also she was quite unapologetic about the female orientation of her work and the fact that it did not seek to instruct. 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 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. 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 families'(91). 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 a crucial dilemma of the intelligent woman in the late eighteenth century England, both in fiction and in reality.

During Austen's life-time female writers were under certain social pressures to remain anonymous which the novelist(Austen) herself did (-**Sense and Sensibility** -by a Lady) until her brother Henry revealed her identity to a friend after which only she wrote under her own name. Throughout her novels she avoided politics in compliance with the manners of the time. Jane Austen is very much in the pattern of female novelists whose heroines occupied the centre of the stage but lived highly circumscribed lives.

These heroines made no effort to leave their proper female sphere but spent their time visiting neighbours , attending dances, going to Bath and generally observing the rituals that were appropriate to their class and sex. Of course, the Austen family was properly protective. When young Jane Austen wanted to travel to London, her brother Frank made arrangements for a private coach. She(Austen) clearly had been certain of the expectations that were usual in middle class society. To conclude this particular aspect in this discussion we should refer to Jane Austen's reactions to the contemporary disapproval of novels. It is encoded in the reading habits she ascribes to her fictional characters. In **Northanger Abbey** the conversation between Mr. Thorpe and Catherine Morland will justify the point:

> Have you ever read Udolpho, Mr. Thorp? Udolpho !oh,Lord! Not I; I never read novels; I have nothing else to do. Catherine humbled and ashamed, was going to apologize for her question but he prevented her by saying, 'Novels are all so full of nonsense and stuff; there has not been a tolerably a decent one come out since **Tom Jones**, except the Monk; I read that t'other day;

but as for all the others, they are the stupidest things in creation (43).

Catherine, initially apologetic about her taste for novels, is pleasantly surprised that even an educated man such as Henry Tilney should share her enthusiasm. Thus in **Northaner Abbey** a skillful balance is maintained between enthusiastic support for the new genre (novel) and an awareness of its sentimental excess. In **Pride and Prejudice** again, Mr. Collins, when invited to read to the ladies of the Bennet household, refuses the first book that is offered;'he started back, and begging pardon protested that he never reads novels'(18).On the other hand, most of Jane Austen's heroines and other positive characters seem to be avid readers.

In her short life-time Jane Austen saw some of the assumptions on the complexities of family life and the difficulties of personal life in the society being questioned and partly altered by change of feeling in her own class. Her attitude towards these changes has been projected through her works upholding the transitional and radical aspects in the author. Austen novels are to be studied in the changed historical perspective of the eighteenth century as regards the moral nature and status

of women, female education, marriage, authority, family and its economic status along with the representation of women in literature.