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Editor-in-Chief
Dr. Vishwanath Bite

Managing Editor
Madhuri Bite

www.the-criterion.com
criterionejournal@gmail.com

Secondary Citizens: Women in the Novels of Jane Austen

N.G.Nandana
Research Scholar
Department of English
Bangalore University

> "18th-century women inhabited houses that were nearly always exclusively owned and dominated by men, and as there was virtually no exterior existence for these women, it is natural that the world inhabited by Austen's heroines would have been one of interiority." (Berglund. p. 14)

Contrary to popular opinions of critics, that of Austen as a writer who portrays the submissive and regressive role of women in society, Austen's primary concern in all her novels is to find a role for women in the conventional society of her times. Women in the late eighteenth century England, were relegated to secondary roles in such a patriarchal society with respect to property and social responsibilities; for instance, women were not permitted to visit new arrivals to the neighborhood (such as Mr. Bingley in *Pride and Prejudice* 1813) until the male head of their household had first done so. Women in Jane Austen's times could inherit only if there are no male-line heirs left, and if there is more than one sister, then they are all equal co-heiresses, rather than only the eldest member having better prospects of inheritance. Women however, are in a unique situation in such an economy; they are important consumers but they have no means of generating income. Unlike Charlotte Bronte who showed her displeasure to Victorian Society which did not recognize women as pivotal, Austen tries to give a vivid picture of her times as realistically as possible. Writing just before Jane Austen, Mary Wollstonecraft published *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in 1792. Wollstonecraft's text focuses and challenges the existence of women as second-class citizens around this time; Wollstonecraft does not deny the physical superiority of men, but this is just about the only way she finds men to be better than women.Wollstonecraft heavily laments the reality that society has constructed itself on the principle that men are in every way superior to women by virtue of the law of nature, and society thereby requires women to act accordingly. It is this basic principle that explains why women were excluded from things like participation in legislative discussions surrounding marriage and it is this idea that Wollstonecraft channeled her energy in working against. Women who were regarded as the more emotional, unstable, weak, and poorer of the sexes could only come to benefit and improvement by being under the direct control of more powerful, strong, and influential men.

On the other side, Ms. Austen differs from her predecessor; though critical of the prevailing conditions of life for women, she accepted the limitations of feminine existence. Only a rather small number of women were what could be called professionals, who though their own efforts earned an income sufficient to make themselves independent, or had a recognized career. Jane Austen herself was not really one of these few women professionals. During the last six years of her life she earned an average of a little more than £100 a year by her novel-writing. In Jane Austen's time, there was no real way for young women of the "genteel" classes to strike out on their own or be independent. Professions, the universities, politics, etc. were not open to women. Almost every historian and literary critic of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century agrees that a primary definition of "work" for women during this period would be some form of **sewing** or **needlework.** (Wilson 167; Lieb 29) According to Parker,

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> ". . . the term was engendered by an ideology of femininity as service and selflessness and the insistence that women work for others, not for themselves." (p 6)

Lower or working class women learn plain sewing (the sewing of domestic garments), and a young woman might even be trained to be a '. . . ***Mantua-maker***' (Le Faye p 125), making garments not just for the family but for other women to wear to the various balls; Women of the gentry or aristocracy learn sewing as ornamentation and as a social skill, useful in moments of emotion or ennui.

Excellent needlework skills were a sign that a young woman was prepared to take up her **"work"** in society, which Engle man has defined in reference to genteel women in eighteenth-century Salem, Massachusetts, but which applies equally to Regency England: ". . . no matter what her station was in life, a woman's job was to marry wealthily, manage wisely, and mother well" (Engle man P 143). As critics have shown, sewing also provides the means by which a woman negotiates life in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, through communal sewing with other women, women's acceptable work of sewing confine them to standards of quiet and patience is opposed to the activity of writing, a far more subversive fabrication of words that could potentially, as in the words of Mary Wollstonecraft, challenge society's prejudices.The sewing that she does provide the women means for her support, although she is clearly living under financially difficult circumstances. Apart from the small vocations of sewing, embroidery etc, marriage for women in general as for Charlotte Lucas in *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), was the only honorable profession.

In rural communities there might be no physician within reach, and thus simple home doctoring remedies for herself and others were a necessary part of a Lady's knowledge; few would willingly undertake the profession as nurses were generally thought of as without skills or morality& paid less. The other feasible option for women was being a governess i.e. a live-in teacher for the daughters or young children of a family or marrying into money. Unlike the present times where teaching is considered a noble profession, women who worked as governess were considered inferior, were not highly respected, and did not generally pay well or have very good working conditions. There is a sense of awkwardness when Emma refers to Jane Fairfax's occupation as a governess. Talking to Mr. Frank Churchill, she asks:

"You know Miss Jane Fairfax's situation in life, I conclude? What she is destined to be?. . . "You get upon delicate subjects, Emma," said Mrs. Weston smiling; ". . . Mr. Frank Churchill hardly knows what to say when you speak of Miss Fairfax's situation in life. I will move a little farther off."(*Emma*Ch. 6)

Emma's hesitant pause and remark reflects the attitude of the conventional society of her times. Hence, women during Austen's time were afflicted with the twin problem of attaining economic security and in the same context achieving symphonic relation within the family. Marriage offered a solution to both these problems; some women were willing to marry just because marriage was the only allowed route to financial security, or to escape adisagreeable family situation. Thisquandary is expressed most clearly by the character Charlotte Lucas, whose pragmatic views on marrying are voiced several times in the novel:

> Without thinking highly either of men or of matrimony, marriage had always been her object; it was the only honourable provision for well-educated young women of small fortune, and however uncertain of giving happiness, must be their pleasantest preservative from want. (*P&P* Ch. 22)

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Charlotte is twenty seven, not especially beautiful, and without an especially large fortune and so decides to marry Mr. Collins ". . . from the pure and disinterested desire of an establishment." (*P&P*Ch. 22) Thus, working women were not given respect in society and spinsterhood was an option for women who had a considerable fortune to fall on. According to Baker,

> "Single women (including widows) were generally treated the same as men for the purposes of private law, save that the rules for inheriting real property favoured males before females in the same degree of kinship" (Baker P 466)

Unmarried women also had to live with their families or with family-approved protectors; it is almost unheard of for a genteel young and never-married female to live by herself, even if she happened to be an heiress. Thus, when Lady Catherine says: "Young women should always be properly guarded and attended, according to their situation in life" (*P&P*Ch. 37) she holds a mirror to the prevalent attitude of society of her times. When a young woman leaves her family without their approval or leaves the relatives or family-approved friends or school where she has been staying, this is considered very serious, symptom of a radical break. Only in the relatively uncommon case of an orphan heiress who has already inherited i.e. who has "come of age" and whose father and mother are both dead, can a young never-married female set herself up as the head of a household and even here she must hire a respectable older lady to be a "**companion**". When Emma jokingly refers to herself as an old maid; there is a sense of fear of ending up lonely which was reflective of the majority of the women of her times. Jane Austen herself wrote in one of her letters to Fanny Knight:

> "Single women have a dreadful propensity for being poor-which is one very strong argument in favor of matrimony."(Chapman p 483)

Therefore, a woman who did not marry could generally only look forward to living with her relatives as a `dependant' more or less Jane Austen's situation, so that marriage is pretty much the only way of ever getting out from under the parental roof unless, of course, her family could not support her, in which case she could face the unpleasant necessity of going to live with employers as a `dependant' governess or teacher, or hired "lady's companion". On one occasion Mrs. Bennet admonishes Elizabeth:

> "If you go on refusing every offer of marriage, you will never get a husband …and I am sure I do not know who is to maintain you when your father is dead."(*P&P* Ch. 20)

This was the maternal fear of the majority of the women who wanted their daughters to settle down well as early as possible in life. Austen herself seems to have changed her outlook towards marriage through the course of her novels. In the early novels the heroines possess values that simply outshine the harsh conditions of economic worlds that are capricious, for ex; in *Mansfield Park* (1814), Fanny's personal integrity defeats Mr. Crawford's fortune, while in the later novels Austen is more worldly wise and makes her women take more control of their fates through active engagement with the economy. A woman with no relations or employer was in danger of slipping off the scale of gentility altogether,and in general, becoming an "old maid" was not considered a desirable fate. Ex; Lydia says "Jane will be quite an old maid soon, I declare. She is almost three and twenty!"(*P&P*Ch. 39)The estate as it lies solely in the hands of men and thus cannot provide her heroines with an active, managing role in the new economy. As Copeland remarks, "Finding an important and responsible role for women in these circumstances is central in Austen's works." (Pp. 77-90)Jane Austen's novels on one hand celebrate the rise of the pseudo gentry, but by and large address the fate of women in that society. In *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) Elizabeth and Jane

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will have only 1,000 pounds each due to their father's irresponsibility but they are lucky enough to be married to Darcy and Bingley who are sufficiently rich. Mary Crawford in Mansfield Park (1814) is as much driven to marriage by property as Maria Bertram, through whom Wollstonecraft's argument is expressed that a woman's survival in the early nineteenth century depended on her making a good marriage which provided money and property. Maria Bertram settled for a marriage to Mr. Rush worth because it '. . . would give her the enjoyment of a larger income . . . as well as ensure her the house in town' (Mansfield Park Ch.4) Her brother Edmund is the only one in the family to disapprove:

> "He could allow his sister to be the best judge of her own happiness, but he was not pleased that her happiness should centre in a large income. . ." (Mansfield Park Ch4)

Both the Bertram sisters and Mary Crawford feel they must marry for property as it confirms their survival. When Fanny refuses Henry Crawford she is considered as senseless. Without education and the possibility of owning property themselves, they had to rely on the marriage market for survival. These women became adept in marketing themselves for property by choosing to behave in a way which made them a desirable commodity for men to buy and sell on the marriage market. The parallel this has with slavery is drawn subtly in *Mansfield Park* with reference to Sir Thomas' plantation in Antigua. When Edmund explains to Fanny how pleased Sir Thomas is with the development of her character, alluding to her making a good wife. Fanny appears to change the subject in her question '. . . did you not hear me ask him about the slave trade?' (Mansfield Park Ch. 21) Ms. Austen delicatelyexemplifies the skewed relationship between women and marriage as a form of slavery which maintains their subservience. Thus, patriarchal society is reinforced with the way their own '. . . propriety would keep everyone in [their] right place and ensure that everything would be done as it ought to be' (Neale p 95.) According to Neale, the patriarchal structure of early nineteenth-century society ruled that '. . . women can only be what property makes them' (p 98.) Therefore their survival relied on the adherence to a certain kind of propriety which privileged men and gained women property through marriage, but in turn kept them subordinate and uneducated. *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) may well be the first English Realistic novel based on its detailed and accurate portrayal of getting and spending in an English gentry's family. The novel in fact opens with an act of familial ingratitude: Henry dash wood's uncle secures the major part of his fortune for the benefit of John dash wood's four year old son, thereby completely discounting all the attention which for years he had received from his niece and her daughters, the greed of John dash wood's prevent any help to these women. On a biographical level Jane Austen had to face a similar predicament when her father Reverend George Austen died in bath in January 1805. A problem of practical nature faced Jane, her mother and her sister; how to sustain a living? The Church of England did not make any provisions for the widows and children of Clergymen, thus the Austen women were completely dependent on the men in the family to live a life of dignity. As Dr. Sushila Singh notes,

> With her meticulous fidelity to the truth of contemporary life she could not have turned a blind eye to the shortcomings of women in that age of meager opportunities for their advancement. (p76)

CONCLUSION:The role of women in society was not clearly defined unlike for men who had to deal with clear cut roles of a provider, protector of the family. Thus, Household management was one area which was dominated by them. House-keeping was a full time occupation in its own right within the confines of the home; they could showcase their skills as efficient managers. Though the heavy work was delegated to servants, she had to manage everything; engage, instruct and supervise domestic servants; educate the children, manage domestic accounts and not run into

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debt, educate her children, be a sociable hostess and maintain good relations with the neighboring Gentry. Thus, when Marianne Dashwood married Colonel Brandon, . . . she found herself at nineteen, submitting to new attachments, entering on new duties, placed in a new home, a wife, the mistress of a family, and the patroness of a village."(*S&S*Ch. 50)
In contrast, Mrs. Croft is her husband's partner in economic decisions. On the occasion of renting Kellynch Hall, the Admiral and his wife meet Mr. Shepherd. After the discussions Mr. Shepherd remarks to Sir Walter: "… asked more questions about the house and terms and taxes than the admiral himself and seemed, conversant with business." *(Persuasion* Ch 1)

Society of Austen's time did not encourage a woman to cross the boundaries into male dominated sphere, and took a less tolerant view of them. Jane Austen herself had to write her initial novels under a pseudonym as writing was not considered a profession for women. Jane Austen accentuates in all her novels that parents play an important role for their children's success or failure in life. In the institution of marriage by giving the female an equal footing with male and giving her a dominant role in the domestic sphere Austen has successfully carved a role for the women. With this social responsibility they play an effective role in promoting the idea of stability on the domestic sphere which in turn will give the larger society the much needed stability.

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