

Emphasis on Education in Jane Austen's Novels

N. G .Nandana

Research Scholar
** Bangalore University

"Education is the manifestation of the perfection already in man"
– Swami Vivekananda

Abstract- This paper intends to show how Jane Austen the novelist was always aware of the importance of education in an individual's life. Women of Austen's time did not have a proper education and as a result they lacked professional status and were completely dependent on matrimony for securing their financial needs. This paper highlights Austen's acute awareness of the inadequacies of the kind of education young woman of her age received. The attempts to compare and analyze Jane Austen's thoughts on education with that of Mary Wollstonecraft. Through her characters Austen depicts how an educational system isn't worth a great deal if it teaches young people how to make a living but doesn't teach them how to make a life. On the contrary "education is an ornament in prosperity and a refuge in adversity."- Aristotle

Index Terms- Eighteenth century education, Jane Austen, Mary Wollstonecraft, Women Education,

INTRODUCTION

Education in the largest sense is any act or experience that has a formative effect on the mind, character or physical ability of an individual. In its technical sense, education is the process by which society deliberately transmits its accumulated knowledge, skills, and values from one generation to another.

Etymologically, the word education is derived from educare (Latin) "bring up", which is related to educere "bring out", "bring forth what is within", "bring out potential" and ducere, "to lead". (Wikipedia)

Jane Austen's own formal education had been quite as extensive as that of most women of her class and day. Austen was first taught by her father who took in other pupils besides his children and then sent them to boarding schools in Oxford and Southampton. Austen was subsequently educated at home, except for a short stint at a boarding school, Jane and Cassandra had returned home because the Austen's could not afford to send both of their daughters to school. Austen acquired the remainder of her education by reading books, guided by her father and her brothers James and Henry. George Austen apparently gave his daughters unfettered access to his large and varied library, was tolerant of Austen's sometimes risqué experiments in writing, and provided both sisters with expensive paper and other materials for their writing and drawing. When Austen remarked of Jane Fairfax; "Living constantly with right-minded and well-informed people, her heart and understanding had received every advantage of discipline and culture. . . ." (Emma Ch. 20) she

seems to be looking back on her own upbringing and at the same time emphasizes the need of education for women. According to Park Honan, a biographer of Austen, life in the Austen home was lived in ". . . an open, amused, easy intellectual atmosphere," (Pp. 211-212) where in the ideas of those with whom the Austen's might disagree politically or socially were considered and openly discussed. After returning from school in 1786, Austen never again lived anywhere beyond the bounds of her immediate family environment. Subsequently she seems to have taught herself like the Bennett girls in *Pride and Prejudice* (1813). Reading and learning the proper response to what was read were a large part of the content of her self education as her novels testify. She was well read in Shakespeare and eighteenth century literature, and her favorite authors being Richardson and Johnson. Private Theatricals were also a part of Austen's education. From when she was seven until she was thirteen, the family and close friends staged a series of plays, including Richard Sheridan's *The Rivals* (1775) and David Garrick's *Bon Ton*. While the details are unknown, Austen would certainly have joined in these activities, as a spectator at first and as a participant when she was older. Most of the plays were comedies, which suggest one way in which Austen's comedic and satirical gifts were cultivated.

A bookish family atmosphere was familiar to her is evident from the novels. There might also be lessons with outside "masters" or specialists such as piano teachers, etc. Some local "Grammar" schools did exist, teaching the educational basics including Greek and Latin to higher-class or upwardly mobile boys, but did not admit girls. Women were not allowed to attend the institutionalized rungs on the educational ladder: "public" schools such as Eton which Edmund Bertram in *Mansfield Park* attends, and the universities Oxford and Cambridge. The prime symbol of academic knowledge, and more-or-less exclusively masculine educational attainments, was the Classical languages Greek and Latin, to which a great deal of time was devoted in "genteel" boys' education, but which few women studied. Austen sometimes shows a wistful regret that women are debarred from these privileges, but her views of the exclusively male portals of higher education are not always respectful. In *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), Edward Ferrars, brought up to be a gentleman of leisure confides, ". . . I was therefore entered at Oxford and have been properly idle ever since" (*Sense and Sensibility* Ch 19) which shows the inadequacy of the education system. Austen astutely gauges that an educational system isn't worth a great deal if it teaches young people how to make a living but doesn't teach them how to make a life. Women were in a worse situation in such a patriarchal society. Since women did not usually have careers as such, and were not "citizens" in the sense of being directly involved in politics, there was little generally-perceived need for such higher education for

them, and most writers on the subject of "female education" preferred that women receive a practical and religious training for their domestic roles. In *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) Caroline represents this attitude when she remarks:

A woman must have a thorough knowledge of music, singing, drawing, dancing, and the modern languages, to deserve the word". To which Darcy's replies "To all this she must yet add something more substantial, in the improvement of her mind by extensive reading." (*Pride and Prejudice* Ch 8)

For women of the "genteel" classes the goal of non-domestic education was thus often the acquisition of "accomplishments", such as the ability for needlework, simple arithmetic to draw, fine hand writing, sing, play music, or speak modern i.e. non-Classical languages generally French and Italian. Though it was not usually stated openly, the purpose of such accomplishments was often only to attract a husband; so that these skills then tended to be neglected after marriage. Until well into the nineteenth century education was not considered necessary, in fact it was felt to be rather a hindrance to their settlement in life. It was all the more cumbersome for women as academically oriented young girls were not preferred in matrimony, Jane Austen was well aware of this attitude, and wrote in *Northanger Abbey*:

"... where people wish to attach, they should always be ignorant. To come with a well informed mind, is to come with an inability of administering to the vanity of others, which a sensible person should always wish to avoid. A woman especially, if she has the misfortune of knowing anything, should conceal it as well as she can." (*Northanger Abbey* Ch 14)

In Jane Austen's day, there was no centrally-organized system of state-supported education. There were local charity or church-run day schools such as the one set up by St. John Rivers in Charlotte Bronte's later novel *Jane Eyre*, but these were not attended by the children of the "genteel" social levels that Jane Austen writes about.

More or less the same is true of apprenticeships, another relatively less "respectable" mode of education. Some local "Grammar" schools did exist, teaching the educational basics including Greek and Latin to higher-class or upwardly mobile boys, but did not admit girls. The type of education depended on the preferences and financial resources of the parents in each family. Thus without Darcy's father's help, Wickham's father "... would have been unable to give him a gentleman's education." (*Pride and Prejudice* Ch. 35) Education for boys in her novels is more elaborate than that of girls and usually proceeds from a private tutor to public school and university. Instead, "genteel" children specially girls would be educated at home by their parents, particularly when young as the Morland children are in *Northanger Abbey*; or by live-in governesses such as Miss Taylor in *Emma* or tutors; or by going off to a private boarding school or to live with a tutor as Edward Ferrars went to Mr. Pratt's in *Sense and Sensibility* (1811); as several boys went to Steven ton to be tutored with Jane Austen's father. Lady Catherine de Bourgh is quite understandably shocked when Elizabeth tells her that they never had any governess, so Elizabeth had to admit "Compared with some families, I believe we were; but such of us as wished to learn never wanted the means. We were always encouraged to read, and had all the

masters that were necessary. Those who chose to be idle, certainly might." (Ch. 29 *Pride and Prejudice*)

It can be deduced that Austen was thinking of her own education when she makes Elizabeth Bennett defend the want of a governess at Longbourn. Perhaps no masters came to Steventon from Basingstoke; but with such parents and brothers, Jane hardly wanted them. She had an acute awareness of the inadequacies of the kind of education young women of her age received and also of the standards of their upbringing. Thus Anne Elliot's remark in *Persuasion* (1817)

"... 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 hands. I will not allow books to prove anything." (Ch. 23 *Persuasion*)

The creator of a lively and intelligent character as Elizabeth Bennett could not tolerate such inequality and hence this statement by the writer reflects the condescending attitude of men of her times.

Austen agrees with Mary Wollstonecraft the author of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman and the Wrongs of Woman* (1792), who states in her preface that "... my main argument is built on this simple principle, that if [woman] be not prepared by education to become the companion of man, she will stop the progress of knowledge and virtue; for truth must be common to all." (p 2)

Wollstonecraft further contends that society will degenerate without educated women, particularly because mothers are the primary educators of young children. Wollstonecraft attributes the problem of uneducated women to men, and "... a false system of education, gathered from the books written on this subject by men who, consider females rather as women than human creatures." (p 7)

Thus Wollstonecraft advocates education for women as it will enable them to pursue careers should they so choose:

"... women might certainly study the art of healing, and be physicians as well as nurses. And midwifery, decency seems to allot to them ... they might, also, study politics ... Business of various kinds, they might likewise pursue." (p 162)

In addition to her broad philosophical arguments, Wollstonecraft also lays out a specific plan for national education to counter Talleyrand's. In Chapter 12 of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman and the Wrongs of Woman*, "On National Education", she proposes that all children be sent to a "country day school" as well as given some education at home "to inspire a love of home and domestic pleasures". She also maintains that schooling should be co-educational, contending that men and women, whose marriages are "the cement of society", should be "educated after the same model. In her national plan for education, she retains class distinctions (with an exception for the intelligent), suggesting that:

"After the age of nine, girls and boys, intended for domestic employments, or mechanical trades, ought to be removed to other schools, and receive instruction, in some measure appropriated to the destination of each individual ... The young people of superior abilities, or fortune, might now be taught, in another school, the dead and living languages, the elements of science, and continue the study of history and politics, on a more extensive scale, which would not exclude polite literature." (p187) Consequently Ms Austen rightly remarks,

of Ms Elliot, “She had been forced into prudence in her youth, she learned romance as she grew older - the natural sequence of an unnatural beginning.”(Ch 1 *Persuasion*)

The patriarchal society as depicted by Jane Austen in the character and conduct of her novels clearly reveal the discrimination meted out to the women who comprise a major section of the society. Austen has always been considered a writer who writes on domestic issues. This paper shows how on the contrary, Jane Austen does not reject Wollstonecraft’s ideas and tries to portray in her novels that women are crucial to the development of the nation & Emphasis on women education will lead to emancipation.

REFERENCES

- [1] Austen, Jane. *Sense and Sensibility*. United Kingdom: T. Egerton, 1811.
- [2] *Pride and Prejudice*. United Kingdom: T. Egerton, 1813.
- [3] *Mansfield Park*. United Kingdom: T. Egerton, 1814.

- [4] *Emma*. United Kingdom: A. Bertrand, 1815.
- [5] *Persuasion*. England: John Murray, 1817 (posthumous).
- [6] *Northanger Abbey*. England: John Murray, 1817 (posthumous).
- [7] <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Education>
- [8] Honan, Park. *Jane Austen: Her Life*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987. Print.
- [9] Wollstonecraft, Mary. *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman and the Wrongs of Woman, or Maria*. Ed. Anne Mellor and Noelle Chao. New York: Pearson Education, 2007. Print.

AUTHORS

First Author – N.G.Nandana, M.A (English Literature)
Research Scholar, Department of English, Bangalore University
Email id - ngnandana@gmail.com