

Women in Jane Austen's "Persuasion"

Athira Krishna J
Assistant Professor
Department of English
Shine College, Trivandrum

ABSTRACT

This paper studies "*Persuasion*" as a tale that explored the relationships of a woman. Anne Elliot was misunderstood by her family, none of them saw her value. Even her dear friend, Lady Russell did not understand Anne completely. She persuaded Anne to reject the proposal from a man that Anne dearly loved. Anne was the only woman in the novel, with the exception of Mrs. Croft, that had a head for solving problems. Anne was called on to fix disputes, take care of Louisa, and calm down the others. Anne is a strong lady. She had to watch the man she loved pursue other women and have the patience to wait until the time was right to show him that she still loved him. It took a lot of courage to admit that she still loved Wentworth. Throughout the novel she worked quite hard at hiding her feelings. She hid her feelings from her family, Lady Russell, and Captain Wentworth. No one in the novel truly knew Anne, she hid parts of herself from everyone. At the end of the novel she was finally honest with Wentworth. She told him that she had never stopped loving him and that she still believed she had made the right decision in not marrying him the first time. Austen did a great job with Anne's character.

KEYWORDS: relationships, character, status quo, affection, feminine values

Along with her contemporary Mary Wollstonecraft, Jane Austen disagreed with the prevailing attitude that women were inferior to men. She believed that women should be regarded as men's equals, receive a good education and be treated as rational people. It is not only Austen's mad matriarchs who reflect her discomfort with the glass coffin of female submission. Her last completed novel, *Persuasion* (1818), focuses on an angelically quiet heroine who has given up her search for a story and has thereby effectively killed herself off. Almost as if she were reviewing the implications of her own plots, Austen explores in *Persuasion* the effects on women of submission to authority and the renunciation of one's life story. While Jane Austen realised that societal changes were impacting the role of women, she did not advocate a complete restructuring of their role. Her primary concern was for the health of society, and most of her novels depict heroines in a domestic setting, bettering society through service to their families and neighbours. In *Persuasion* she depicts women whose lives are still restricted by social convention. Eight years before the novel begins, Anne Elliot had been persuaded to renounce her romance with Captain Wentworth, but this decision sickened her by turning her into a nonentity. Forced into "knowing [her] own nothingness", Anne is a "nobody with either father or sister" so her word has "no weight". An invisible observer who tends to fade into the background, she is frequently afraid to move lest she should be seen. Having lost the "bloom" of her youth, she is but a

pale vestige of what she had been and realizes that her lover "should not have known [her] again", their relationship being "now nothing!" Anne Elliot is the ghost of her own dead self; through her, Austen presents a personality haunted with a sense of menace.

The rationality of women is demonstrated by the Cobb incident in *Persuasion*. Louisa's startling fall robs even Wentworth and Charles Musgrove, the senior males in the party, of their self-control and the task of creating a semblance of order out of the prevailing panic is left to a woman. Anne Elliot is called upon not only to supervise the resuscitation of Louisa, but also to look to the needs of the despairing Wentworth. She handles her formidable task with such decision that, in relation to her companions, she appears as an adult amongst helpless children .

Persuasion opens with an account of domestic problems at Kellynch Hall. So long as Lady Elliot lived the Kellynch estate was run with 'method, moderation, and economy. However, since her death Sir Walter Elliot has given free rein to his natural extravagance until, burdened with debt, he is finally forced to rent out his estate and retire to Bath. Because the country house is the centre of the landed gentleman's life, the source from which his duties spring, Sir Walter has lost all function once he abandons Kellynch. As the novel develops it becomes clear that Jane Austen is not taking Sir Walter Elliot as an isolated case, but is rather, suggesting that the entire established order is ceasing to be useful. Anne, the only fully worthy member of the gentry in the novel, and the only one of the Elliots cognisant of the intimate links between household management and the preservation of Kellynch, and hence of social order, is compelled to transfer her allegiance to the 'new men' of the navy, who seem to offer the best chance of a general revival of worthwhile values. The capabilities of this group are suggested by another symbol of household management. Despite the fact that he has very little to work with, Captain Harville, through ingenious contrivances and nice arrangements', has managed to make out of his lodgings a picture of great repose and domestic happiness.

Look no further than to the theories evoked by *Persuasion's* title to identify the unifying concerns of the novel. For Austen, the dynamics of persuasion as understood in eighteenth-century rhetoric's and its characteristics and its characteristic occasions were paradigmatic of her theme--the moral development of the mind. The basic plot of *Persuasion* probably originated in the ironies of sensibility and firmness, in the hypothesis that a character such as Anne's would be persuadable precisely because of her strengths a disciplined will, a heightened moral sensitivity, and a very affectionate heart.

The second claim is that *Persuasion* participates in and fosters the dialectics of gender in the eighteenth century. It is possible to cast the extreme oppositions in *Persuasion* in other terms--spiritual (Anne's ethic of love and service) versus secular (Sir Walter's selfish vanity) comes quickly to mind. But the more important tension is between Anne and Wentworth. His moral code, with its emphasis on personal integrity, adherence to high principles, consistent, objective judgment, is a second, more masculine voice of morality, not

its opposition. More importantly, the climactic discussion Anne has with Harville points us in the direction of the binary opposition, Armstrong identifies between public/masculine values on the one hand and domestic/feminine values on the other. *Persuasion* clearly belongs among those novels that empowered the "rise of the domestic woman and established her dominance over the household, leisure time, courtship procedures, and kinship relations" .

Finally, *Persuasion* has a justifiable claim to at least a minor place in the rhetorical canon (as well as the literary one). The novel enacts the psychology of persuasion set forth in Bacon, Campbell, and Blair and accepts as morally problematic a psychology that features desire and imagination as necessary and sufficient cause of persuasion. But *Persuasion* does not bear out the confidence the theorists express in reason as a remedy to persuasion's problematic psychology. Although it is true that reason in Austen plays a salutary role as a reality check, that Anne's critical reason, in Bacon's terms, "buckles and bows down the mind to the nature of things", reason is not in itself a sufficient safeguard because it is for Austen an instrumental faculty that can serve Sir Walter's vanity and Wentworth's anger, as well as Anne's morally inspired self-command. Furthermore, the arguments of Elizabeth Bennet and, more importantly may signal a sympathetic, loving heart informed by a moral imagination rather than a weak will and a dormant reason. *Persuasion*, then, offers in a distinctly feminine voice a counter to a rhetorical theory grounded in a rationalist ethic.

The importance of the mother's early influence in the child is demonstrated perhaps most clearly in *Persuasion*. Although the excellent Lady Elliot died when her second daughter was fourteen, nevertheless she stamped her values so firmly on Anne that, in spite of an adolescence spent with a foolish and arrogant father, they provided her with the model according to which she shaped her adult self : 'Lady Russell loved them all; but it was only in Anne that she could fancy the mother to revive again' . Lest there be any temptation to suspect that Jane Austen's acceptance of conventional female roles was simply a rationalisation of her unwillingness to mount the challenge to the *status quo* which her perception of women's innate equality with men might seem to indicate as appropriate, we must turn finally to *Persuasion*. By the time she wrote this novel, Jane Austen had begun to realise that the old order of things was breaking down. Two aspects of this breakdown were particularly significant for women. First, manners were ceasing to function as a source of moral communication. For the decadent old order, as represented by the Elliots and the Dalrymples, they were becoming little more than vehicles for empty display and the emerging naval classes were as yet too unsophisticated to understand the intricacies of polite codes. Second, the home and the family were declining in importance. The Elliots have come to regard the family unit as a source of prestige rather than of love and duty, and are quite willing to yield up their permanent home at Kellynch in exchange for lodgings at Bath. Family feeling is much stronger amongst naval people like the Harvilles but their lives as yet lack the stability needed for them to put down firm roots.

The woman's *raison d'être* is thus seriously undermined. By the standards established in the earlier novels Anne Elliot is perhaps the most perfect of all Jane Austen's women--she possesses an 'elegant and cultivated mind', is an excellent surrogate mother to Mary's

children, is highly accomplished, and has impeccable manners--and yet she is 'nobody' to the Elliots, the Musgroves or the naval characters. The fact that she eventually becomes an important member of the Musgrove/naval group in no way invalidates Jane Austen's point. The incident which gives Anne the chance to prove her worth--Louisa's fall from the Cobb--is a freakish accident and leads to the conclusion that her ultimate success is the result of good fortune rather than the inevitable consequences of personal virtue.

Jane Austen responds to this new set of social facts by making some tentative proposals for a redefinition of the female role. Deprived of their function the 'quiet, confined' lives to which women have traditionally been limited are transformed into sources of frustration rather than of fulfilment. In such circumstances a woman's 'feelings prey upon' her, and she becomes subject to 'all manner of imaginary complaints'. What she needs, then, is a new arena of 'exertion', and through her presentation of Mrs Croft, Jane Austen suggests that it will be found in fields of endeavour previously reserved for men. When Admiral Croft goes to sea, his wife accompanies him; when it comes time to rent Kellynch Mrs Croft 'asked more questions about the house, and terms, and taxes, then the admiral himself, and seemed more conversant with business'; and when the Admiral talks to his naval friends, Mrs Croft joins in 'looking as intelligent and keen as any of the officers around her'.

If Mrs Croft is anything to go by such a redefinition of the area of feminine activity will produce a completely new type of woman. Physically she will be more robust and her complexion will be less soft. Thus, Mrs Croft possesses 'vigour of form' and her face is 'reddened and weather-beaten'. She will be more active and demand less in the way of creature comforts. Mrs Croft, for instance, enjoys a rather dangerous form of carriage riding and regards anything more than the amenities that can be provided on board ship as 'idle refinement'. In conversation she will assume the blunt and assertive style previously felt to be appropriate only for men, as Mrs Croft does in response to Captain Wentworth's objection to allowing women on board ship: 'Oh Frederick!--But I cannot believe it of you.--All idle refinement!--Women can be as comfortable on board, as in the best house in England'.

Given her admiration for Anne Elliot, Jane Austen no doubt regrets that she can no longer provide the model for womanhood. Nevertheless, the affection with which she portrays Mrs Croft suggests that what is important to her is not some *a priori* definition of the proper female, but that women should seek out a role in society that will allow them to be fulfilled as 'rational creature'. Control of manners and the family satisfy Jane Austen only because she regards these as being functions of crucial importance to society and not because they are in any absolute sense suitable occupations for women. Thus, once the society begins to change and the importance of manners and the family is diminished, then the woman must move into other areas of activity and must adopt a personal style appropriate to her new role.

Jane Austen's attitude to women, then, while growing directly out of the social and philosophical environment in which she lived reveals the workings of a keen individual intelligence. She may be committed in general to the *status quo*. Nevertheless, she is not prepared to go along with prevailing views about innate female intelligence and abilities. The fact that her contemporaries' view of women was demeaning does not, however, tempt her to follow Mary Wollstonecraft in demanding a complete reorganisation

of society. Instead, she takes a clear-sighted look at the functions performed by women and finds that, regardless of the very low esteem in which their sex is held, they are given a role substantial enough to satisfy the needs of such intelligent and capable people as Elinor and Marianne Dashwood, Elizabeth Bennet, Fanny Price, and Emma Woodhouse. Only when the society change does Jane Austen look for a change in the woman's area of activity.

“Men,” says Anne, in *Persuasion*’s most climactic—and heavily gendered—scene, “have had every advantage of us in telling their own story” (Austen 165). This statement illustrates the main problem in the rupture between Anne and Wentworth: it is *his* discontent that is allowed to characterize the situation. As Anne’s speech continues, she touches on aspects of masculine advantage that almost ring of Wollstonecraftian revolution. Advantage rests not only in the telling of the story, but in the pen that writes it and in the education that enables it—all of which have also long belonged to men. She will not, she says finally, “allow books to prove anything” (Austen 165). It is difficult, in this moment, not to be conscious of *Persuasion*’s origins. What does Anne Elliot mean—both in her words and as a character—as the product of an author who is telling not only her own story, but, in a way, that of an entire category of women? It would be simplistic to reduce Anne—and, indeed, Austen—to a reflection of her creat(or)(ion). Drawing biographical parallels is almost too easy, too monolithic to fully capture the complexity of either woman. It cannot be denied, however, that Anne Elliot is a character uniquely equipped to tell and defend her own story—and that Austen, an unmarried woman like her heroine, is the one holding the pen. Two inches wide or not, Austen’s story is one whose implications resonate on a grand scale. Within the diegesis, Anne forges a femininity that simultaneously defies and conforms to conventions of “proper” womanhood. Unmarried and capable, older and unequalled in mind or temperament, Anne proves her worthiness to other characters and readers alike. This is, in part, because she does so in a recognizable way. Her worth lies in her ability to enact *superbly* the feminine virtues that society demands: faith, in particular, becomes a defining aspect of her character. At the same time, however, she becomes representative of a womanhood that does not require marital felicity to have worth or validity—a position that, in its own right, is fairly radical. It is difficult, by the end of the story, to begrudge Anne the happy ending (and rescue from Spinsterhood) that she receives. Anne returns to—or rather, is allowed entry into—conventional womanhood. Yet, this entry does not erase the strength she has shown while she lived outside of it, as she has throughout the bulk of the novel. And while, as Mary Wollstonecraft writes, it is only through marriage that “women can rise in the world,” Anne’s character shows the complications intrinsic to so broad a statement (Wollstonecraft 287). Her position in the world, and the worth she earns towards it, are things that she achieves before the “nuptial coronet” is quite within her grasp. To say that her marriage precludes her character’s radicality is a summation that does not quite fit the woman that *Persuasion* has brought to life. Though Anne Elliot is Spinster no more, it is from the experience given her by that role that she is the complex, fully realized character—one almost too good for us *all*—we are privileged to meet. Her situation may have changed, but her character cannot, by this change, have “altered beyond [our] knowledge,” as Mary

Musgrove so ineptly puts it (Austen 44). Having kept the faith for most of the novel, then, it is only fair that Anne receives her share of it from her readers, rational creature we know she is—and as we all, in the end, hope to be.

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