



**WOMEN'S LIBERATION IN JANE AUSTEN'S SENSE AND SENSIBILITY:
BALANCING EMOTION AND INDEPENDENCE**

Mohammad Shah Alam Chowdhury^{1*}, Dr. Naseer Ud Din Sofi², Dr. Sazzad Hossain³

1. PhD scholar (English), Guru Kashi University, Talwandi Sabo, Bathinda, Punjab - India
2. Assistant Professor, Dept. of English, Guru Kashi University, Talwandi Sabo Bathinda, Punjab -India
3. Professor, Dept. of English, Dhaka International University, Dhaka, Bangladesh

Abstract:

This article examines Jane Austen's "Sense and Sensibility" (1811) through the lens of early women's liberation, exploring how Austen navigates themes of emotion and independence within the constraints of Regency-era England. Through a close analysis of the novel's protagonists, Elinor and Marianne Dashwood, the study investigates Austen's nuanced portrayal of women's agency and her critique of societal expectations. The research draws on feminist literary criticism, historical context, and close textual analysis to argue that Austen presents a sophisticated exploration of women's roles and freedoms. The paper demonstrates how Austen uses the contrasting personalities of the Dashwood sisters to examine different approaches to female independence, balancing rationality with emotional expression. It further explores Austen's treatment of education, marriage, and social constraints as key themes in the novel's engagement with women's liberation. By situating "Sense and Sensibility" within both its historical context and the broader trajectory of feminist literature, this study highlights Austen's significant contribution to early feminist discourse. The article concludes that Austen's nuanced approach to women's independence in "Sense and Sensibility" offers enduring insights into the complexities of navigating personal autonomy within societal constraints, cementing the novel's place in the canon of early feminist literature.

Keywords: Jane Austen, freedom, Sense and Sensibility, Women, etc.

INTRODUCTION

Jane Austen (1775-1817) is most commonly known for her detailed portrayal of the everyday lives of people during her era. Throughout her lifetime, Austen wrote six novels, which include *Pride and Prejudice*, *Sense and Sensibility*, *Emma*, *Northanger Abbey*, *Mansfield Park*, and *Persuasion*, all of which serve as excellent representations of middle-class life. These works firmly established Austen's position in English literature. In his book *The Great Tradition* (2002), F. R. Leavis examined the evolution of English novels and identified certain novelists as the greatest, representing the development of the genre. According to Leavis, Jane Austen was the first great novelist in this tradition. Critics have thoroughly analyzed Austen's novels from various perspectives, and Austen has continuously inspired generations of readers due to her adept

handling of topics such as love, marriage, and life. Austen has also influenced numerous subsequent writers by being "the founder of the novel which deals with unimportant middle-class people and of which there are many fine examples in latter English fiction." (Wu, 1988, p. 118)

Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*, first published in 1811, is an exploration of contrasting temperaments and values in the lives of two sisters, Elinor and Marianne Dashwood. The novel is commonly interpreted as a study of the balance between rationality and emotion, particularly in the context of romantic relationships (Austen, 1811). However, beyond its surface, *Sense and Sensibility* also reflect the complex social constraints imposed on women during the early 19th century (Brown, L., 1997). This article examines how Austen balances the themes of emotion and independence to explore early ideas of women's liberation. Through the characters of Elinor and Marianne, Austen offers a nuanced portrayal of how women navigate societal expectations while seeking personal agency and emotional fulfilment.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The primary objective of this study is to analyze how Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* address's themes of women's liberation through the contrasting personalities of the Dashwood sisters.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The interpretation of Jane Austen's works, particularly "Sense and Sensibility," has undergone significant evolution since their initial publication. Early critics often viewed Austen's novels as mere romantic fiction, failing to recognize the deeper social commentary embedded within her narratives. However, modern scholarship has shed new light on the complexity and depth of Austen's writing, acknowledging her subtle yet powerful critique of societal norms and her early feminist themes.

Gilbert and Gubar's groundbreaking work "The Madwoman in the Attic" (1979) opened new avenues for feminist readings of 19th-century literature, including Austen's novels. They propose that Austen's heroines navigate a patriarchal society by developing a "cover story" that allows them to maintain autonomy while outwardly conforming to social expectations. This interpretation reveals the subtle resistance present in Austen's female characters, challenging the notion that they are merely passive participants in their social world.

Claudia Johnson's "Jane Austen: Women, Politics, and the Novel" (1988) further explores Austen's engagement with the political and social issues of her time. Johnson argues that Austen's novels, including "Sense and Sensibility," offer a nuanced critique of patriarchal power structures through their detailed portrayal of women's experiences. This perspective challenges earlier readings that downplayed Austen's social commentary, positioning her instead as a keen observer and critic of her society (Johnson, 1988).

More recent scholarship, such as Devoney Looser's "The Making of Jane Austen" (2017), examines Austen's enduring influence on feminist thought and popular culture. Looser contends that successive generations of readers and critics have shaped Austen's legacy, often emphasizing different aspects of her work to align with contemporary feminist concerns. This ongoing reinterpretation speaks to the richness and complexity of Austen's writing, which continues to offer relevant insights into gender dynamics and social structures (Looser, 2017).

Mary Waldron's "Jane Austen and the Fiction of Her Time" (1999) provides valuable context by situating Austen's work within the broader literary landscape of the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Waldron's analysis helps to highlight the innovative aspects of Austen's writing, particularly her sophisticated approach to character development and social criticism (Waldron, M. (1999).

Marilyn Butler's "Jane Austen and the War of Ideas" (1975) offers a different perspective, examining Austen's works through the lens of the ideological conflicts of her time. Butler's analysis helps to illuminate the political and philosophical underpinnings of Austen's novels, including "Sense and Sensibility," revealing their engagement with contemporary debates about rationalism, emotionalism, and social order (Butler, 1975).

Elinor and Marianne: Embodiments of Sense and Sensibility

The Dashwood sisters, Elinor and Marianne, serve as the primary vehicles through which Austen explores the titular concepts of "sense" and "sensibility." Elinor, the elder sister, embodies "sense" with her rational approach to life, emotional restraint, and pragmatic decision-making. In contrast, Marianne personifies "sensibility" through her passionate nature, emotional expressiveness, and romantic idealism.

Austen's portrayal of these contrasting personalities goes beyond mere character study, offering a nuanced exploration of different approaches to navigating the constraints placed on women in Regency-era society (Kirkham, 1983). Elinor's method involves working within societal norms, using reason and self-control to maintain independence of thought and action while outwardly conforming to expectations. This approach allows her to exercise agency in subtle ways, influencing outcomes through careful management of social interactions and family affairs (Johnson, 1988).

Marianne, on the other hand, represents a more direct challenge to social norms. Her insistence on emotional authenticity and her willingness to express her feelings openly push against the boundaries of acceptable behaviour for women of her time. Through Marianne, Austen explores the potential costs and benefits of a more overt resistance to societal expectations.

By presenting these contrasting approaches, Austen suggests that true liberation for women may lie in finding a balance between rationality and emotion, between conformity and rebellion. The novel's resolution, which sees both sisters finding happiness through moderation of their initial positions, can be read as Austen's advocacy for a nuanced approach to women's independence that acknowledges both the realities of their social context and the importance of personal authenticity (Copeland & McMaster, 2010).

Societal Constraints and Women's Agency

"Sense and Sensibility" provides a vivid portrayal of the limitations placed on women in Regency-era England. The novel opens with the Dashwood women facing financial insecurity due to laws of primogeniture, immediately highlighting their dependence on male relatives for financial stability and social standing. Throughout the narrative, Austen exposes how societal expectations, economic realities, and moral pressures constrain women's choices and freedoms (Vickery, 1998).

The limited options available to women of the Dashwood sisters' class are starkly illustrated. Marriage is presented as one of the few paths to financial security, yet Austen is careful to show

the potential pitfalls of this route, particularly when pursued without due consideration of character and compatibility. The sisters' reduced circumstances after their father's death further emphasize the precarious position of women without independent means.

However, Austen does not present her female characters as mere victims of their circumstances. Instead, she demonstrates how they exercise agency within these constraints. Elinor's careful management of the family's reduced finances and her strategic navigation of social situations represent a form of resistance to patriarchal control. Her ability to influence outcomes while ostensibly conforming to societal expectations showcases a subtle but effective form of female power (Copeland, E., & McMaster, J. (Eds.), 2010).

Marianne's approach, while less successful in the short term, represents a different form of resistance. Her insistence on emotional authenticity and her critique of social conventions challenges the status quo more directly. Through Marianne, Austen explores the potential for women to assert their individuality and challenge societal norms, even as she acknowledges the risks associated with such an approach.

Even secondary female characters, such as Mrs. Jennings and Lucy Steele, demonstrate various strategies for exercising agency within the confines of their society. Mrs. Jennings uses her social position and knowledge to influence outcomes, while Lucy employs manipulation and strategic alliances to secure her future.

By depicting these varied acts of resistance and negotiation, Austen suggests that women can maintain a degree of autonomy even in a restrictive society. She presents a nuanced view of female agency, acknowledging both the very real constraints faced by women of her time and the potential for individual action and self-determination within those constraints.

The Role of Education and Self-Improvement

Austen places significant emphasis on the importance of education and self-improvement for women in "Sense and Sensibility." Both Elinor and Marianne are portrayed as intelligent and well-read, with their intellectual pursuits serving as a means of personal growth and self-expression. This focus on female education aligns with early feminist thought, such as Mary Wollstonecraft's "A Vindication of the Rights of Woman" (1792), which argued for women's right to education as a path to greater social equality.

The Dashwood sisters' intellectual engagement is contrasted with the more superficial accomplishments expected of women in polite society. Characters like Mrs. Jennings and Lady Middleton represent the traditional view of female education, which prioritized skills like music, drawing, and needlework over more substantive intellectual pursuits. Austen's critique of this approach is subtle but clear, as she demonstrates the limitations of such a narrow focus on ornamental accomplishments (Wollstonecraft, 1792).

Elinor's practical knowledge and Marianne's passionate engagement with literature and music are presented as more valuable and fulfilling forms of education. Their ability to think critically, engage in meaningful conversation, and find solace and strength in their intellectual pursuits serves them well throughout the novel's challenges (Leavis, F. R., 2002).

Moreover, Austen suggests that ongoing self-improvement is crucial for women's personal growth and happiness. Both sisters undergo significant character development throughout the

novel, learning from their experiences and adjusting their worldviews. This process of self-reflection and growth is presented as essential to achieving a balance between sense and sensibility, and ultimately to finding fulfillment.

By emphasizing the value of substantive education and ongoing self-improvement, Austen advocates for a more meaningful approach to women's intellectual development. She suggests that true liberation for women must include the freedom to cultivate their minds and pursue knowledge, rather than being limited to superficial accomplishments designed primarily to attract a husband

Marriage, Love, and Independence

The theme of marriage is central to "Sense and Sensibility," as it was one of the few paths to financial security available to women of Austen's time. However, Austen's treatment of marriage is nuanced, exploring the tension between romantic love, practical considerations, and the desire for independence.

Elinor's relationship with Edward Ferrars and Marianne's experiences with both Willoughby and Colonel Brandon allow Austen to examine different aspects of love and marriage. Through these relationships, she suggests that ideal marriages should be based on mutual respect, shared values, and emotional compatibility, rather than solely on passion or financial considerations (Tomalin,1997).

Austen is critical of marriages based purely on economic factors, as exemplified by the loveless union of Mr. and Mrs. Palmer. At the same time, she acknowledges the very real economic pressures that influence marital choices, particularly for women. The character of Lucy Steele represents a pragmatic approach to marriage as a means of social and financial advancement, while Willoughby's choice to marry for money rather than love is presented as a moral failure.

Importantly, Austen does not present marriage as the only goal for her female characters. The sisters' close relationship, intellectual pursuits, and personal growth throughout the novel all underscore the importance of women's independence beyond their marital status. Elinor and Marianne both demonstrate that they are capable of finding fulfillment and purpose outside of romantic relationships.

The novel's resolution, which sees both sisters happily married to men who respect their individual qualities, can be read as Austen's ideal. These marriages represent a balance between love and practicality, emotional fulfillment and social stability. However, it's crucial to note that these unions are presented as the culmination of the sisters' personal growth and self-discovery, not as their sole purpose in life (Todd, J.,2006).

Through her nuanced portrayal of love, marriage, and independence, Austen challenges the notion that women's lives should be defined solely by their marital status. She advocates for women's right to make informed choices about marriage based on both emotional and practical considerations, and to find fulfillment both within and outside of romantic relationships.

CONCLUSION

"Sense and Sensibility" offers a subtle yet powerful exploration of women's liberation in early 19th century England. Through the characters of Elinor and Marianne Dashwood, Jane Austen presents a nuanced view of how women can navigate societal constraints while maintaining their independence and integrity.

By balancing the qualities of sense and sensibility, Austen suggests a path forward for women that combines emotional authenticity with practical wisdom. This approach allows her characters to challenge societal norms and expectations while still operating within the realities of their time. The novel's resolution, which sees both sisters finding happiness through moderation of their initial positions, can be read as Austen's advocacy for a nuanced approach to women's independence that acknowledges both the realities of their social context and the importance of personal growth and self-discovery.

Austen's novel, with its focus on women's education, agency, and personal development, contributes significantly to early feminist discourse. While not overtly radical, "Sense and Sensibility" offers a thoughtful critique of patriarchal society and advocates for women's right to emotional and intellectual fulfillment. The novel challenges the notion that women's lives should be defined solely by their marital status, presenting a vision of female identity that encompasses intellectual pursuits, personal growth, and meaningful relationships both within and outside of marriage.

In the broader context of women's liberation literature, "Sense and Sensibility" stands as an important work that laid the groundwork for future feminist writings. Its enduring relevance speaks to Austen's insight into the complexities of women's experiences and her ability to address universal themes of independence, love, and self-realization. By presenting characters who navigate the tensions between societal expectations and personal desires, Austen offers a template for female agency that remains relevant to contemporary discussions of gender roles and women's rights.

Ultimately, "Sense and Sensibility" is a testament to Austen's skill as a social critic and her deep understanding of the human condition. Through her nuanced portrayal of the Dashwood sisters and their world, Austen not only entertains but also challenges her readers to consider the complex interplay between individual desire, social responsibility, and personal growth. In doing so, she contributes to an ongoing conversation about women's place in society that continues to resonate with readers and scholars alike.

REFERENCE

1. Austen, J. (1811). *Sense and Sensibility*. London: Thomas Egerton.
2. Butler, M. (1975). *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas*. Clarendon Press.
3. Brown, L. (1997). *Women in Austen's World*. HarperCollins.
4. Copeland, E., & McMaster, J. (Eds.). (2010). *The Cambridge Companion to Jane Austen*. Cambridge University Press.

5. Gilbert, S. M., & Gubar, S. (1979). *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. Yale University Press.
6. Johnson, C. L. (1988). *Jane Austen: Women, Politics, and the Novel*. University of Chicago Press.
7. Kirkham, M. (1983). *Jane Austen, Feminism and Fiction*. Brighton: Harvester Press.
8. Looser, D. (2017). *The Making of Jane Austen*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
9. Leavis, F. R. (2002). *The Great Tradition*. New York Review of Books.
10. Tomalin, C. (1997). *Jane Austen: A Life*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
11. Todd, J. (2006). *The Cambridge Introduction to Jane Austen*. Cambridge University Press.
12. Vickery, A. (1998). *The Gentleman's Daughter: Women's Lives in Georgian England*. Yale University Press.
13. Wollstonecraft, M. (1792). *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*.
14. Wu, W. (1988). *History and Anthology of English Literature (Book 2)*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.
15. Waldron, M. (1999). *Jane Austen and the Fiction of Her Time*. Cambridge University Press.