

Between Sense and Sensibility: Feminist Agency and Economic Constraint in Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*

Dr. Neelam Devi

Assistant Professor
KVA DAV College for Women, Karnal (HR)

Abstract

Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) offers a sophisticated critique of Regency-era gender inequality through the contrasting experiences of Elinor and Marianne Dashwood. This paper examines Austen's feminist perspective through the novel's exploration of primogeniture, economic dependence, and the marriage market as mechanisms of women's oppression. Austen's novels "hint at the need for equality between the sexes" despite heroines who "defy gender norms and push for more agency". Through the Dashwood sisters' different approaches to love and marriage, Austen demonstrates how women navigate "immensely important" economic realities while seeking "marriage for mutual love and esteem". The study argues that Austen presents a nuanced feminist vision recognizing both women's structural constraints and their potential for agency within patriarchal society.

1. Introduction

Jane Austen (1775–1817) occupies a distinctive position in feminist literary history. Though "her novels are not feminist in the way we mean it today," they offer early critique of gender inequality. Austen is "acclaimed as one of the most reasonable and artistically perfect writers of narratives" whose works "vividly depict the life led by and psychology revealed by women in that age". Her six novels "concerned basically with the themes of love, marriage and wealth show many progressive notes" that reveal "female self-awareness and sense of self-dignity".

Sense and Sensibility, published in 1811 as Austen's first novel (based on an 1795 draft titled "Elinor and Marianne"), showcases her "keen understanding of human nature and psychology and her satiric wit". The novel received favorable reviews for its "naturally drawn" characters and "realistic plot," with critics highlighting its "excellent" moral value as instructional tool. Modern scholarship recognizes its "ironic depiction of the economic motivations at work in the Regency marriage market".

This paper examines Austen's feminist perspective through three key dimensions: (1) the legal and economic constraints imposed by primogeniture, (2) marriage as an "economic proposition" rather than romantic choice, and (3) the contrasting feminist agency of Elinor and Marianne Dashwood.

Austen's Feminist Context: Regency-Era Gender Inequality

Legal and Economic Disenfranchisement

The overarching theme in Austen's novels is "the inequality faced by women in Regency society". Austen's novels reveal "how immensely important the question of marriage was to most women". Marriage ranged from "wealth and status" to "securing oneself from poverty, and avoiding the destitution of an 'old maid'".

The Marriage Market as Feminist Critique

Austen's feminist critique centers on marriage as an institution of economic necessity rather than romantic choice. The novel presents marriage as "an 'economic proposition'" where "women are married because of financial endowment rather than for love with little choice in the matter". This critique reveals "the societal constraints placed on women, the tension between rationality and emotion".

The novel's feminist significance lies in exposing how "the potential marriage of Miss Morton to Robert or Edward is based on her financial endowment" rather than choice. As illustrated: "The lady, I suppose, has no choice in the affair"—"Choice? —how do you mean?"—"I suppose from your manner of speaking it must be the same to Miss Morton whether she marries Edward or Robert".

Sense and Sensibility: Primogeniture and Economic Displacement

The Dashwood Sisters' Dispossession

The novel opens with the death of Mr. Dashwood, triggering primogeniture's devastating effects on women. "The familial succession of assets typically went to the first-born son or the next male heir". John Dashwood inherited Norland estate, "leaving his half-sisters and stepmother 'to quit the neighborhood Norland' and move to a small cottage in Devonshire".

The succession's impact reveals systematic female economic vulnerability: "The succession of 'Norland estate was not so really important as to his sisters; for their fortune, independent of what might arise to them from their father's inheriting that property, could be but small'". This passage demonstrates "the unfair succession of assets and its effect on the Dashwood women".

Women's Economic Dependence as Feminist Theme

The Dashwood sisters' displacement illustrates Austen's feminist critique of property law. Having "little choice" in marriage due to financial necessity, women face "the challenges women may face in marriage" through class, stigma, and economic disparity. Austen demonstrates that "instead of love, money becomes a determiner for the choice of marriage, making it a commodity".

Willoughby's marriage to Miss Gray exemplifies this economic imperative: despite loving Marianne, he marries for "Fifty thousand pounds"—a "smart, stylish girl they say, but not handsome". Money determines marriage choice "making it a commodity rather than a [romantic union]".

Feminist Agency Through the Dashwood Sisters

Elinor: "Sense" as Feminist Prudence

Elinor represents "sense with her practicality and duty". Austen's feminist perspective recognizes Elinor as the preferred heroine: "I do, however, know which one I most admire, and that is the one that Jane

Austen clearly preferred, Elinor". Elinor embodies "clear-sightedness and self-control" while maintaining "strong feeling".

Elinor's feminist agency manifests through:

- **Practical navigation:** She strategically manages limited resources while maintaining dignity
- **Emotional restraint:** She suppresses personal feelings to protect family welfare
- **Self-dignity:** She demonstrates "female self-awareness and sense of self-dignity" through responsible conduct

Elinor represents the novel's "sense . . . about the need for women to have strong heads as well as good hearts". Her approach demonstrates feminist prudence within structural constraints.

Marianne: "Sensibility" as Feminist Impetuosity

Marianne embodies "sensibility with her passionate romanticism". Claudia Johnson's feminist reading identifies the novel as valuing both "female prudence" and "female impetuosity". Marianne's approach represents feminist emotional authenticity and resistance to purely economic marriage considerations.

Marianne's feminist characteristics include:

- **Romantic idealism:** She insists on love over financial necessity
- **Emotional expression:** She refuses to suppress feelings for social propriety
- **Resistance to commodification:** She rejects Willoughby's marriage to Miss Gray as evidence of marriage's economic corruption

Dual Feminist Vision: Balancing Prudence and Passion

Austen's feminist perspective balances both approaches. The novel examines "different approaches to female independence, balancing rationality with emotional expression". Through contrasting personalities, Austen explores "women's agency and her critique of societal expectations".

The feminist significance lies in Austen's recognition that women need "strong heads as well as good hearts". This dual vision acknowledges both the necessity of economic prudence and the value of emotional authenticity in navigating patriarchal constraints.

Feminist Critique of Marriage as Economic Institution

Marriage Without Choice

Austen's most explicit feminist critique targets marriage's economic determinism. The novel demonstrates valid feminist points where "women are married because of financial endowment rather than for love with little choice in the matter". This reflects the harsh reality that "whilst Jane Austen makes clear the hard economic facts of marriage, she also offers, in the examples of her heroines, another possibility: marriage for mutual love and esteem".

The Hope for Equality Within Marriage

Austen's feminist optimism suggests "it may be possible to find equality inside marriage" despite legal inequality. Her heroines demonstrate that "marriage to a man who does not care about you is not a safe or secure place to be". The novel's feminist vision is "optimistic (or romantic) enough to suggest that [one]

might marry a man who loved and respected you, and would treat you as an equal even if the law did not demand it".

This contrasts with unhappy marriages (like the Bennets in *Pride and Prejudice*) and marriages of economic necessity (like Charlotte Lucas to Mr. Collins), showing Austen's preference for "marriage for mutual love and esteem".

Women's Liberation Through Self-Awareness

Progressive Feminist Notes

Austen's novels "show many progressive notes here and there" that reveal "female self-awareness and sense of self-dignity". Her stories demonstrate that "women protagonists start to follow their true love despite various challenges from society, public stigma and differences in class, strata, social and monetary status".

This feminist self-awareness manifests through:

- **Following true love:** Women resist economic pressure to marry for love
- **Overcoming stigma:** Women navigate public disapproval of their choices
- **Maintaining dignity:** Women preserve self-respect despite structural constraints

The Novel's Feminist Contribution to Early Discourse

Sense and Sensibility offers "Austen's nuanced portrayal of women's agency and her critique of societal expectations". The study demonstrates "how Austen presents a sophisticated exploration of women's roles and freedoms" through the Dashwood sisters' contrasting approaches.

The novel's place in "the canon of early feminist literature" reflects Austen's "significant contribution to early feminist discourse". Her "nuanced approach to women's independence . . . offers enduring insights into the complexities of navigating personal autonomy within societal constraints".

Critical Reception and Feminist Significance

Contemporary and Modern Recognition

The novel was "well-received by the public when released and is still popular as part of Austen's canon". Modern scholarship recognizes its feminist dimensions through "feminist literary criticism, historical context, and close textual analysis".

Claudia Johnson's feminist reading identifies the novel as demonstrating "the need for women to have strong heads as well as good hearts". This dual feminist vision acknowledges both rational prudence and emotional authenticity as essential for women's agency.

Austen's Feminist Legacy

Austen enjoys "both a wide popular readership and critical acclaim" with "global reputation". Her feminist significance lies in portraying women who demonstrate "female self-awareness and sense of self-dignity" through resistance to economic marriage pressure.

The novels reveal "the author's feminine realization and thoughtful propositions" about women's oppression and agency. Austen's work shows that "to bring changes in the society, the role of courageous

women and their sacrifices are always to be recognised though many a times, it is seen that they are deprived of it and are rather exploited".

Conclusion

Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* offers a sophisticated feminist critique of Regency-era gender inequality through the Dashwood sisters' experiences of economic displacement and marriage-market constraints. Austen's novels "hint at the need for equality between the sexes" despite heroines who navigate severe structural limitations. Through Elinor's prudence and Marianne's emotional authenticity, Austen presents dual feminist agency balancing "rationality with emotional expression".

The novel's feminist significance emerges from its exposure of marriage as "an 'economic proposition'" where women face "little choice" in matters of love. Primogeniture's devastating effects on the Dashwood women demonstrate systematic female economic vulnerability, making marriage "the only option for respectable survival".

Austen's feminist optimism suggests "it may be possible to find equality inside marriage" despite legal inequality. Her work shows women who "follow their true love despite various challenges from society, public stigma and differences in class". Through this nuanced vision, *Sense and Sensibility* secures its place "in the canon of early feminist literature", offering "enduring insights into the complexities of navigating personal autonomy within societal constraints".

The novel demonstrates that feminist self-awareness requires both "strong heads as well as good hearts"—Elinor's prudence and Marianne's passionate resistance to economic marriage. Austen's feminist legacy lies in portraying women who maintain "self-dignity" while navigating patriarchal constraints, revealing the "feminine realization" underlying her progressive critique of gender inequality.

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