



Modern Perspectives on Austen: Gender and Society in Emma and Sense and Sensibility

M. Priyanka and M. KaviPriya

II MA Literature, Department of English, Sathyabama Institute of Science and Technology, Chennai-600 119

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Sathyabama Institute of Science and Technology, Chennai -600 119

Correspondence: malapriyanka1592@gmail.com

Abstract:

Emma and Sense and Sensibility offer a critical examination of gender roles and societal expectations, highlighting the challenges women face in navigating love, financial security, and social status. This paper explores how these novels critique restrictive gender norms and reflect the evolving discourse on female autonomy. Emma presents a heroine who defies traditional expectations through her independence, while Sense and Sensibility contrasts emotional and rational approaches to women's roles within a rigidly structured society. Using contemporary feminist and sociological perspectives, this study examines how these narratives prefigure modern discussions on autonomy, emotional labour, and economic independence. Furthermore, the paper analyses how shifting interpretations and adaptations continue to shape the relevance of these themes in today's world. By comparing the treatment of agency, class, and gender, this study underscores how these novels remain significant in discussions of personal choice, societal pressures, and evolving gender identities.

Keywords: Gender roles, Feminism, Marriage, Societal Expectations, Female Autonomy

A sociological framework in Emma and Sense and Sensibility emphasizes how social class and gender norms shape the characters' actions. Through Bourdieu's social capital, we see how wealth and status influence autonomy, while Foucault's power theory highlights societal control over women's choices, reinforcing their limited agency.

Jane Austen's *Emma* and *Sense and Sensibility* offer a compelling critique of gender roles, economic dependency, and the societal constraints placed upon women in the early 19th century. Through her portrayal of heroines who navigate love, autonomy, and social expectations, Austen provides a nuanced analysis of the limitations women faced and the ways in which they asserted their independence within these constraints. While *Emma* presents a protagonist who seemingly defies societal norms through her wealth and confidence, *Sense and Sensibility* juxtaposes the rational and emotional responses of two sisters to their limited prospects, highlighting the precarious position of women in a world where marriage was often their only security. These novels serve as early feminist texts, raising questions about agency, class, and personal choice that continue to resonate in modern discussions of gender equality. By examining these works through contemporary feminist and sociological perspectives, this study highlights how Austen's narratives prefigure modern debates on emotional labor, economic independence, and the intersection of gender and class. Furthermore, shifting interpretations and adaptations continue to shape the relevance of these themes in today's world, reinforcing Austen's enduring impact on literature and social thought.

Austen was born in 1775, a period when women's roles were largely confined to domesticity and marriage. The legal system of primogeniture meant that women could not inherit property unless specific provisions were made, leaving many dependent on advantageous marriages for financial stability. In this context, Austen's sharp critique of marriage as an economic contract is particularly significant. In *Sense and Sensibility*, the Dashwood sisters find themselves in financial distress after their father's death, as his estate is entailed to their half-brother, John. Their struggle to secure financial stability through marriage underscores the vulnerability of women who lacked independent wealth. Elinor, embodying "sense," suppresses her emotions to conform to societal expectations, stating, "I will be calm; I will be mistress of myself" (Austen, 1811). This self-restraint contrasts with her sister Marianne's embrace of "sensibility," which leads to heartbreak when her passionate attachment to Willoughby is not reciprocated. The novel ultimately suggests that a balance between sense and sensibility is necessary for women to navigate their limited choices successfully, reinforcing the idea that societal constraints force women to adopt survival strategies that often come at the cost of their emotional well-being.

In contrast, *Emma* introduces a heroine who appears to exist outside these constraints. Emma Woodhouse is wealthy, independent, and determined never to marry, proudly declaring, "I have none of the usual inducements of women to marry" (Austen, 1815). Unlike the Dashwood sisters, Emma does not face financial insecurity, allowing her the rare luxury of choosing whether or not to marry. However, her privilege also blinds her to the struggles of less fortunate women, such as Miss Bates, whose unmarried status and financial dependence serve as a cautionary example. When Emma humiliates Miss Bates at Box Hill, Mr. Knightley rebukes her, stating, "It was badly done, indeed, Emma" (Austen, 1815). This moment serves as a turning point for Emma, forcing her to recognize the realities of women without economic security. Austen uses Emma's journey to illustrate that while wealth can provide autonomy, social pressures and emotional considerations still influence women's lives, reinforcing the broader critique of gender roles that pervades her work.

Austen's critique of marriage extends beyond individual characters to encompass the broader social structures that dictate women's lives. In *Sense and Sensibility*, the character of Charlotte Palmer represents the kind of marriage

many women entered into out of necessity rather than love. She endures her husband's indifference with forced cheerfulness, embodying the emotional labor that women were expected to perform in maintaining household harmony. This aligns with Arlie Hochschild's concept of the "second shift," which examines how women today continue to bear the burden of emotional and domestic responsibilities even as they enter the workforce (Hochschild, 1989). Austen's depiction of marriage as a social contract that often places women in positions of emotional servitude highlights the enduring nature of these struggles, reinforcing her relevance in contemporary feminist discourse.

From a sociological perspective, Pierre Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital provides insight into the ways in which class and social standing intersect with gender in Austen's novels. Emma's wealth grants her the freedom to reject marriage, while the Dashwood sisters' lack of financial resources severely limits their choices. This reflects Bourdieu's assertion that economic and social capital shape individuals' opportunities and agency (Bourdieu, 1986). However, even Emma is not entirely free from societal expectations. Despite her initial resistance, she ultimately marries Mr. Knightley, suggesting that even the most independent women are not entirely exempt from the pressures of social convention. This mirrors modern discussions about how women navigate autonomy within patriarchal structures, balancing personal choice with societal expectations.

Austen's exploration of emotional labour is particularly evident in Elinor Dashwood's experience. Elinor suppresses her own pain when she learns that Edward Ferrars is secretly engaged to Lucy Steele, maintaining composure for the sake of her family. She listens patiently to Lucy's self-congratulatory remarks about Edward, demonstrating the silent endurance expected of women in maintaining social harmony. This aligns with contemporary discussions about the emotional labour women perform in personal and professional spaces, often at the expense of their own well-being. Hochschild's research on emotional labor highlights how women are frequently expected to regulate their emotions to accommodate others, a theme that Austen critiques through Elinor's quiet suffering (Hochschild, 1989).

Modern adaptations of Austen's novels further illustrate the continuing relevance of her themes. *Clueless* (1995), a contemporary retelling of *Emma*, reimagines the protagonist as Cher Horowitz, a privileged high school student whose matchmaking efforts mirror Emma's meddling. The film highlights the same themes of privilege, self-discovery, and the impact of societal expectations on women's choices, reinforcing Austen's enduring influence. Similarly, Ang Lee's 1995 adaptation of *Sense and Sensibility* emphasizes the emotional struggles of the Dashwood sisters, drawing attention to the ways in which women's financial and emotional stability remain interconnected. These adaptations demonstrate how Austen's critique of gender roles continues to resonate, providing a lens through which to examine contemporary gender dynamics.

Austen's engagement with feminist thought can also be understood in relation to Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), which argues for women's education and independence. Wollstonecraft criticizes the notion that women should be valued solely for their beauty and submissiveness; a theme echoed in Austen's portrayal of female characters who seek more than just advantageous marriages (Wollstonecraft, 1792). Elinor Dashwood's intellectual depth and Emma Woodhouse's assertion of independence align with Wollstonecraft's vision of women as rational beings capable of self-determination. By presenting heroines who

navigate societal constraints with intelligence and resilience, Austen contributes to an early feminist discourse that challenges the limitations imposed on women.

Austen's novels continue to be widely studied and adapted, reflecting their lasting impact on literature and feminist thought. Scholars such as Claudia Johnson have examined Austen's work through a feminist lens, arguing that her novels subtly challenge the patriarchal norms of her time while remaining within the conventions of the domestic novel (Johnson, 1990). This ability to critique societal structures while operating within them speaks to Austen's skill as a writer and social commentator. Her exploration of the intersections between gender, class, and autonomy remains relevant, providing valuable insights into the historical and contemporary struggles of women.

The continued popularity of Austen's novels also raises questions about how her critique of gender roles is interpreted in different cultural contexts. In societies where marriage remains a significant determinant of women's social status, Austen's exploration of autonomy and economic security remains particularly relevant. The ways in which her heroines navigate these issues continue to inspire discussions about gender equality, personal agency, and the role of marriage in shaping women's lives.

Jane Austen's *Emma* and *Sense and Sensibility* offer a profound exploration of gender roles, autonomy, and societal expectations, highlighting the challenges women face in balancing personal choice with social constraints. Through her nuanced characterizations and sharp social critique, Austen challenges the notion that women must conform to rigid societal roles, advocating instead for self-awareness, resilience, and personal agency. Her exploration of marriage as both a social contract and an economic necessity remains pertinent, reflecting ongoing debates in feminist discourse. By examining these novels through literary, feminist, and sociological perspectives, it becomes clear that Austen's work continues to shape discussions on gender, agency, and emotional labour in the modern world.

References:

- Austen, J. (1811). *Sense and Sensibility*. Thomas Egerton.
- Austen, J. (1815). *Emma*. John Murray.
- Beauvoir, S. de. (1949). *The Second Sex*. Gallimard.
- Bourdieu, P. (1986). *The Forms of Capital*. Greenwood.
- Hochschild, A. R. (1989). *The Second Shift*. Viking.
- Johnson, C. (1990). *Jane Austen: Women, Politics, and the Novel*. University of Chicago Press.
- Wollstonecraft, M. (1792). *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. J. Johnson.