



Female Agency and Social Constraints in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sense and Sensibility*

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Abstract

This study examines female agency and social constraints in both *Pride and Prejudice* [1] and *Sense and Sensibility* [2], arguing that Jane Austen depicts the protagonists in both novels as individuals who negotiate their rights, resist patriarchal constraints, and shape societal expectations of women. Through an analysis of the female characters in each novel, this research demonstrates that Austen represents her female characters not through rebellion but through moral judgment, rational decision-making, self-control, an emancipated mindset, and witty ideals. Accordingly, this study employs social constructivism and feminist literary criticism as its principal frameworks, which together contribute to the examination of the portrayal of human relationships. Furthermore, the study highlights marriage, inheritance laws, financial security, and class hierarchy as central mechanisms that shaped a woman's future. It also shows how Austen's ideas about literature both predicted and contributed to the late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century debates about identity, gender, and social order by situating these narratives within the circumstances of the societal borderline.

Subject Areas

Literature

Keywords

Jane Austen, Female Agency, Feminist Theory, Patriarchy, Social Construction of Gender, Marriage, Social Class, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Sense and Sensibility*

1. Introduction

The novels of Jane Austen contribute to the understanding of English society during the second half of the eighteenth and into the nineteenth century, especially within the climate of the Regency period. The political developments of the period had a significant impact on social life, particularly in shaping individuals' economic security and moral expectations. These conditions shaped individuals' futures, economic security, and moral expectations, while reinforcing gender inequality—especially in defining women's social position. Austen's novels *Pride and Prejudice* [1] and *Sense and Sensibility* [2] were published during the Regency period. Consequently, she reflected these social conditions by circumscribing women's autonomy, as she understood the situation best. Austen was personally encouraged to write a dedication when she wrote her novel *Emma* [3], because she was unable to disregard a royal charge. It was stated as follows: "To His Royal Highness the Prince Regent, this work is, by His Royal Highness's permission, most respectfully dedicated to His Royal Highness by His dutiful and obedient humble servant, the Author" (Austen, 1815/2003, dedication).

Jane was a woman with an emancipated mindset who was deeply engaged in artistic and intellectual pursuits; she played the piano, attended church regularly, socialized with neighbors, and grew up in an environment that emphasized learning and creative thinking. Tomalin [4] Le Faye [5]. So, as an extraordinarily well-educated author, she gives us a detailed depiction of that time, with a focus on influencing and empowering women. Women experienced the relationship between emotion and reason, which perfectly mirrors different kinds of class society and different kinds of arguments. They lived in a society where very few could go beyond the domestic lives they already had, and they had limited access to education or professional development. Ultimately, they were uncertain about their future, since it depended substantially on their marriage, yet they somehow remained deeply committed to love and emotion. There are some transformations when comparing that desperate period to this period, which changed and reformed the position of women in society and literature.

It is argued in *Women, Writing and The Industrial Revolution* that economic change forced women to depend on marriage as their only means of financial security. This context obviously influenced Jane Austen when she wrote *Pride and Prejudice* [1] and *Sense and Sensibility* [2], where female characters must follow a system that offers very few alternatives. How Austen portrayed these conditions demonstrates that historical changes influenced gender roles and uncovered women's agency. Although present, it was often applied within defined social norms [6].

Jane Austen wrote her novels effectively, while constructing characters, highlighting their shared intentions and ways of thinking, and framing matrimony as the most important thing in their lives, with all their attention on the power of wealth to achieve financial stability. To address the issues of matrimony and wealth, we should go back to that time and consider that women struggled to make deci-

sions with very few choices. *Pride and Prejudice* [1] and *Sense and Sensibility* [2] are closely related because of their shared themes: strict social expectations, family dynamics, marriage negotiations, and character relationships. Regardless of their resemblance, the ending may be slightly different. In the novel *Pride and Prejudice* [1], we have a perfect resolution: a harmonious union of lovers, with the characters marrying those they love. In contrast, in *Sense and Sensibility* [2], the ending may be as happy as in the preceding novel. However, this time it demonstrates that, occasionally, love alone is not sufficient compared to wealth and security. It influences decision-making when choosing between sense (mind/reason) and sensibility (heart/emotion), particularly from a male perspective. While previous scholarship has extensively analyzed themes of marriage, love, and social class in Austen's works, there remains a need for research that centers on the interplay between women's personal choices and the limitations imposed on them.

In this study, Jane Austen's female agency is represented, which refers to women's capacity to make meaningful choices and exercise judgment within limiting social structures rather than outside them. Moreover, *Social constraints* denote the legal, economic, and cultural restrictions—particularly those related to gender, class, and inheritance laws—that regulate women's behavior and opportunities. As Crivelli [7] explains, inheritance practices such as primogeniture and entail systematically privileged male heirs, limiting women's access to property and reinforcing their economic dependence. This legal context is central to understanding the vulnerability of families such as the Bennets and the Dashwoods. As stated in Crivelli [7]: "It is hardly surprising that land ownership was arranged on a patriarchal principle: males were preferred for inheritance purposes to females of the same degree. Under the principle of primogeniture, if a man died intestate, his property passed to his eldest son. However, the common law did not exclude female inheritance." (Crivelli, 2024, p. 1).

The distinction between *Sense* and *Sensibility*, central to Austen's work, is understood here not as a strict opposition but as a dynamic tension between rational self-control (sense) and emotional responsiveness (sensibility), both of which shape women's strategies of negotiating autonomy.

Ultimately, this paper demonstrates that Jane Austen redefines female agency not as open opposition but as a form of negotiation within hierarchical constraints. Thus, demonstrating that her heroines achieve independence through balancing rational judgment and emotional intelligence. Therefore, it offers a more nuanced model of agency than is typically acknowledged in Austen scholarship.

The following questions guide the research:

- 1) How do Jane Austen's female characters negotiate agency and social restriction in *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sense and Sensibility*?
- 2) In what ways do matrimony and financial implications influence the agency of women in Austen's novels?
- 3) How do family relationships, friendships, and social networks contribute to

female empowerment within patriarchy?

4) Are Austen's women more successful when they pursue sense, sensibility, or a combination?

2. Literature Review

Scholarship on Jane Austen has long debated the extent to which her novels reinforce or challenge patriarchal ideology. Feminist critics such as Simone de Beauvoir [8] conceptualize women, thus emphasizing the structural limitations imposed on female identity. At the same time, Judith Butler [9] extends this view by arguing that gender is performative and enacted through repeated social behaviors. In contrast, Mary Poovey [10] focuses on the ideological construction of the "proper lady," highlighting how social norms discipline women into conformity. In contrast, Claudia L. Johnson [11] interprets Austen as more politically engaged, suggesting that her heroines subtly resist these constraints. Together, these perspectives reveal a critical tension: whether Austen's women are primarily shaped by social structures or actively negotiate them. This study builds on these debates by examining how agency operates within, rather than outside, these constraints.

The collection of reviews and analyses presents a comprehensive examination of Jane Austen's literary contribution, strengthening our understanding of her complex legacy within the Georgian and Regency periods of English literature. The list consists of a few works that had a major impact on shaping, analyzing, and understanding Austen's views. To analyze the representation of female agency in *Sense and Sensibility* [2] and *Pride and Prejudice* [1], this research draws on several distinguished theories. Feminist theory, social constructivism, gender performativity, and agency theory collectively underscore the suppression of women and resonate with a socially structured society.

Representation of Simone de Beauvoir's concept of the female as "the Other" highlights the violation of women's autonomy. In her "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman," she tries to explain that when a girl is born, she is taught how to behave, dress, or speak according to the rules society considers 'feminine', and when they accumulate throughout the years, the identity of a 'woman' is shaped as they are projected ahead. In Austen's novels, female characters like Elizabeth Bennet or Elinor Dashwood are socially shaped by expectations of manners and marriage. Their "womanhood" is not biological, but something negotiated within society's expectations—just as de Beauvoir theorizes.

However, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar [12] employ feminist criticism in their book *The Mad Woman in the Attic*, analyzing both male and female writers and their influence on the establishment of women's identity. While they emphasize that a male-centered society shapes women's identities and, consequently, reflects female agency within the hierarchy, their theory also relates to Austen's work in general and to her heroines.

Mary Poovey [10], in *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer*, examines the ideological structure of women in late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century

Britain. By imposing strict social expectations, she gives the figure of a “proper lady”, just as she names her work accordingly. While analyzing Jane Austen’s heroines through ideological frameworks, she shows the image of the proper lady, characterized by modesty, virtue, and domestic responsibility. Similarly, Claudia L. Johnson [11] is one of the critics who was highly influenced by Austen’s works. In her *Jane Austen: Women, Politics, and the Novel* (1988), she highlights women’s agency through Elizabeth Bennet and Elinor Dashwood and presents Jane Austen as politically engaged.

Another feminist figure is Mary Wollstonecraft [13], who argued about human rights and their implications for women. She helps us understand the characterized women in *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice*, and how these women should fight for themselves, thus negotiate their agency. In her *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman with Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects*, she states, “I do not want women to have power over men; I want them to have power over themselves” (Wollstonecraft, 2017, p. 43).

Furthermore, Christine Marshall [14] conducted research on Austen’s feminist critiques of her novels in her “*Dull Elves*” and *Feminists: A Summary of Feminist Criticism of Jane Austen*. Whereas, she mentions Marilyn Butler’s *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas*, in which, according to her, Jane Austen was not a feminist but rather a writer who expresses opinions. Such an objection is needed to strengthen this study, as it provides a counterargument and helps make it more balanced.

In addition, social constructivism informs this paper. A theory by Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann [15] explains how society is an agent shaping human character.

Alfred Schutz [16] strengthens this idea by highlighting how everyday life affects individuals.

From their sociologist perspective, they argue that social interaction and the meaning of life itself establish the foundation of reality. From this perspective, themes elaborated in *Pride and Prejudice* [1] and *Sense and Sensibility* [2] are products of social norms rather than natural conditions. Judith Butler built on this with her theory of gender, which argues that gender expresses inner identity. Gender is shown through repeated acts that are socially constructed; thus, she calls it a performance rather than something fixed as biologically determined. This framework helps in understanding characters like Elinor Dashwood and Elizabeth Bennet, who both conform and challenge the pressures made upon them. Such pressure portrays women whose everyday lives are taken for granted and shows how society has internalized its high expectations of them. Ultimately, the drama of feminist theories and social constructivism lies in this conflict between self-awakening and compulsions toward a controlling society.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study is initiated to highlight the struggles women faced in the late eighteenth

and early nineteenth centuries, thus illuminating women's position. The impact of patriarchy on female agency during this era laid the foundation for some theoretical frameworks. These theories serve as analytical tools for examining and representing the female characters in *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sense and Sensibility*.

Moreover, feminist theories and social constructivism form the foundation of this research. Simone de Beauvoir [8], in her *The Second Sex*, supports her theory by arguing that a woman is labeled with other names except the one she actually is, thereby denying her existence; hence, she wrote, "She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute - she is the Other" (de Beauvoir, 1949/1953, p. 16). Last but not least, is her iconic sentence on feminist theory "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (de Beauvoir, 1949/1953, p. 273). Through this, she argues that being a woman is socially constructed within female biology. Furthermore, this perspective is highly relevant to Austen's heroines, whose identities are shaped by society.

Similarly, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar [12], in *The Mad Woman in the Attic*, emphasize the boundaries of women's roles in literature by epitomizing women's strict autonomy in a patriarchal society while simultaneously resisting the system. As Gilbert and Gubar [14] compare the malevolent intentions on representing women as evil and neglected they wrote "Specifically, as we will try to show here, a woman writer must examine, assimilate, and transcend the extreme images of "angel" and "monster" which male authors have generated for her. Before we women can write, declared Virginia Woolf, we must "kill" the "angel in the house." (Gilbert & Gubar, 1979, p. 17).

In addition to previous scholars, Judith Butler [9] further advances the representation of subjects in terms of Sex and Gender, which she discusses and analyzes in her work, *Gender Trouble*. She prompts inquiry into this subject matter: "To what extent is 'identity' a normative ideal rather than a descriptive feature of experience?" (Butler, 1990, p. 23). Fundamentally, arguing that the major conflict is that there is a 'universal woman' with a stable identity. From this perspective, the identity of Austen's female characters is reinforced within the instability of identity, whose roles are shaped through repeated actions. Furthermore, she insists that searching for an essential female subject would reinforce the very norms that feminism seeks to critique.

Beyond feminist criticism, sociologists such as Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann [15] and Alfred Schutz [16] examine social constructivism and the rigid pressures it imposes on society. In their *The Social Construction of Reality*, Berger and Luckmann [15] contextualize this agency by focusing on a rigid hierarchical society. They believe that women's roles are socially constructed and reinforced by hierarchical norms.

This enlightens how social roles become internalized, particularly in relation to gender and marriage, in Jane Austen's novels through family and social networks.

Berger and Luckmann [15] explain that "The important principle for our gen-

eral considerations is that the relationship between knowledge and its social base is a dialectical one, that is, knowledge is a social product and knowledge is a factor in social change” (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 104). Thus, they explain that once actors are typified as role performers, their conduct becomes subject to enforcement.

Alfred Schutz [16] is another sociologist and philosopher who comes in this paper to reinforce this theory. He argues that social reality exists in the meanings people give to their experiences. In his *Preliminary Survey of the Problem*, he proclaims that people live in a lifeworld, but somehow it is the everyday world that they presume to experience. Everyday life consumes all the energy, and humans somehow neglect the real meaning of things and thus take everything for granted.

Collectively, these scholars helped establish the idea of examining female agency and social constraints in Austen’s fiction.

4. Methodology

This study employs feminist and socialist literary criticism as key analytical tools to explore Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* [1] and *Sense and Sensibility* [2]. A close reading gives a detailed examination of key passages from the novels, identifying themes through character dynamics, patriarchal expectations, and representation of marriage. The research adopts a qualitative methodology, in which both primary and secondary sources are employed to construct arguments. The primary sources consist of the novels themselves, whereas secondary sources include critical studies and scholarly articles.

A comparative approach underpins the study, focusing on the thematic parallels and contrasts between *the female characters in Pride and Prejudice and Sense and Sensibility*. By analyzing these two works in tandem, this research paper aims to highlight Austen’s evolving perspectives on female agency and social constructivism. Such a comparative lens enables the identification of recurring motifs, character archetypes, and philosophical underpinnings. This methodological approach enables an understanding of Austen’s contribution toward gender inequality and female emancipation.

5. Textual Analysis

5.1. *Pride and Prejudice*

Jane Austen presents *Pride and Prejudice* as a novel deeply concerned with a rigidly hierarchical society, gender roles, and matrimonial prospects, epitomizing a male-centric society. The novel highlights the issues of women’s roles in society, their complexity, and the representation of men. It emphasizes the significance of first impressions, which are largely shaped by social titles tied to wealth and fortune. The novel was titled *First Impressions* for nearly two decades before publication. However, although she wrote it in 1796-1797, she later changed the title to its current title, *Pride and Prejudice* (Tomalin [4]; Le Faye [5]).

The novel deals with the misjudgments and misconceptions that often arise at

the beginning of an acquaintance and how those can change as individuals become familiar with each other. The narrative is set in Hertfordshire and centers on the Bennet family, whose circumstances reflect and reinforce the limitations imposed on the women. Due to inheritance laws that favored male heirs, a family is left financially destitute upon their father's death. Women could not work in high-paying jobs, and the family fortune- the money and estate-would immediately go to the next male in the family. In the Bennet's case, the fortune goes to Mr. Collins, since there is no other man to receive the fortune, which meant that women were completely dependent on men, as fathers, and as husbands. As stated in *The Mad Woman in the Attic, Pride and Prejudice* continues to associate the perils of the imagination with the pitfalls of selfhood, sexuality, and assertion' (Gilbert & Gubar, 1979, p.157).

Female Characters in *Pride and Prejudice* and Their Representation

The characterization of female figures reveals a wide range of social roles, attitudes, and responses. She is narrow-minded and has little knowledge of the constraints placed on women. Mrs. Bennet represents the persistent desire to marry off all her daughters well; thus, through Mrs. Bennet, Austen illustrates how patriarchal insecurity and economic dependence shape female behavior. Her character represents the social pressure placed on women during the Regency period, with very limited female agency. Nonetheless, she may not be entirely to blame for her actions; since they had no son, she feared leaving their daughters alone and without money. That is why she might be justified in her questionable actions and reactions. In contrast, Elizabeth Bennet represents one of the strongest forms of female agency in Austen's works, who does not fully escape the system but negotiates with it. Her perceptive mind and attitude lead her to refuse to marry someone she does not love for financial security, as when she rejects Mr. Collins. The heroine is portrayed as a dignified, highly judgmental woman who rejects Mr. Darcy's first proposal. She is a rational character who challenges societal expectations and gender norms. Austen portrays the protagonist (sometimes called Lizzy) as a sharp-minded, intelligent woman who, with her knowledge, strongly contradicts and resists Lady Catherine's speech and warnings. Moreover, promising her no such thing and telling her that she is determined to marry for love and nothing but it. "I am only resolved to act in that manner, which will, in my own opinion, constitute my happiness, without reference to you, or to any person so wholly unconnected with me". (Austen, 1813/2003, p. 247). From the same confrontation, Jane gives us Elizabeth's assertion that exemplifies her rejection of a rigidly hierarchical society; she asserts that, male or female, they are equal, as in her quote: "He is a gentleman; I am a gentleman's daughter; so far we are equal". (Austen, 1813/2003, p. 248). At the same time, Lady Catherine de Bourgh is a representation of high society, a well-respected, educated woman, portrayed as both arrogant and prideful, highly commanding. Through her character, Austen criticizes the aristocracy and its self-importance within a rigid society, presenting her as someone who seeks to use her class privilege to enforce control. She is the one

who tends to humiliate and control Elizabeth by provoking her about her lower-class society and warns her not to marry Mr. Darcy, with the argument that he needs to marry someone of his rank, specifically, her daughter. Thus, she wants to have such a promise from Elizabeth. “Promise me, therefore, immediately, that you will not enter into such an engagement”. (Austen, 1813/2003, p. 247). However, she intends to put pressure on Elizabeth using her authority, thus forcing her into submission, just what this male-controlled culture does: “Miss Bennet, replied her ladyship, in an angry tone, you ought to know that I am not to be trifled with. However insincere you may choose to be, you shall not find so. My character has been celebrated for its sincerity and frankness”. (Austen, 1813/2003, p. 247). Jane is the character who represents traditional womanhood and the ideal social expectations of the eighteenth century. She is that model of a woman who is convinced by everything others may say or intend to make her understand so. She agrees with society’s expectations and is optimistic about her future. Her understanding is excellent, and her mind has improved; she appears innocent and fair to Austen. “To Jane herself, there could be no possibility of objection; her mind improved, and her manners captivating”. (Austen, 1813/2003, p. 131). Lydia Bennet is portrayed as immature, impulsive, and lacking self-restraint, reflecting the consequences of limited moral and emotional discipline within a rigidly structured society. Although she aspires to adulthood and marriage like her sisters, her behavior reflects a lack of judgment, shaped by social pressures and inadequate guidance. “Lydia was a stout, well-grown girl of fifteen, with a fine complexion and good-humored countenance; a favorite with her mother, whose affection had brought her into public at an early age. She had animal spirits and a sort of natural self-countenance, which caught the attention of the officers” (Austen, 1813/2003, p. 31). This depiction emphasizes how youthful energy, when unregulated by social awareness, becomes associated with disorder and reputational risk in Regency society. Similarly, Kitty Bennet mirrors Lydia’s conduct by imitating her behavior and pursuing officers without discernment, further reinforcing Austen’s critique of weak individuality and social conformity among young women.

5.2. *Sense and Sensibility*

Sense and Sensibility is another of Jane Austen’s masterpieces, in which the author presents an authentic portrayal of women’s defenselessness in a patriarchal society. As stated by Cavendish [17], the novel was first published in 1811 in three volumes under the title *By a Lady*. In so doing, it is clear that she was fighting sexism among writers, which was not so easy during that period. The novel explores social expectations, sisterly and family relationships, loyalty, grief, and love, and situations that often put characters in difficult positions. *Sense and Sensibility* represents a realistic situation; thus, it begins with the will of Mr. Dashwood, an old gentleman who died and left behind his widow and three daughters. The will gave the family members as much disappointment as pleasure. Mr. Dashwood wished his son would take care of his mother-in-law and his three half-sisters, and he made him promise to do so. Nevertheless, since he did not specify any partic-

ular sum of support, the decision was left to his son, John Dashwood. His wife, Fanny, advises him not to give them more money, but to give them five hundred pounds a year. Reasoning that four women do not need more, because they are capable of taking care of the house and everything. Even though she is a female character, she represents male authority through greed and materialism, indirectly supporting the limitations imposed upon women. Fanny affects her husband's decision by minimizing the support that Dashwood women need, arguing that they can live "excessively comfortable... What on earth can four women want for more than that?" (Austen, 1811/2003, p. 9). Through this situation, Austen gives us a clear picture of the woman's role in society during the nineteenth century, where their opportunities were restricted, and they were financially dependent. Under inheritance laws, as in *Pride and Prejudice*, the Dashwood sisters and their mother were left unprotected and had to live on very little income. Above that, they were even discouraged from living in their own house with their half-brother.

As argued in *The Mad Woman in the Attic*, *Sense and Sensibility* declare Austen's divergent perspectives: "*Sense and Sensibility* is an especially painful novel to read because Austen herself seems caught between her attraction to Marianne's sincerity and spontaneity, while at the same identifying with the civil falsehoods and the reserved, polite silences of Elinor..." (Gilbert & Gubar, 1979, p.157).

Female Characters in *Sense and Sensibility* and Their Representation

Jane Austen provides us with a diverse cast of characters in *Sense and Sensibility*, even though it is not as numerous as that in *Pride and Prejudice*, especially among the female characters. Elinor Dashwood is the figure of a social propriety, with composed reason and self-control. As the eldest daughter, she is portrayed as a mature and sensitive woman who tries hard to use her intelligence to make sense of things. "Elinor, this eldest daughter, whose advice was so effective, possessed a strength of understanding and coolness of judgment, which qualified her, though only nineteen, to be the counselor of her mother". (Austen, 1811/2003, p. 6). Her agency is expressed through restraint rather than open resistance. She is known to stop fighting for the one she loves most, which characterizes her sense in the novel. The protagonist was portrayed as a tough, mellow woman, but she briefly loses emotional restraint when she realizes that Edward is not married, only to remain in control. Moreover, Jane Austen presents a strong maternal influence through Mrs. Dashwood. A character who is emotionally responsive and deeply concerned for her daughter's future. She is that kind of mother who makes decisions based on affection and intuition rather than by social calculations. Through her character, Austen highlights the emotional volume of female experience within a restrictive social system, thus explaining how maternal care becomes a key source of support and guidance for young women with limited choices. Marianne, on the other hand, is a contrast to Elinor. She is a representation of sensibility, expressing her feelings without regard for social restraints. The character Austen portrays is an intelligent and passionate young woman. Her emotions lead

her to idealize love, thus interpreting it through imagination rather than rational judgment. She firmly believes that there is passionate love for everyone, or perhaps it is just in her thoughts; somehow, her beliefs shape her expectations and decisions throughout the novel. To convey the character's attitude, Austen explores her character both during her romance with Willoughby and in her speech on Elinor and Edward's romance. "I may consider it with some surprise. Edward is very amiable, and I love him tenderly. Nevertheless, yet—he is not that kind of young man—there is something wanting—his figure is not striking; his eyes want all that spirit, that fire, which at once announce virtue and intelligence." (Austen, 1811/2003, p. 13). Although she is often guided by emotion, Marianne is not indifferent to others; she is caring and supportive towards her sisters and mother, too. She forces her sister to run after her love, Edward, yet she is highly thrilled for her when Edward proposes to Elinor. Another female character worth mentioning is Sir John Middleton's mother-in-law, Mrs. Jennings. She represents elegance and social support in the female community. This character often interacts with the Dashwoods during their stay in the cottage, where she embodies social sophistication but lacks emotional connection within Regency society. 'Lady Middleton was not more than six or seven and twenty; her face was handsome, her figure tall and strong, and her address graceful. Her manners had all the elegance that her husband wanted. However, they would have been improved by some share of his frankness and warmth.' (Austen, 1811/2003, p. 21). Through this character's description, Austen emphasizes the contrast between a woman's visible elegance and emotional deficiency, suggesting that grace alone does not necessarily reflect personal connection.

A comparison of Elizabeth Bennet and Elinor Dashwood's characters is provided in the Appendix.

6. Discussion

The analysis of *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sense and Sensibility* shows that female agency in Austen's work is neither fully restrained nor entirely emancipated. It runs within the constraints of a rigid patriarchal structure. This paper shows how Austen's female characters use moral judgment, reason, and emotional intelligence to negotiate their own potential. From a feminist perspective, schooled by Simone de Beauvoir and Judith Butler, characters such as Elizabeth Bennet and Elinor Dashwood continually engage with social expectations that shape their womanhood through repeated behaviors. Thus, they kept resisting the system not by rebellion but by the ability to judge properly when to obey and when to resist.

Marriage is another theme that stands at the center of this paper, as both inheritance laws and limited educational opportunities restrict it. Sociological theory by Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann explains that expectations are internalized and reproduced, meaning that society implants ideas and expectations beforehand. Austen's female characters are conditioned to view marriage as their primary objective, yet the author complicates these expectations by introducing

alternative outcomes. Elizabeth Bennet's refusal to marry without love represents a challenge to marry only for financial stability. At the same time, Charlotte Lucas (though not discussed in depth above) represents a reasonable acceptance of social reality. Similar to *Pride and Prejudice*, *Sense and Sensibility*, Marianne's idealism for emotion and love fails, while Elinor's self-control leads to stability.

Family and social networks play a crucial role in shaping female agency. Alfred Schutz achieves this effect through the concept of everyday life, which reflects how everyday interactions create social norms that can both constrain and empower women in this case. For instance, Mrs. Bennet represents patriarchal constraints through her pressure to marry, whereas Mrs. Jennings provides emotional and social support.

A key finding of this study is that Austen does not privilege either sense or sensibility but instead supports a balance between them. Through her novels, she suggests that the most successful women are those who integrate both qualities, achieving a balance between practical agency and personal fulfillment. Austen's work establishes a foundation for discussions of gender roles, revealing that limitations imposed on women do not eliminate agency but rather help reshape it. Ultimately, this study shows that Austen's novels offer a nuanced portrayal of female independence, demonstrating that within restrictive social structures, women can negotiate autonomy through a balance of reason, emotion, and social awareness.

7. Conclusion

This paper examines the complex interactions between female agency and patriarchal boundaries in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sense and Sensibility*. By focusing on the characters of Elizabeth Bennet and Elinor Dashwood, the study explores how these women negotiate their identities, desires, and life choices within a male-dominated social and cultural system. Thus, drawing on feminist theory and social philosophy, the study shows a complex analysis of Austen's narrative strategies and thematic concerns. The study enables a deeper exploration of how Austen critiques the patriarchal ideologies of her time while depicting the limitations imposed on women. Through this approach, the novels appear not merely as literary works but as sites of tension between traditional gender norms and the evolving consciousness of modern womanhood. Moreover, Austen's heroines illustrate resilience, moral autonomy, and rationality, revealing that female agency can survive even within a restrictive, hierarchical society. The enduring relevance of Austen's work in contemporary discussions of identity, social equality, and gender is evident in her characters' journeys. Furthermore, this study emphasizes the importance of reassessing established classics through modern theoretical frameworks, confirming Austen as an artist who contributed to women's self-determination and the social construction of gender. In doing so, this study ultimately demonstrates that Austen's novels remain critically significant, enlightening the enduring tension between female agency and social constraint while re-

inforcing their significance in contemporary feminist and literary discussion.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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Appendix

A comparative analysis of female agency in Austen's heroines:

Detail	Elizabeth Bennet (<i>Pride and Prejudice</i>)	Elinor Dashwood (<i>Sense and Sensibility</i>)
Social position	Member of a society with restricted inheritance rights	Eldest daughter with financial decline
Attitude toward marriage	Rejects marriage based on economic security	Values affection but considers financial security
Agency category	Confident and independent	Logical and controlled
Patriarchal disobedience	Refuses Mr. Collins and at first rejects Mr. Darcy	Maintains dignity while resisting emotion
Expression of emotion	Confident and straightforward	Controlled and careful
Social norms negotiation	Challenges class prejudice and gender expectations	Negotiates social limitations with self-control
Moral integrity	Guided by self-respect	Guided by responsibility
Contribution to feminism	Manifests resistance and autonomy	Represents strength through restraint and moral patience