Louis Savinien Dupuis Journal of Multidisciplinary Research, 2025: V(4) 113–114
DOI: 10.21839/lsdjmr.2025.v4.262

Research Article

The Role Of Women In Victorian Society In Jane Austen's Novels *Sense And Sensibility* And *Pride And Prejudice*

preethi*
Department of english,immaculate college for cuddalore.

(Received: 09-04-2025; Accepted 08-06-2025; Published Online 03-11-2025)

Abstract

This paper examines the role of women in nineteenth-century English society as represented in the novels of Jane Austen, with particular reference to *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sense and Sensibility*. It focuses on three major aspects: marriage, class, and female agency. In Austen's time, women's lives were shaped by economic dependence, social hierarchy, and strict moral expectations. Marriage was not merely a personal choice but a necessity for financial security and social acceptance. Through her characters, Austen critiques marriages based solely on wealth and highlights the importance of mutual respect and emotional compatibility. The paper also explores how class distinctions influence relationships and opportunities, while demonstrating that moral worth transcends social rank. Furthermore, it analyses how Austen's heroines assert independence through rational thinking, self-reflection, and moral strength. The study concludes that Austen presents a realistic yet progressive view of women, revealing both the limitations they faced and the subtle ways in which they exercised agency within a patriarchal society.

Introduction

The role of women in nineteenth-century English society was largely shaped by patriarchal structures and rigid class systems. Women were expected to remain within the domestic sphere, focusing on family responsibilities and marriage. Legal restrictions limited their access to property and financial independence, making marriage the primary means of securing stability.

The novels of Jane Austen provide valuable insight into these social conditions. Although her works are often associated with romance, they offer a deeper exploration of social realities, particularly concerning women's lives. Austen focuses on domestic settings, but within these spaces she examines important issues such as gender inequality, class distinction, and moral development.

This paper analyses *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sense and Sensibility* to understand how Austen portrays women navigating marriage, class hierarchy, and social expectations. It argues that Austen presents women as intelligent and morally capable individuals who assert their agency despite societal limitations.

Marriage as a Social Institution

Marriage in Austen's novels functions as both a social expectation and an economic necessity. Women were often dependent on marriage for financial security, as inheritance laws favoured male heirs. This reality is clearly reflected in *Pride and Prejudice*, where the Bennet sisters face uncertainty due to the entailment of their family estate.

Austen highlights different attitudes toward marriage through her characters. Some marriages are based on convenience and economic stability, while others are founded on love and mutual respect. For example, practical marriages emphasize security over emotional fulfillment, reflecting the limited choices available to women.

At the same time, Austen critiques this system by presenting ideal marriages that combine affection with moral understanding. Elizabeth Bennet's eventual union represents a balance between personal happiness and social responsibility. Similarly, in *Sense and Sensibility*, Elinor Dashwood values sincerity and emotional stability in relationships.

Through these portrayals, Austen suggests that while marriage is necessary, it should not be reduced to a mere financial arrangement. Instead, it should be based on respect, compatibility, and shared values.

Class and Social Hierarchy

Class plays a crucial role in shaping the lives of Austen's characters. Social status determines behaviour, relationships, and opportunities, particularly for women. Wealth and land ownership serve as markers of class, influencing how individuals are perceived within society.

In *Pride and Prejudice*, class prejudice is evident in the interactions between characters. Social superiority often leads to arrogance, while lower status invites judgment and criticism. However, Austen challenges these assumptions by showing that moral integrity is more important than social rank.

Similarly, *Sense and Sensibility* illustrates how changes in economic circumstances affect social position. The Dashwood sisters' reduced fortune limits their opportunities and highlights the vulnerability of women without financial independence.

Austen's portrayal of class is both realistic and critical. While she acknowledges the importance of social hierarchy, she also questions its fairness. By emphasizing character over status, she suggests that true worth lies in personal qualities rather than inherited privilege.

Female Agency and Independence

Despite the limitations imposed by society, Austen's heroines demonstrate significant agency. They are capable of making decisions, reflecting on their actions, and asserting their individuality.

Elizabeth Bennet exemplifies independence through her refusal to accept proposals that do not align with her values. Her confidence and self-respect allow her to challenge social expectations.

Similarly, Elinor Dashwood represents emotional strength and rational judgment. Her ability to maintain composure in difficult situations reflects inner resilience.

Austen also portrays personal growth as an essential aspect of agency. Characters learn from their experiences and develop greater self-awareness. This process of self-realisation enables them to make better decisions and form meaningful relationships.

Through these characters, Austen demonstrates that agency does not always require open rebellion. Instead, it can be expressed through thoughtful choices, moral integrity, and self-reflection.

Discussion

The themes of marriage, class, and female agency are closely interconnected in Austen's novels. Marriage serves as a means of navigating class structures, while agency allows women to make informed choices within these constraints.

Austen's works reveal the complexities of women's lives in a society that limits their opportunities. At the same time, they highlight the strength and resilience of women who seek both personal happiness and social acceptance.

By combining realism with subtle critique, Austen presents a balanced perspective. She does not reject social institutions entirely but suggests that they can be improved through greater emphasis on moral values and individual dignity.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the novels of Jane Austen provide a detailed and insightful portrayal of women's roles in nineteenth-century English society. Through *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sense and Sensibility*, Austen explores the challenges women face in relation to marriage, class, and social expectations.

While acknowledging the limitations imposed by patriarchal structures, Austen presents women as capable of intellectual and moral independence. Her heroines demonstrate that personal happiness can be achieved through self-awareness, rational judgment, and mutual respect in relationships.

Austen's work remains significant because it addresses universal themes that continue to resonate today. By portraying women who balance social responsibility with personal integrity, she offers a timeless perspective on the pursuit of equality and fulfilment.

Works Cited

Primary Sources

Austen, Jane. *P ride and Prejudice*. London: T. Egerton, 1813.

Austen, Jane. *Sense and Sensibility*. London: T. Egerton, 1811.

Secondary Sources

Showalter, Elaine. *A Literature of Their Own*. 1977.

Wollstonecraft, Mary. *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. 1792.

Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One's Own*. 1929.