

Women's Societal Convention and Individual Independence in Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudice*, and *Emma*

Ahmad Mahbub-ul-Alam^{1*} and Noshin Nisa²

Abstract

This study examines the portrayal of feminism in the 19th-century novels of the English novelist Jane Austen, specifically in her works Sense and Sensibility, Pride and Prejudice, and Emma. The paper analyses how Austen builds emotionally strong, self-aware, and intelligent female protagonists who navigate patriarchal limitations and claim their power within these boundaries with resilience, introspection, and a mindset of strength and tolerance. Through close reading, this study demonstrates how Austen's protagonists subtly rebel against adversity with their impeccable social intelligence, exhibiting just the right amount of defiance to obtain what they are entitled to, while respecting social and familial dynamics and maintaining their grounds. Austen's protagonists reflect the reality of her time, in which women were unable to escape societal restrictions. Still, they also reflect a woman's strength in surviving on her own terms, embracing opportunities amid her limitations. The present study also discusses the natural and gradual development of characters like Elinor, Marianne, Elizabeth, and Emma, which reflects Austen's internalized feminist commentary on her society, where emotional intelligence serves as a tool of survival.

Keywords: *Societal Convention; Women's Independence; Sense and Sensibility; Pride and Prejudice; Emma.*

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1. ***Corresponding Author**, Associate Professor (English) & Dean (Acting), Faculty of Arts, Social Science and Law (FASSL), Feni University (FU), Bangladesh, and PhD Research Fellow, Center for Higher Studies and Research (CHSR), Bangladesh University of Professionals (BUP),
Cell no : +8801713095291, pialbd@yahoo.com, mahbub@feniuniversity.ac.bd]
 2. Content Writer, Rank Wizards LLC, Dhaka, Bangladesh, and Former Post-graduate Researcher, Department of English and Humanities (DEH), University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh (ULAB),
Cell No: +8801914898340, nnoshin1998@gmail.com, noshin@rankwizards.co]

Introduction

Jane Austen lived from 1775 to 1817. Austen's predecessors created middle-class characters who experienced adventures and mysteries to escape the mundane and struggling reality. However, Austen chose to adapt the truth of her middle-class English society into her writings, using effective humor to depict realistic scenarios amusingly. Her depiction of interpersonal relationships between people as social beings stemmed from her belonging to the social and interactive 19th-century English community. Her characters suffer from economic insecurities and an uneasy disdain for social and economic hierarchies; the superior class and rigid aristocracy restrict them, and until they find a fulfilling ending in their story, they must live observantly. In her personal life, Austen also faced economic uncertainty following her father's death. She realized that the comfort of the middle-class falters when property becomes uncertain. Austen realized the importance of living with financial security and a sense of belonging. Her conditions were reflected in her stories (novels). The restrained relationship in the Dashwood family from *Sense and Sensibility* mirrored the painful circumstances Austen faced herself. Her own experiences are examples of the relentless struggles imposed on women with the absence of a male source of wealth and the lack of autonomy in the inheritance of family property for women.

Jane Austen's novels portray the classist Regency-era England. The inequality and the blatant pride towards the disparity of those enjoying the luxury of the higher class were immense. Middle-class people worked hard to conform to the aristocracy's conventions and live comfortably. The middle class had always lived with the tension of holding onto the comfort of moderate living, avoiding the doom of poverty, and managing not to vex the pride of the formidable upper class. Moreover, within the socio-economic classism, discrimination towards women and denying them socio-economic autonomy added another layer of inequality.

Now, it would be rather wise to say that Austen's novels and characters evolved in tandem with the society in which she lived. The initial stories of her career, for example, *Sense and Sensibility*, contained examples of discrimination. However, her later works, such as *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma*, convey the stories of characters from the middle class, who refused to yield to the weakening notion of the aristocracy's supremacy. These selected novels feature rebellious female protagonists who raise their voices against gender-focused oppression and attempt to choose what they individually desire, despite being unable to eradicate inequality. The romantic and

personal fulfillment she (Jane Austen) has provided to her protagonists can be considered her way of establishing her self-importance.

Objective of the Study

The broader objectives of this study revolve around examining how Jane Austen's feminist ideology strikes a balance with societal conventions, while the specific ones are to gain a deeper understanding of the protagonist female characters' feminist approach to establishing autonomy by navigating through societal conventions, including marriage, custody, social and property rights, and, most significantly, the conservative patriarchy.

Literature Review

Tara Ghoshal Wallace's [8] paper takes the opposite route in analyzing Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* by stating that it is a betrayal of Austen's feminist ideals, being somewhat of an anti-feminist novel. However, the same paper argues otherwise, discussing how Austen tries to establish her feminist values through the resilience of the character of Elinor. Although the heroines of this novel ultimately submit to patriarchy, this paper highlights the moments when they resisted the passive aggression of their deeply patriarchal society.

Anuradha Chaudhuri [1] declares Emma and Elizabeth as the feminist figures of Jane Austen, with their combination of intelligence and self-awareness of justified rights, especially in a society where women's rights were ambiguously non-existent, but fails to notice, despite being claimed as feminist figures, that they are unable to rise above the restraints of society and the inevitability of marriage, something that Austen deliberately and timely chose to keep.

Sufia Usmani [7] identifies Austen's narrative tactic, which is to give her female protagonist agency and space for victory within the restrictive marriage system. For Austen's heroines, marriage had been the ultimate reward, achieved by rising above their society's passive aggression. This paper argues that, although marriage is a victory in the story, it is still a surrender to conventionality that Austen made as an author.

Gopal Chauta [3] points to Elizabeth's rejection of marriage as a significant feminist act. However, Elizabeth eventually marries the same person she had rejected. This time, she chose to marry him, a decision that occurred through passive convenience rather than active action.

Numerous other critical works also demonstrate that Jane Austen's novels possess feminist elements that are essentially relevant and worthy of discussion through critical approaches at all times. However, understanding the selected texts through the demand of the context along with considering the critics' opinions (i.e., the secondary sources of this study), the passivity of Jane Austen's protagonists alongside their active determination and resilience is discussed in this paper through a close comparative survey of the characters with an approach to comparative examination of the art of characterisation of the author.

Theoretical Framework

Elaine Showalter [2] explained two lenses of reading a text in terms of feminism — Feminist Criticism and Gynocriticism — while the first discusses the portrayal of women and their experiences in reality made by male writers, the second involves women as both writers and readers, especially as writers. The present study connects Jane Austen's novels, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Sense and Sensibility*, and *Emma*, with Showalter's concept of Gynocriticism — not only for a female writer telling women's stories, but also because her (Austen's) womanhood unites the experiences of female readers with the affairs of the female characters, which are also based on the author's personal experiences.

Austen's characters also eventually succumb to the conventions of their society; they reflect the practical condition of the Regency era patriarchy. Yet, the sense of empowering individuality and the determination to defy unwanted societal pressures have been prominent, alongside the inescapable reality of conformity, which a female author with similar experiences empathetically relates to the female readers of that time. The selected novels and characters in this study reflect Jane Austen's own subtle acts of rebellion and feminism, dedicated to the women of her time.

Methodology

The present study employs qualitative, critical, and analytical approaches through Gynocriticism to discuss Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudice*, and *Emma*, which serve as the primary sources of analysis. The methodological primacy of this content analysis includes a close textual and contextual examination of the selected novels, focusing on character development, narrative voice, and socio-cultural context. This paper discusses the recurring themes of emotional resilience, romantic idealization, female autonomy, gendered societal roles, and financial dependency. By analyzing the characters' interactions that drive the narrative, the study examines Austen's narrative strategy of establishing ideals and making a statement about the

desire for greater autonomy for women. Additionally, relevant scholarly articles have been used as the secondary sources for the paper. The referencing for this paper has been formatted in the Analytical Sciences Style, as per the Feni University Journal guidelines for a complete paper.

Findings and Discussion

Sense and Sensibility

Sense and Sensibility starts with the Dashwood family and the introduction of Henry Dashwood and John Dashwood. Henry was the Dashwood sisters' father, and John was their half-brother. John has already inherited the Norland Park property, along with additional wealth through his marriage. However, the place is the only shelter for the Dashwood sisters, which John denies them when their father, Henry Dashwood, dies. The half-brother's lack of warmth forces Mrs Dashwood and her daughters to search for another home and prepare to leave their comfortable home in Norland. This introduction to the Dashwood family's dynamics establishes the norm of unequal treatment towards women and the deliberate lack of women's independence over the control of their male guardians.

The calm and wise demeanour of the protagonist, Elinor, is presented in contrast to her sisters, Marianne and Margaret, and her mother's emotional and nervous nature. When they act out their frustrations against John's wife's bad behaviour towards them and expressively lament their helpless situation, Elinor stays calm; she tries to maintain their strength and bond together. Elinor's mother and Marianne are characteristically indulgent in outpouring emotions, while Elinor is always conscious of containing her feelings, hardly ever having any outbursts. To juxtapose, John Dashwood's wife, Fanny, is placed in opposition to the Dashwood ladies. Fanny, already in a wealthy position, becomes increasingly greedy and discourages John from providing his stepmother and half-sisters with generous financial assistance.

On the other hand, while they are still in Norland, Mrs Dashwood hopes for a match between Elinor and Edward Ferrars, Fanny's brother. She gets hopeful because marrying into a wealthy family can only secure a comfortable future for her daughters. Interestingly, Elinor also likes Edward. Edward, Elinor's love interest, is introduced as someone who is misunderstood and unappreciated by others and finds it challenging to express himself while being determined to stay authentic. His personality is ideally suited to match Elinor's. When the Dashwood ladies, or anyone of the regency period, associate a man and a woman romantically, it is inevitable for them to conclude in

marriage, significantly for the sake of the female's security, and the option of stepping back from a potential marital relationship is rarely taken. Elinor and Edward's friendliness towards each other excites Mrs Dashwood and Marianne about their probable marriage. However, they move out of Norland to settle in Sir John Middleton's property, bidding farewell to their home away from Edward.

The Dashwood ladies start a new journey with the Middleton family, with the inclusion of Austen's amusing characters. Sir Middleton's friend, 35-year-old Colonel Brandon, is introduced as a potential match for Marianne; the possibility is hidden later in the plot. His age and gravity of character make him a bit too mature for Marianne, which is eventually accepted as his character begins to reveal the complexities. Initially, Marianne does not consider Colonel Brandon romantically attractive. Marianne and Elinor are portrayed as embodying two distinct sets of ideals and expectations. Elinor understands the norms of her society and abides by the conventions. Marianne does not believe in the idea of marriage being a planned financial exchange. She idealizes love and passion to almost an ignorant level of naivety. She is also bothered by her sister's (Elinor's) restrained nature, as she is not visibly upset by the emerging doubts in Elinor and Edward's relationship. Marianne would express her sadness loudly if she were to lose the person she cared for. Marianne and Elinor are on opposite ends of the spectrum, and both gradually learn to gain balance by the end. This is how Austen's female protagonists seem personal to the author. It is as if the writer experiences a journey through her characters and makes them achieve the development they can, but Austen herself cannot.

Marianne's journey of learning a harsh lesson begins as she meets the charming Willoughby and falls deeply in love with him. He is everything she wishes for, and she starts believing him unquestioningly, ignoring her sister's cautious advice. On the contrary, Elinor notices that Colonel Brandon is developing feelings for Marianne and empathises with him, as he is also reserved like her. Nonetheless, Marianne keeps pursuing her dream of marrying Willoughby, especially after he takes a lock of her hair as a token of love. She believes and convinces her family that she is now engaged to him. Although he never commits to marriage, he continually implies that he intends to be near the Dashwood family by showing interest in the Barton Cottage. Adding to the suspicion, Willoughby suddenly leaves for London, leaving Marianne emotionally broken.

Meanwhile, Edward suddenly visits the cottage, rekindling the hope for Edward and Elinor's relationship. Marianne feels disappointed at Edward's lack of excitement

towards Elinor, ignoring that both of them lack the expressiveness and romantic idealism she does. Elinor is nervous and careful in her conduct with Edward, while Edward also remains uncomfortable during his stay and leaves without establishing a conclusion with her.

The society depicted in the story is notorious for spreading gossip as a form of amusement, which tarnishes the reputation of unmarried young women. Through eavesdropping and gossiping, the speculation of Marianne and Willoughby's engagement has spread amongst people, opening the risk for a scandal and ruining Marianne's image for prospects, especially at a time when Elinor and Edward's union is also uncertain, keeping the Dashwood sisters in a vulnerable situation in the fight to secure their lives financially and socially. Elinor and Marianne meet the Steele sisters, Anne and Lucy. Elinor and Lucy get acquainted, and Lucy trusts her enough to reveal that she is anxiously engaged to Edward Ferrars. Elinor tries to digest this information despite being shocked and disheartened. She instinctively forgets about Edward and pulls herself away from possibly marrying him, as he is with someone else now. Lucy is also worried that Edward's mother, Mrs Ferrars, will not approve of her because she cannot provide a fortune for Edward, which reveals another example of the deliberate lack of control women have over their own fortunes, which they cannot acquire and are typically fixed for their husbands only. This rule also requires the husband's family to approve of the young woman. Nonetheless, Lucy requests Elinor to keep the engagement a secret, and Elinor agrees.

Willoughby finally arrives, but he has changed. He denies any affection for Marianne and behaves coldly towards her. Eventually, they learn he will marry Ms Grey, who can offer him good fortune. Marianne is devastated and does not know how to express her tumultuous feelings to her sister, who is trying to console her. Brandon ultimately reveals Willoughby's horrible truth to Elinor. He shares the story of a woman named Eliza, whom he loved but was unable to marry. Eliza passed away, leaving her daughter under Brandon's protection. He claims that Willoughby has violated that girl, making her pregnant. Unaware of Willoughby's true nature, Marianne still laments over him, even after he marries Ms Grey.

Elinor and Marianne meet the mysterious and intimidating Mrs Ferrars, Edward's mother, at one of the many social gatherings, but she (Mrs Ferrars) does not appear to be very cordial with Elinor. However, Marianne reacts passionately against Mrs Ferrars' disdainful attitude when she dismisses Elinor's paintings without appreciation, which offends Mrs Ferrars. Elinor later gets happy that she does not have to be

associated with Mrs Ferrars, judging by her character. Both sisters' different types of demeanours amidst the derogatory behaviour of people simultaneously show their intrinsic drive to establish their individuality and determination despite their subservience.

The politics of the social and financial ladder take a heavy toll on Edward when his mother disinherits him for wanting to marry Lucy, who cannot bring fortune. This leaves both Edward and Lucy without a fortune. Edward's brother Robert decides to marry Ms Morton, whom Mrs Ferrars had chosen for Edward. The sudden change bothers Elinor as she wonders how Ms Morton's opinion was never sought before deciding whom she would marry, simply because she is a woman.

Gradually, Marianne recovers and tries to move on from Willoughby. Colonel Brandon expresses his feelings for Marianne and wishes to marry her, which makes Mrs Dashwood extremely happy with the thought of her daughter marrying a nobleman. Brandon worries about living up to Marianne's expectations for a partner. But Marianne also tries to balance her romantic idealism, extreme emotions, and the inevitable reality. Her growing maturity and Brandon's understanding of nature offer hope for improving their relationship. Marianne is rewarded with marriage to a stable noble gentleman, Colonel Brandon, who can provide a secure future and the humane respect that is a blessing for Regency-era women.

On the other hand, Elinor quietly endures the pain after learning about Edward and Lucy's marriage. She did not even realise that she could feel so strongly for him. Her habit of suppressing her emotions makes her feelings and emotions surprising to her. She thought that she was selfless for forcing herself to accept the marriage between Edward and Lucy. When she realises that she still hopes that the marriage wouldn't happen, the disappointment surprises her, but does not vilify her desires to herself. Feeling frustrated for not getting what she wanted is normal, and she knows it. From here, Elinor takes steps to improve her emotional health.

However, a reward awaits Elinor, too, and the Austen heroine must achieve the ideal social and financial security, along with romantic fulfilment, by the end of her story. Edward visits Elinor and reveals that he did not marry Lucy because she married Robert; instead, he wants to marry Elinor. Elinor finally lets her emotions flow and cries out in joy. Lucy and Robert's union is commented on as a mutual attraction driven by vanity, as Edward did not have property. Although Lucy's decision to choose the wealthy Robert is looked down upon, this story serves as an underlying

commentary on the complex strategies women employ to attain a secure future. Although Elinor and Edward are in love, their financial situation remains uncertain. Edward acknowledges the necessity of reconciling with his mother for Elinor's economic security, which he successfully achieves. Elinor is rewarded with romantic and financial success by adhering to societal norms and overcoming specific difficulties.

Pride and Prejudice

The sentence at the novel's beginning, "It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife," reflects the gist of the novel and the society of the story. A single man can possess good fortune if his wife can pass her fortune on to her husband. Additionally, a single man who already possesses a good fortune is automatically eligible to secure his wife's fortune. Either way, the lady must be cautious in securing her fortune from her father or her wealthy husband. The mindset of women competing for wealthy households in marriage is a consistent theme in *Pride and Prejudice*. We see the female protagonist, Elizabeth Bennet, from a middle-class family, ideologically and actively rebelling against the notion that marriage is a financial transaction and the necessity of restricting oneself to a loveless marriage solely for the sake of securing the family's wealth. She is determined to marry for love only. Eventually, her marriage of love to the wealthy Fitzwilliam Darcy is joyous because it resolves the family's financial issues and provides the security that love alone cannot offer. Even though *Pride and Prejudice* is often read through a romantic lens, the romance here prevails only when the finances are handled; surely that makes it a critical example of an anti-romantic novel. The author empowers Elizabeth to rebel against societal norms, but she ultimately conforms to tradition in exchange for happiness and a stable future.

Elizabeth's mother, Mrs Bennet, is portrayed as an overbearing woman unhealthily obsessed with her daughters' marriage, especially her constant attempts and insistence on confirming wealthy suitor Mr Bingley for the eldest daughter, Jane Bennet; this is viewed as condescending and embarrassing behaviour that reduces the dignity of the Bennet family as a whole, primarily due to their middle-class status. However, the pressure of social hierarchy and the restrictive economic system leaves Mrs Bennet no choice but to be desperate. Mr and Mrs Bennet do not have any sons; they have five marriage-eligible daughters. According to the law, Mr Bennet's property will be inherited by the immediate male relative. As they have five daughters, it is necessary to secure all of their futures by arranging marriages with wealthy suitors. Mrs Bennet's

constant pestering of her daughters to maintain their image as attractive, marriageable ladies for rich, handsome men is painful for them, but her concern is not baseless. She strictly instructs all her daughters, especially the eldest, Jane, to grab the attention of the eligible man, Mr Bingley, at the Ball, no matter what. She goes to excessive lengths to ensure Mr Bingley's liking for Jane; she sends Jane to Bingley's residence during the rain to ensure she can stay there and spend time with him.

Jane even gets sick due to getting drenched in the rain and having to stay there for multiple days, which satisfies Mrs Bennet. Mrs Bennet even forces Elizabeth so that she (Elizabeth) likes and marries their insensitive and stupid relative, Mr Collins, who is the future inheritor of the Bennets' house (property). She (Mrs Bennet) is ecstatic after a loud phase of panic when Mr Darcy manages Lydia and Wickham's marriage after their scandalous eloping and Wickham's womanising treachery. Though Wickham's despicable character is evident, Mrs Bennet is still happy that one of her daughters is married to the stability of a future, regardless of Wickham's character, a conclusion portrayed humorously that saves the Bennet family and Lydia from defamation but also is a lifelong punishment for Lydia having to live with Wickham for the sake of her and her family's reputation. On the other hand, Mrs Bennet is devastated when Mr Collins marries Charlotte Lucas after being rejected by Elizabeth. Emotions have been at the extreme ends for Mrs Bennet, as she continues to embarrass herself and her daughters with her intrusive behaviour. However, she cannot be blamed for the systemic conditioning that causes her desperation.

Elizabeth is the contrast to docile and introverted Jane. She (Elizabeth) is full of self-respect, ideals, and determination. The term 'prejudice' from the novel's title applies to Miss Elizabeth Bennet, while 'pride' is for Mr Fitzwilliam Darcy. Darcy and Elizabeth meet at the Ball, and they clash with each other's proud and strong personalities. Darcy's vain comment about Elizabeth, saying, "she is tolerable but not handsome enough to tempt me," does not offend or hurt her, but rather amuses her into replying to his comment wittily. As part of her society, she cannot help but abide by the traditions. At the same time, Elizabeth holds onto her individuality and defies the compulsions that could lead her to compromise her ideals. In immense concern for her sister (Jane), she walks to the Bingley residence to see her, without any formality, solely with the purest of intentions, driven by love. She is not bothered by the mud stain on her dress. She seamlessly showcases her talents and interests in the arts, literature, and music, without the intention of proving anything to anyone, while still unintentionally charming Darcy. She maintains her etiquette and remains extremely

polite while rejecting Mr Collins' proposal to marry her. She tries to convince her mother to understand her decision not to marry someone she does not love. On the other hand, although she is disheartened to learn that her friend Charlotte Lucas has agreed to marry Mr Collins, she must accept that Charlotte needs to live pragmatically and find a husband for a stable life before she gets any older; Charlotte is not idealistic, nor does she dream of love like her, but she (Elizabeth) understands her friend (Charlotte).

The Darcy-Elizabeth romance, or the negotiation that unfolds throughout their journey, has not been smooth either; it is filled with misunderstandings and a frustrating lack of communication. She easily trusts Mr Wickham's badmouthing of Mr Darcy based on her prejudice against Darcy. She despises Darcy upon learning that he has provoked Mr Bingley into not going forward with Jane because of her reserved nature, which he misunderstood as indifference. When Darcy confesses his feelings for Elizabeth and proposes marriage, she becomes embroiled in a heated argument and vehemently refuses to consider him. She finally softens for him when he communicates his truth through a letter and reveals his hurtful history with Wickham. He explains how Wickham is a betrayer who attempted to ruin the reputation of Darcy's younger sister, Georgiana. Darcy also admits his mistake and apologises for misunderstanding Jane. Darcy's confessing words change Elizabeth's perception of Darcy, making her fall for him. Her attraction and admiration for Darcy reach their peak when Darcy hunts down the absconded Wickham with Lydia and makes him marry Lydia, saving the Bennet family's reputation. Later, when she visits Darcy's extravagant, luxurious residence, she is awestruck. Even though Elizabeth does not explicitly decide to marry Mr Darcy, she wishes to marry him; she becomes even more disheartened upon recalling her aggressive rejection of him, lamenting the realisation of never being with Mr Darcy, even if she wants to. However, her determination strikes back when Lady Catherine de Bourgh, a high-society lady who is determined to marry Darcy off to her daughter, warns Elizabeth not to pursue Darcy. It is easy for aristocratic Lady Catherine to opt for an equally wealthy eligible suitor for her daughter and act upon her grip on the option, as she can exercise power and does not have worries about middle-class survival. However, Elizabeth shows her idealistic determination, which eventually gets her off the 'prejudice' against the 'proud' Darcy.

At the end of the novel, with the unions of Jane and Bingley, and Elizabeth and Darcy, the ladies achieve their romantic goals in victory. However, it comes through the unromantic journey that follows, as one overcomes the hurdles of misunderstandings

and social hierarchy. Eventually, their futures get comfortably secured because they insert themselves into the hierarchy.

Emma

Unlike *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sense and Sensibility*, *Emma* presents a complex series of events, such as conflicts within the comfortable middle-class bubble, rather than clashing with class discrimination. *Emma* also opts out of the female protagonist's struggles to achieve a better life for herself with an ideal man. Still, Emma, the protagonist, portrays her internal growth through self-reflection, mainly since she is not preoccupied with her financial security and has the time and space to reflect on herself. Emma does not have a mother who pressures her into marriage; she has a father who is protective of her and does not want her to marry and leave home, which simultaneously frees her from the anxiety of pursuing marriage and binds her to her father's codependency. She is expressly not interested in finding someone to marry and does not imagine herself as a married woman in the future. Her concern and attachment to her father are significant reasons for such a mindset. The protective father-daughter dynamic affords Emma the freedom that Austen's other leading ladies do not have. Still, it also places her in another kind of parental restriction that limits her independence and ultimately hinders her flourishing. Eventually, as a result of being protected from the anxiety of class struggles and marital politics, Emma develops prejudices and a close-mindedness, instinctively imposing her superiority complex onto others to control their lives unapologetically. The story progresses as she learns to respect others' boundaries and treat them with sensitivity.

Over time, Emma meets Harriet, a young girl with an unknown history of parentage, which makes her social status less favourable compared to that of the middle class. Emma's liking for Harriet crosses the line when she gets too invasive into Harriet's life and becomes determined to make choices for Harriet, believing her judgment to be superior, not considering Harriet's situational position. Not only fused with 'pride' and 'prejudice,' but Emma also lacks judgment and nuanced understanding. She misunderstands the advancements of the neighbourhood vicar, Mr Elton, to be for Harriet and pushes Harriet to expect an engagement with him. Her deterministic, naïve notion convinces Harriet to reject the farmer, Mr Martin's proposal, who could be an ideal match for Harriet based on their social status. Mr Martin's genuine affection for Harriet could conveniently secure Harriet's future, regardless of her questionable background. Emma believes that Mr Martin is not good enough for Harriet, as Emma fails to realise the matter's sensitivity.

Emma depicts more behavioural insensitivities towards Jane Fairfax and Miss Bates, two women with less protected and privileged lives. Miss Bates' niece, Jane, is expected to be a governess and has no property to offer a potential suitor. Miss Bates is also an unmarried middle-aged woman who is looked down upon by her surroundings for being a spinster. Emma's internalized superiority complex and disdain are reflected through her annoyance and impatience with Miss Bates, whom she even humiliates callously, only to regret afterward terribly. Emma also judges Jane harshly, influenced by her preconceived mindset of disliking her due to her high social standing. Emma's pettiness is evident when she wrongly assumes Jane has an affair with a married man, while in truth, Jane is secretly engaged to Frank Churchill, who has been ironically considered a potential match for Emma.

In *Emma*, unlike *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sense and Sensibility*, the more prominent source of conflict is not social class, but rather misunderstanding, which creates an unromantic comedy or errors followed by a light-hearted resolution. Even issues related to marriage and courtship are addressed in humorous terms. Emma realises her insensitivity towards Miss Bates and Jane and makes amends with them by apologising. Jane's future gets brighter as she does not have to be an unmarried governess and can happily be with Frank, who is committed to marrying her despite his parents' disapproval. The situation between Harriet and Emma is the most complicated and fragile. Emma, despite having good intentions for Harriet, unintentionally causes her pain. Emma herself is repulsed when Mr Elton confesses his love for her, not Harriet. She bluntly rejects his proposal without fear of consequences, which is refreshing and can be compared to Elizabeth's confident refusal of a wealthy suitor's marriage proposal in *Pride and Prejudice*. Harriet is heartbroken by the truth, and Emma feels hugely guilty. Gullible Harriet, still not entirely over Mr Elton, falls for Mr Knightly for his kindness, shares her feelings with Emma with newfound ecstasy, and fills Emma with the mixed emotions of suddenly realising a love for Mr Knightly and her fear of hurting Harriet again. The anguish of the situation makes her clearly understand her faults of hurried judgments and whimsical decisions. Fortunately for Emma, Mr Knightley confesses his love for her, which delights and relieves her. With Mr Knightley's persuasion, Harriet concludes that her feelings for Mr Knightley are temporary and eventually accepts Mr Martin's second proposal.

The story ends with peaceful conclusions and happiness for all. However, some underlying issues are not directly addressed but implied. When Harriet comes to

reconcile with Emma, she reveals that she has learned about her family background and that she is the illegitimate daughter of a tradesman. The revelation makes Emma realise how wrong she was to believe Harriet would be ideal for a nobleman. After the marriages, Harriet and Emma part ways, with the underlying implication that their friendship will eventually cease to exist due to their class differences. Emma and Mr Knightley's love story is portrayed as ideal and perfect, yet problematic elements of power imbalance can still be found. Mr Knightley is Emma's sister's husband's elder brother. Marrying him is convenient for Emma since it will secure her future and allow her to stay closer to her father. The power imbalance can be generated through the dynamic of mentor and mentee, which has been prevalent from the start of their relationship. Mr Knightley is fifteen years older than Emma and has seen her growing up from childhood. He has been expressing concerns for Emma, worrying about her because of her impulsiveness. Her improvement in conduct impresses Mr Knightley, who admits to being proud of her as a senior well-wisher. When a pair with such a relationship becomes one, one of the partners is bound to have a higher status than the other. By the end, Emma agrees to improve herself and humble herself more, and Mr Knightley assures her that she will be more understanding towards Emma, considering her inexperience. The promises and their conclusion seem ideal and heavenly. However, Mr Knightley, knowing Emma's weaknesses very well, will almost always have control over decision-making rather than an equal status with two equal people in the marriage.

Conclusion

In this study, the three selected novels of Jane Austen — *Sense and Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudice*, and *Emma* — blend romance and social commentary seamlessly, guiding the stories from romance to reality. This paper argues that the protagonists of these novels do not achieve the feminist dream of independence and equity; instead, they undergo a journey towards these ideals. Austen's novels serve more as a critique of the conventional male-dominated society of the Regency era, where women must demonstrate remarkable resilience to survive within a limited range of autonomy, rather than simply telling stories of dreams coming true with perfect endings.

Eventually, Jane Austen's female protagonists are awarded conventional security; they do not break free from boundaries because that would have been unrealistic. Austen allows her characters to rebel and defy conventions, but only within certain limits, to maintain practicality. The best example is Emma, who is initially determined to be the exception. But she confided in the convention because that provides her, the story's

protagonist, with the security reward. We can conclude that Austen meticulously crafts her stories and characters as a product of her time, which also speaks to a timeless audience about what female autonomy can be like, while staying within the constraints of the reality of her time.

However, the feminism in Jane Austen's novels is subtle and grounded in humility. A desire for change in restrictive conservativeness is reflected in the realistic depiction of the characters, who are grounded in the norms of their time. The self-determined female characters with strong moral ideals, who survive on a journey of achieving what they want for themselves and their loved ones while learning from their human mistakes, represent Austen's feminism.

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