

Sense and Sensibility: Hushing and Dwarfing the Ladies of the Era

Dima M.T Tahboub

Faculty of Language Studies, Department of English Language and Literature,
Arab Open University, Amman, Jordan. post code:11953, P.O box 1339.

Email: d_tahboub2002@yahoo.com

Abstract This paper argues that Jane Austen is one of the wisest female writers who have approached the feminist case during the conservatism of the Georgian era, Regency period and beyond. Although hushed and unassertive, she adopted a reconciliatory strategy trying to gain the willful acceptance of society to the change in women's positions, one step at a time, with each work and character adding a new emancipatory dimension to her prototypes.

In *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), her argument may seem frail and anti-feminist because she makes her leading heroines sacrifice their existence and identity for the sake of society, but within the paradigm of the final win-win ending, all is happy; the leading heroines move a step ahead in stressing their individuality while still observing the roles dedicated to them by society. *Sense and Sensibility* may be regarded as a hushed and dwarfed image of feminism but the subtle gains of acceptance in this novel pave way for the appearance of an eloquent giant and an all time favorite, Elizabeth Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice* (1813).

Key words feminism; conservatism; Regency; female prototypes.

Author Dima Tahboub, Dr,Philol., is Assistant Professor of English Language and Literature. Her research interest are comparative literature, feminism and postcolonial literature.

Introduction: The Austen Feminism in *Sense and Sensibility*

There is a common misconception in the minds of some readership that novels written by women writers should adopt the feminist stake and present their struggle for self-assertion in the face of an oppressive society. This generalization, however; does not apply to Jane Austen's novel *Sense and Sensibility* in which she portrays her two leading ladies, Elinor and Marianne as mercurial heroines who vacillate

between self-immolation and self-emulation and instead of furthering the feminist potentials these two females possess, Austen makes them yield to the turbulent waves of the biased, old-fashioned and patriarchal society. The intriguing question would be: why does she do that? Was she a woman against her own sex? Or does she succeed in reading the mindset of society at her time and thus evades the direct challenge favoring slow penetration into hostile grounds? In an age that only allowed conduct books for women, Austen has little space to maneuver but makes the best of it. Therefore, the first key aspect to understanding and appreciating Austen's feminism is appreciating the romantic context of womanhood. Austen presents a third option out of the typical angel-devil, silent-hysterical paradigm. Her heroines, are realistic, neither to be worshiped nor condemned, but everyday women in their struggle for self-definition.

Austen in this novel develops her own repertoire of feminist vocabulary which combines contradictory traits of feminism. Through Elinor and Marianne, the author sets up her own version of feminism and produces the qualities of her female characters as a miscellaneous mixture of feebleness and might, boldness and reserve, rudeness and civility. If we want to study *Sense and Sensibility* in view of feminist criticism, we might as well announce it a total failure and stamp it with the verdict: anti feminist in bold letters. But, if we take into account Eliane Showalter's time frame of feminist writing which starts with the feminine period 1840-1880 (Showalter 38), we will judge the novel as prefeminist and hence understand it as an attempt to test the waters and the reaction of society to new ideas and models. Austen's target according to Gard is the "unfeeling and unintelligent world in which the sisters have to live rather than the sisters themselves. The problem lies in those supposedly sacred institutions of order and property, marriage and family" (93). Austen lays the foundation in this novel, gains the acceptance and proceeds to present the leading shrew, Elizabeth Bennet who tames an all-time favorite hero, Mr. Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice* (Stubbs 498).

Austen, herself is uneasy to brand. She is ahead of her time practicing some form of professional authorship where no one can accuse her of taking extreme sides or clearly adopting a single point of view. "Austen has been portrayed as both a liberal and a moderate; she has been cast also as a feminist, an anti-feminist" (Weiss 89). This evasiveness proved clever at the time as argued by Giffin (2002) and Austen was one of the few authors to survive the censorship of conservatism, and even to remain popular. Still, in totality, her collection of novels tackled the same mentality, one shot at a time recording a breakthrough with each new heroine in terms of social acceptance.

Austen practiced some kind of Rousseauian philosophy believing that society has to grow to accept change and agree to its terms. Through subtle satire and laughter at its own follies, the wise authoress walked society into a state of subconscious approval.

Austen's female bildungsroman is more nuanced than the title suggests at first glance, however, and readers themselves journey to deeper enlightenment as her heroines do...A great deal of critical attention has been paid to Austen's conversation with her readers below the surface of the text through the added philosophical depth to what began primarily as a sketch of two characters. We all know that the brilliantly satirical author communicates more to her readers than what is explicitly stated in the text, especially in evoking such seemingly straightforward conceptual terms as (Anderson&Kidd 65) "sense," "pride," or "persuasion".

Sketching a Feminist Prototype: Sailing with the Wind or against It?

Elinor, the first female heroine of Austen, emerges in the novel as a perfect angelical figure. She is giving, nurturing and always ready to extend a helping hand, wipe a tear or solve a problem because "she had an excellent heart; her disposition was affectionate, and her feelings were strong, but she knew how to govern them" (Austen 4). She is portrayed as miss ideal, as a daughter, a lover and a member of society who "remains totally committed to the 'true code'. "The 'true code' or decorum includes prudence, judgment, good sense" (Paris 96). The reader can never accuse her of any violation in thought and manner. Her motto in life is that it does not cost much to make others happy and "upon Elinor, therefore, the whole task of telling lies when politeness required it, always fell" (Austen 29). One needs to read between the lines to see that Austen is not cheering for such an example of excessive idealism, so Suzan Morgan's interpretation of the novel as a triumph of politeness over sincerity is not accurate (Morgan 188). Austen's final character frame for Elinor is grafted with sensibility to balance her sense and wisdom. Elinor is offered the chance to spill out her heart without reservation, and thus her wax statue melts.

Marianne presents the other side of the coin; she is the recluse, the rebel who deliberately avoids society. She molds her own life and thoughts as she pleases and highly honors her convictions because she believes that at her time of life, "opinions are tolerably fixed. It is not likely that I should now see or hear anything to change

them” (Austen 57). Marianne is very moody even in her sentiments and while she is chosen to depict the model of extreme sensibility, she confesses her own failure in understanding and sharing the feeling of her closet relative, her guardian-angel, Elinor, in her distress “Oh Elinor,” she cried, “you have made me hate myself forever. How barbarous have I been to you, you, who have been my only comfort...who have seemed to be only suffering for me” (Austen 193). Moreover, civility and courtesy are associated with sensibility, but Marianne applies this code of conduct to her selected set of people and beyond them, she does not give the slightest attention to anyone or anything. She is too opinionated and stubborn for her age and determined without experience. Being a flawed heroine, Austen blows up her romantic fantasies and makes her settle for a realistic and down-to-earth option. Marianne is not harnessed because she is a female, but because she is a representative of romantic individualism and Austen was preaching some degree of self-control and regulation in the novel (Brownstein 55).

Austen chooses Elinor and Marianne as a medium to convey the nature and status of women during her era. Each heroine presents her case, defends her position and leaves the final verdict to the audience, but sometimes, we can sense the authoress middling to subconsciously lead the reader to appreciate and value Elinor as a woman of sense unlike her sister, Marianne, her opponent of extreme sensibility. The reason for this assumption is that Elinor, despite the difficulties she encounters, is able to arrive to the shore of safety and fulfill her dreams by asserting herself as a woman willingly accepted by society and by choosing her life partner on equal footing of emotions and intellect. “Elinor does not wear her heart on her sleeves” (Hardy 73). But that does not mean that she is senseless or cold hearted; on the contrary, Elinor is very considerate as well as loving and this is obvious in her attitude when she knows that the only man she loves cannot marry her because of his commitment to another woman, but she always remains in full command of her feelings and gives an appealing image of a principled woman.

On the other hand, Marianne is a defective heroine. Her defect is exaggerated sensibility in feelings, thoughts and conduct. This blinds her from seeing beyond herself and tentative judgments. She does not believe in compromise because to her you either love a person or not. When in love, she is stripped of all means of self control; therefore, “when Willoughby enters the story, he sweeps Marianne off her feet” (Hardy 69), but if she does not approve of something, she bluntly states that without regard to decorum. Marianne openly criticizes the love of her sister, Edward Ferrars, and disapproves of him because he cannot recite poetry in a passionate manner. In social occasions, she does not show interest in the attendants and busies

herself with playing the piano.

Marianne abuses sensibility in times of happiness and sadness. We can hear her declare when she is jilted that “misery such as mine has no pride, I care not who knows I am wretched. The triumph of seeing me so may be open to all the world” (Austen 138).

Females as Emblems of the Social Code

The characters of Elinor and Marianne foreground a conflict that is long rooted and well hidden in society; that is, the conflict between individualism and collectivity, between character and characterlessness. Austen flatters society a great deal. She cares about the public opinion in her works and heroines because through this admiration, she stays in print and passes her thoughts of change and emancipation. In this writing strategy, Austen has disciples and followers and some years after the publication of her novel and on the other side of the Atlantic, Louisa May Alcott trimmed the wings of her *Little Women* upon the advice of her publisher so as not to defy social expectations and gender roles but still, she managed to present Jo March as a foremother of feminists. Understanding these impediments may make readers and critics more appreciating and less critical of writers such as Austen and her contemporaries.

Austen charges Marianne with the crime of individuality which is viewed as a conspiracy against the oneness of society. Society tailors the characters of its members according to certain appropriate measurements. Marianne does not want to fit in the social mold because she “cares nothing for social conventions. It was impossible for her to say what she does not feel, however trivial the occasion” (Morgan 200).

Austen presents Elinor in a “subtle manner” (Brann 131) in line and conformity with the accepted image and role of women. Elinor is cleverer than Marianne in approaching society because she “uses the social forms to keep her mind and heart while sparing her acquaintance the pain those free opinions must sometimes produce” (Morgan 201). A feminist, in Elinor’s opinion, is not selfish or egocentric. She is an interactive person and a woman of society. It is clear that sense is the manner preferred by Austen because it stands for goodness of heart and mind and reliability of judgment while sensibility is weakness, carelessness and self-indulgence. This makes Elinor the nominee of the author to fit the position of a woman trying to affirm her feminist identity without putting her fist in the face of society.

A first glimpse into the novel will enable the reader to discover that Elinor and Marianne’s personalities are strikingly divergent. One can list a number of qualities

related to Elinor and their opposite to Marianne but a thorough look reveals that the two sisters have many things in common and the difference is in how they show them. While Marianne is a human mass of emotions, ‘Elinor is by no means deficient in sensibility; she shares all the tastes of her sister if with a lesser intensity but perhaps because she is older. She constantly tries to relate her imagination and her feelings to her judgment and to the moral and social tradition on which the order of society is based’ (Watt 307).

Nevertheless, Elinor is very submissive when she sacrifices her only love and hope for a different and fulfilling life, just for the sake of duty and false expectations of society while the rebellious Marianne holds to her love until the end because she believes it is a part of her existence and free will. This raises the question: is Austen really taking sides or is she presenting both characters as complementary and her choice of an ideal feminist would neither be Elinor or Marianne but “Elimar” (my emphasis), a combination of Elinor and Marianne, who could eliminate their deficiencies and strengthen their feminist potentials?

On the other hand, there is a pattern of consistency in Austen’s method of characterization throughout the novel where Elinor preserves a balanced sensible behavior, unchanging even in the most painful moments when she realizes that her love is doomed and will never see the light. She “seems resolved to go about her business without showing any undue emotion” (Hardy 75). Then in an unexpected twist, Elinor falls from her ivory tower and surrenders her fortified castle of sense leaving the waves of emotions to toss her back and forth when she hears that her beloved, Edward, is free to marry her. She “almost ran out of the room and as soon as the door was closed, burst into tears of joy” (Austen 266).

This shocking change in characterization extends to Marianne, the woman of extremes, who faces tremendous alternations in her personality. Her failure in love, which nearly causes her death, tames her sensibility and revolution. She confesses her guilt and seeks forgiveness because “everybody seemed injured by me... to every common acquaintance even, I had been insolent and unjust with a heart hardened against their merits and a temper irritated by their very attention” (Austen 175). This change in attitude proves that Austen’s recipe for a model female is a blend of sense and sensibility because neither one of them can stand alone no matter how strong and dominant a woman appears to be, she will always have a feeble and fragile side of her.

Marianne’s case is even worst. At the beginning of the novel, the reader suspects Marianne to be the feminist spokeswoman of Austen being highly revolutionary and rebellious. Marianne challenges society and produces her own view of free, sincere

and unreserved love in her relation with Willoughby. She detests double faced talk and treatment, what society calls decorum, and that is why she is punished. She develops suicidal thoughts and is devitalized through illness and cast off as a reward to the patient colonel Brandon. She changes from a wild shrew to a tame pet and accepts "Colonel Brandon's devotion, she did so whole heartedly. By the time she was nineteen, Marianne found herself placed in a new home, a wife, the mistress of a family and the patroness of a village" (Powell 32). This code of defeating the heroine is a way of showing that society, led by the patriarchy, is the prime master and enactor of destinies. Still, through Marianne, Austen presents this new prototype of free-spirited women to the public eye and arena of discussion to unsettle their subtlety and familiarize them with women who choose to say no. This is why Watt believes that Marianne "is the life and the centre of the novel" (79). Austen gives her ample space to voice her opinion and question Elinor's sense: "always resignation and acceptance? Always prudence and honor and duty? Elinor, where is your heart?" (Austen 66) This makes us suspect Austen's intentions: does she really favor Elinor and sense over Marianne and sensibility? Does she use her to speak the unspeakable, question the sacred and breach the taboos? The answers may contradict but the final result proves that Austen opts for safety and the slow but sure method of change rather than supporting her heroine to the end.

Code of Defeat

One of the reasons which make us exclude *Sense and Sensibility* from the list of strong and assertive feminist novels is the Austen 'code of defeat' or indecision (my emphasis). Elinor is defeated by being obliged to succumb to the social norms on account of her nerves and individuality. Rarely is she able to perform things in her own way because she "always honors her social responsibility, however much it might sometimes cost her to be properly attentive" (Hardy 80). Despite all the sacrifices Elinor offers, society is hard to please and is determined to deprive her of everything, her character, her means of resistance, and only love. She bows to society's will and is ultimately rewarded with love. A counter argument maybe that Austen aims to immunize her heroines with injections of survival that would enable them to face other than a romantic life or a happily ever after ending. This ending can be interpreted as an indirect message by Austen that patience pays off at the end and going by the book has its advantages. The somewhat happy ending lessens the atmosphere of conflict of women vs. society or personal vs. public in the novel. This guarantees that all are happy with the end result: the writer passes her shy but critical message, stays in print without raising eyebrows, women move a

step forward in presenting their predicament to an unsympathetic and conservative society and society still feels secure that all is in order and the codes are observed.

Society is the one and only adversary standing against the assertion of the feminist identity. Society is a system of restrictions, a series of conceptions and misconceptions directed towards the distinctiveness and uniqueness of its members, especially women. There is no compromise in dealing with society; a woman has to surrender her personal freedom or she will be banned from society. Austen is clever in reading the social context and tries to achieve the best possible deal to advance the feminist case without risking the social acceptance and eventually her career as a writer.

Austen presents the concept of marriage in this novel in two ways according to the opinions of critics. The most obvious presentation is very degrading and demeaning to women because it pictures marriage as “the proper ambition of well-bred young ladies. It is their only safe refuge” (Calder 17). Society raises and teaches women so they can gain the approval of men and ensure promising and wealthy husbands. Beyond that, they have no dream, no ambition, “no reality except in terms of the marriages they are to make or fail to make...and if they were deprived of their belief that marriage was both a worthy ambition and their salvation, they would be deprived of life” (Calder 25). A married woman is simply a home maker, a nurturer of heart and hearth. Nevertheless, some critics support Austen’s image of marriage and interpret it in a way that her heroine “comes to enjoy a distinctive relationship with the man she eventually marries...there is above all the need to acknowledge and respond to the other person” (Hardy 71).

It is permissible to claim that Austen has suffered from self censorship to achieve some sort of equilibrium between women’s rights and society’s demands, a society determined, by a so-called law, to deprive women of any hope of independence. By robbing women of the right to inherit their dead relatives, society wanted to keep women reliant and dependent on men as a means of guaranteeing their obedience and conformity. Working women are socially stigmatized and work is assigned to the peasantry. The only alternative for well bred women is to get married to wealthy men following the advice that says “Don’t marry for money but marry where money is.” A woman with no financial means has no prospects. Willoughby, the man whom Marianne fights society for jilts her because she has no property or fortune. This forces her to accept Colonel Brandon, the mediocre emotional compensation but the good future investment. Here, Austen was trying to console women and make them reach a sense of content by accepting the best possible outcome of the worst of conditions.

Throughout the novel, we can find Austen in a very sensitive position struggling for the right of freedom of expression but being silenced by the unapproachable taboos of society, especially in the case of defending women. However, Austen finds an outlet to express her muffled thoughts through Marianne who undermines society in every possible way but due to the sense of inhibition that Austen feels and her fear of being secluded by society, she labels the words and acts of Marianne with signs of invalidity and irrationality, so they can be easily overlooked by society. This self inhibition makes Austen place all kinds of restrictions on her choices. Her “artistic problem was always that of reconciling the moral intention which lay behind her fiction, her natural comic instinct and the taste of the public for which she wrote” (Bradbrook 101).

To the other stock female characters in the novel, Austen directs her ultimate criticism. Beyond the two leading characters, all the other women are occupied with a sense of ‘empty-busyness’. They appear to be important by being “usually busy. They know how to find pleasure in passing the time in what seems to them useful activities; needle work, music and writing” (Calder 23). The feminist picture in this novel is very hazy but it is honest and detailed. *Sense and Sensibility* can be described as ‘womenlla’ (my emphasis), a story primarily about women, their plights and predicaments but one that does not take a firm stand in their favor. Austen plays the role of an acrobat walking on a tight rope aiming to achieve maximum audience appeal but without harming herself and her case. She does not face the patriarchal society which is the greatest victimizer of women through its male representatives and conventions which demand that women should be wealthy, well bred, classy and conforming. “Jane writes for the object of educating and pleasing the public reader” (Bradbrook 101). Although she introduces examples of social injustice, such as the law of entail which prevents women from enjoying a decent life, she never gives solutions and her stories always end happily no matter how many problems the heroines face at the beginning (Monaghan 156).

While the women of *Sense and Sensibility* go with the wind and allow society to define their characters and lives, is the situation of men any better? Edward Ferrars, the beloved of Elinor, description is no better than the women of the age. When his “natural shyness was overcome, his behavior gave every indication of an open affectionate heart” but according to Marianne “there is something wanting, his figure is not striking; it has none of that grace...his eyes want all that spirit, that fire” (Austen 17). Colonel Brandon, Marianne’s compensatory choice is even worse. He is belittled into “a flannel waistcoat invariably connected with aches, cramps, rheumatisms, and every species of ailment that can afflict the old and the

feeble” (Austen 38). This proves that it is society which determines the characters of gentlemen and ladies all the same.

Conclusion: The Feminist Compromise; Planting the Seeds of Change

While literature is supposed to be a medium that enables the writers to freely voice their opinions, this seems highly questionable in the case of writers such as Austen writing during the conservative Georgian era. An era during which writing is viewed as an instructive and conscious activity aimed at fostering the beliefs of society. The author is viewed as a member of society who should keep his/her creativity on leash; Austen understands that social change is not easily inaugurated; it needs time, tact and patience and this is the policy that Austen applies in *Sense and Sensibility*. She is not hasty to harvest the fruits but plants the roots deep in the ground with each new novel and set of new female heroines. Her novels maybe studied as a continuum endowed with internal dialogism with each work breaking new grounds and achieving a new success in a long-distance feminist marathon.

In this novel, Austen carves an incomplete frame for a strong and loving feminist and adds the final piece after a while in the character of Elizabeth Bennet in her later novel, *Pride and Prejudice*. *Sense and sensibility* is a transitional novel offering a reconciliatory form of feminism that cannot be appreciated until the reader comprehends its indirect messages in which Austen indirectly apologizes for her shortcomings and failure to provide a unique image of a strong female stating that “there is no freedom of thought in a self centered isolation or a code of sentimental maxims. Freedom is only to be found beyond the boundaries of the self” (Morgan 200).

The subject matter, sense and sensibility, is female oriented. Jane Austen is a pioneer female writer. The novel features female heroism so one would expect feminism to be written all over it. If the reader holds these pre-reading assumptions, s/he is going to be failed but if we approach it as text that traces the literary anthropology of feminism and the depiction of the foremothers of feminists, then it will prove invaluable both literary and historically. Austen is no ‘hyena in a petticoat’ as Mary Wollstonecraft, one of the earliest feminist writers, is described; she still enjoys being a lady but believes that women deserve more. To appreciate this masterpiece, one must know the contextual conditions which affect the production of the textual; hence, the message will seem progressive and apt.

Works Cited

Anderson, Kathleen; Jordan, Kidd. “Mrs. Jennings and Mrs. Palmer: The Path to Female Self-

Determination in Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*." *Persuasions: The Jane Austen Journal*, vol.30, 2008, pp. 135-148.

Austen, Jane. *Sense and Sensibility*. Lebanon: York Press, 1988.

Bradbrook, Frank W. *Jane Austen and her Predecessors*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1967.

Brann, Eva. "Whose Sense? Whose Sensibility? Jane Austen's Subtlest Novel." *Persuasions*, vol. 12, 1990, pp. 131-133.

Brownstein, Rachel M. *Becoming a Heroine: Reading about Women in Novels*. London: Penguin, 1984.

Calder, Jenni. *Women and Marriage in Victorian Fiction*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1976.

Gard, Roger qtd in Seeber, Barbara. *General Consent in Jane Austen: A Study in Dialogism*. Montreal: McGill-Queens UP, 2000.

Giffin, Michael. *Jane Austen and Religion: Salvation and Society in Georgian England*. New York: Palgrave, 2004.

Hardy, John. *Jane Austen's Heroines*. London: Routledge, 1984.

Monaghan, David. *Jane Austen: Structure and Social Vision*. London: Macmillan, 1980.

Morgan, Susan. "Polite Lies: The Veiled Heroine of *Sense and Sensibility*." *Nineteenth Century Fiction*, vol. 31, 1976, pp. 188-205.

Paris, Berand J. "Character and Conflict in Jane Austen's Novels: A Psychological Approach." *Nineteenth Century Fiction*, vol. 36, 1981, pp. 95-8.

Powell, Violet. *A Jane Austen Compendium*. London: Heinemann, 1993.

Showalter, Eliane. *A Literature of their Own: British Women Novelists from Bronte to Lessing*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1977.

Stubbs, Patricia. "Women and Fiction: Feminism and the Novel." *Nineteenth Century Fiction*, vol. 36, 1982, pp. 496-99.

Watt, Ian. *Sense and Sensibility*. New York: Harper, 1961.

Weiss, Deborah. "Uncertain Knowledge and the Ethics of Everyday Life." *Studies in Romanticism*, vol. 52, no. 2, 2013, pp. 253-273.