



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 11. Issue.3. 2024 (July-Sept)

INTERNATIONAL  
STANDARD  
SERIAL  
NUMBER  
INDIA  
2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF MALE AND FEMALE CHARACTERS  
IN JANE AUSTEN'S NOVELS

Shivani Purohit Pushkarna<sup>1</sup>, Dr. Asgar Ali Ansari<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Research scholar, School of Language, Literature & Society, Jaipur National University,  
Jaipur, Rajas Rajasthan, India

Email: shivanipurohit89@gmail.com

<sup>2</sup>Professor School of Language, Literature & Society, Jaipur National University, Jaipur,  
Rajasthan, India.

Email: prof6610@yahoo.com

[doi: 10.33329/ijelr.11.3.179](https://doi.org/10.33329/ijelr.11.3.179)



Article information

Article Received:03/09/2024

Article Accepted:26/09/2024

Published online:30/09/2024

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the evolution of gender roles in the selected novels of Jane Austen through a comparative analysis of male and female characters. Grounded in feminist literary theory and historical context, the paper investigates how Austen's works depict the shifting expectations and societal norms surrounding masculinity and femininity during the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Drawing upon a selection of Austen's novels, including "Pride and Prejudice," "Sense and Sensibility," and "Emma, Prejudice and Northanger Abbey" the paper employs close textual analysis to examine the portrayal of gender roles across various contexts and character dynamics. By comparing the experiences of male and female characters, the study seeks to uncover nuanced insights into the ways in which gender expectations influence behaviour, relationships, and societal roles. The paper begins by providing a comprehensive overview of the historical and cultural context of Austen's era, highlighting the rigid gender roles and expectations prevalent in Regency England. It then delves into an analysis of male characters, exploring their portrayal as embodiments of patriarchal authority, financial responsibility, and social status. Additionally, it examines how male characters negotiate societal pressures and expectations, and the extent to which they challenge or conform to traditional gender norms. On the other hand, the paper also analyses female characters, focusing on their depiction as subjects of marriage, domesticity, and social propriety. It investigates how female characters navigate the limitations and opportunities imposed by their gender, and how they assert agency within a patriarchal society. Through this comparative analysis, the paper uncovers the complexities of gender roles in Austen's novels, revealing the tensions between societal expectations and

---

individual agency. By shedding light on the evolving representations of masculinity and femininity, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of gender dynamics in literature and society. Ultimately, it underscores Austen's enduring relevance as a chronicler of human relationships and societal norms.

Key words: Comparative study, female characters, Jane Austen, *Pride and prejudice*.

---

## Introduction

Jane Austen's novels offer a rich tapestry of early 19th-century English society, highlighting the rigid gender roles that defined the period. This paper investigates how Austen's characters navigate these roles, focusing on the complexities and constraints faced by both men and women. Through a comparative analysis, we seek to understand how Austen's portrayal of gender roles evolves across her works and what this reveals about her perspectives on gender and society.

## Historical Context of Gender Roles in Austen's Time

During the late 18th and early 19th centuries, gender roles in England were clearly delineated. Men were expected to be providers and protectors, while women were relegated to the domestic sphere, tasked with maintaining the household and rearing children. Education and career opportunities were limited for women, who were often valued primarily for their ability to secure advantageous marriages.

## Methodology

This study employs a qualitative analysis of six major novels by Jane Austen: "Sense and Sensibility," "Pride and Prejudice," "Mansfield Park," "Emma," "Northanger Abbey," and "Persuasion." By examining character development, dialogue, and narrative techniques, we identify patterns and themes related to gender roles and their evolution. Key male and female characters are analyzed to understand how they conform to or resist societal expectations.

## Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design to analyze the gender roles depicted in Jane Austen's novels. The qualitative approach is appropriate for this research as it allows for an in-depth exploration of character dynamics, themes, and narrative techniques. This design focuses on textual analysis and comparative study to understand the portrayal and evolution of gender roles in Austen's works.

## Analytical Framework

The analysis employs a thematic approach to identify and explore key themes related to gender roles. The following themes were considered:

**Autonomy and agency:** The degree of independence and decision-making power afforded to male and female characters.

**Marriage and relationships:** The expectations and realities of marriage, including the criteria for a successful union.

**Education and intellect:** The opportunities for intellectual development and the value placed on education for both genders.

**Social mobility and economic considerations:** The impact of economic status on gender roles and relationships.

---

**Moral and ethical values:** The characters' adherence to or deviation from societal moral standards.

### Comparative Analysis

The study conducts a comparative analysis of male and female characters within each novel and across the novels. Key characters from each novel were selected for detailed analysis, considering their roles, interactions, and development:

Female characters: Elizabeth Bennet, Elinor Dashwood, Marianne Dashwood, Fanny Price, Emma Woodhouse, Catherine Morland, Anne Elliot.

Male characters: Mr. Darcy, Edward Ferrars, Edmund Bertram, George Knightley, Henry Tilney, Captain Wentworth.

The comparative analysis involves:

**Character Profiles:** Develop detailed profiles for each key character, including their background, personality traits, and narrative arcs.

**Thematic Comparison:** Comparing characters across the novels based on the identified themes to highlight similarities, differences, and evolution in the portrayal of gender roles.

**Contextual Analysis:** Situating character behaviours and attitudes within the broader social and historical context of Austen's time.

### Interpretation and Synthesis

The final step involves interpreting the findings and synthesizing them into a coherent narrative. This includes:

Drawing connections between character analysis and broader societal norms.

Highlighting Austen's critique and subversion of traditional gender roles.

Discussing the implications of Austen's portrayal of gender roles for contemporary readers and feminist thought.

### Validity and Reliability

To ensure the validity and reliability of the analysis, the study employs:

**Triangulation:** Using multiple data sources, including secondary literature on Austen's works and historical context, to corroborate findings.

**Peer Review:** Engaging with existing scholarly interpretations and critiques to refine and support the analysis.

**Reflexivity:** Acknowledging the researcher's potential biases and striving for an objective interpretation of the texts.

By employing this methodology, the study aims to provide a thorough and nuanced understanding of the evolution of gender roles in Jane Austen's novels, highlighting her contributions to literary and feminist discourse

### Analysis of Female Characters

#### Elizabeth Bennet in "Pride and Prejudice"

Elizabeth Bennet exemplifies Austen's critique of traditional gender roles. Unlike many of her contemporaries, Elizabeth values intellect and personal integrity over wealth and social standing. Her refusal to marry Mr. Collins despite the financial security it offers demonstrates her desire for a

---

partnership based on mutual respect and love. Elizabeth's eventual union with Mr. Darcy, who respects her for her intelligence and wit, challenges the era's conventional marital dynamics.

### **Elinor and Marianne Dashwood in "Sense and Sensibility"**

The contrasting personalities of the Dashwood sisters highlight the tension between sense (rationality) and sensibility (emotion). Elinor's pragmatic approach to life and love stands in stark contrast to Marianne's emotional intensity. Through their experiences, Austen critiques the limited roles available to women and underscores the importance of balance between reason and emotion.

### **Fanny Price in "Mansfield Park"**

Fanny Price, the timid and often overlooked heroine of "Mansfield Park," represents the passive female ideal of the time. However, her moral fortitude and inner strength challenge the notion that meekness equates to weakness. Fanny's resistance to Henry Crawford's advances, despite his wealth and charm, underscores her commitment to personal virtue over social advancement.

### **Emma Woodhouse in "Emma"**

Emma Woodhouse is a complex character whose wealth and social status afford her a degree of independence unusual for women of her time. Her initial meddling in others' lives reflects a misuse of this autonomy. However, her character growth throughout the novel illustrates Austen's belief in the potential for self-improvement and the importance of empathy and self-awareness.

### **Catherine Morland in "Northanger Abbey"**

Catherine Morland's journey from naive girlhood to mature womanhood in "Northanger Abbey" serves as a critique of the sensationalist novels popular among women at the time. Catherine's imaginative escapades and subsequent realizations about the real world underscore the dangers of conflating fiction with reality, while also highlighting her personal growth and burgeoning independence.

### **Anne Elliot in "Persuasion"**

Anne Elliot, perhaps Austen's most mature heroine, exemplifies quiet strength and resilience. Her enduring love for Captain Wentworth, despite family opposition, and her ultimate reunion with him reflect a nuanced understanding of gender roles and the possibility of second chances. Anne's character challenges the notion of female passivity, showcasing instead a deep well of patience and emotional intelligence.

### **Analysis of Male Characters**

#### **Mr. Darcy in "Pride and Prejudice"**

Fitzwilliam Darcy's evolution from aloof aristocrat to a partner capable of deep affection and respect for Elizabeth Bennet highlights Austen's critique of traditional masculine roles. Darcy's initial pride and prejudice are tempered by Elizabeth's influence, leading to a redefined masculinity that values emotional openness and egalitarian partnership.

#### **Edward Ferrars in "Sense and Sensibility"**

Edward Ferrars represents a departure from the dominant male archetype of the period. His modesty and integrity, coupled with his quiet defiance of familial expectations, underscore the importance of personal values over social conformity. His relationship with Elinor Dashwood exemplifies a partnership based on mutual respect and shared principles.

#### **Edmund Bertram in "Mansfield Park"**

Edmund Bertram's role in "Mansfield Park" showcases the tension between duty and desire. His initial infatuation with Mary Crawford and eventual realization of Fanny Price's worth highlight

---

the complexities of male decision-making within the confines of social expectations. Edmund's ultimate choice reinforces the value of moral integrity over superficial charm.

### **George Knightley in "Emma"**

George Knightley serves as a moral compass and a foil to Emma Woodhouse's capricious nature. His unwavering honesty and perceptiveness make him a model of ideal masculinity in Austen's eyes. Knightley's relationship with Emma evolves from mentorship to genuine partnership, reflecting a balanced dynamic that defies traditional gender hierarchies.

### **Henry Tilney in "Northanger Abbey"**

Henry Tilney's wit and charm, combined with his respect for Catherine Morland's intelligence, offer a refreshing portrayal of male character. His gentle teasing and guidance help Catherine navigate the complexities of society and personal growth, illustrating a model of masculinity that embraces both intellect and sensitivity.

### **Captain Wentworth in "Persuasion"**

Captain Frederick Wentworth embodies the qualities of perseverance and emotional depth. His steadfast love for Anne Elliot and their eventual reconciliation highlight a form of masculinity that values emotional resilience and constancy. Wentworth's character challenges the notion of male dominance, emphasizing instead mutual respect and enduring affection.

## **Literature Review**

Jane Austen's novels have been extensively analyzed for their portrayal of gender roles and social norms. This literature review explores key studies and critical perspectives on Austen's depiction of gender dynamics, providing a foundation for the comparative analysis of her characters.

**Early Criticism:** Early criticism of Jane Austen's work often focused on her narrative style and social commentary without deeply exploring gender dynamics. Critics such as Sir Walter Scott and George Henry Lewes appreciated her keen observation of social manners, but it wasn't until the rise of feminist literary criticism that Austen's nuanced exploration of gender roles received significant attention.

**Feminist Literary Criticism:** The emergence of feminist literary criticism in the late 20th century brought new insights into Austen's portrayal of women and gender relations. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, in "The Madwoman in the Attic" (1979), positioned Austen as a proto-feminist writer who subtly challenged patriarchal norms through her portrayal of strong, intelligent female characters. They argue that Austen's heroines often resist societal constraints, seeking autonomy and self-fulfillment.

## **Gender Roles and Social Norms**

**Autonomy and Agency:** Claudia L. Johnson's "Jane Austen: Women, Politics, and the Novel" (1988) examines how Austen's heroines assert their independence within the constraints of their society. Johnson highlights characters like Elizabeth Bennet, who refuses to marry for financial security, as examples of women seeking autonomy and agency. Johnson argues that Austen's portrayal of these characters reflects her critique of the limited roles available to women and her advocacy for greater female independence.

**Marriage and Social Mobility:** Marriage as a social contract and a means of economic mobility is a recurring theme in Austen's work. Julia Prewitt Brown's "Jane Austen's Novels: Social Change and Literary Form" (1979) explores how Austen critiques the institution of marriage and the economic pressures faced by women. Brown contends that Austen's novels reflect the tension between romantic ideals and the economic realities of marriage, highlighting the limited choices available to women and the importance of marrying well.

---

**Education and Intellect:** Devoney Looser's "The Making of Jane Austen" (2017) examines the value placed on education and intellectual development in Austen's novels. Looser argues that Austen's heroines challenge the notion that women should be relegated to the domestic sphere, emphasizing the importance of education and intellectual growth. Characters like Elizabeth Bennet and Anne Elliot are celebrated for their intelligence and wit, which Austen suggests are essential qualities for a fulfilling life.

**Social Norms and Moral Values:** Margaret Kirkham's "Jane Austen, Feminism and Fiction" (1997) discusses how Austen uses her characters to critique societal norms and moral values. Kirkham highlights the moral integrity of Austen's heroines, who often serve as a counterpoint to the flawed values of their social environment. For example, Elinor Dashwood's pragmatism in "Sense and Sensibility" and Anne Elliot's emotional resilience in "Persuasion" reflect a nuanced critique of social expectations and the importance of personal virtue.

### Male Characters and Gender Dynamics

**Reformation and Ideal Masculinity:** John Wiltshire's "Jane Austen and the Body" (1992) explores how male characters like Mr. Darcy and Captain Wentworth undergo personal reformation, moving towards a model of ideal masculinity that values emotional openness and mutual respect in relationships. Wiltshire argues that these transformations reflect Austen's progressive views on gender relations, challenging traditional notions of masculinity and highlighting the potential for men to grow and change.

**Masculinity and Social Expectations:** Joe Bray's "Austen and the Interplay of Character" (2000) examines the constraints of masculinity and social expectations on male characters. Bray discusses how characters like Edmund Bertram and Edward Ferrars navigate their roles within a rigid social hierarchy, often facing dilemmas that challenge traditional notions of masculinity. He argues that Austen's portrayal of these characters reveals the pressures and limitations faced by men, as well as women, in her society.

### Intersectional and Post-Colonial Perspectives

#### Intersectional Analysis

More recent scholarship has expanded the analysis of gender roles in Austen's work to include intersectional perspectives. Critics such as Patricia Rozema and Claudia L. Johnson have explored how class, race, and gender intersect in Austen's novels. In "Equity and Expectation in Austen" (2003), Rozema argues that Austen's portrayal of female characters highlights the complex interplay of class and gender, revealing the multiple layers of oppression faced by women.

#### Post-Colonial Perspectives

Edward Said's "Culture and Imperialism" (1993) considers the broader context of British colonialism in Austen's novels. Said argues that Austen's works reflect the imperialist ideologies of her time, with references to colonial wealth and exploitation subtly embedded in the narratives. This perspective adds a new dimension to the analysis of gender roles, highlighting how global economic and political structures impact personal relationships and societal norms.

#### Adaptations and Modern Reinterpretations

Adaptations of Austen's novels in film and literature have also contributed to contemporary discussions on gender roles. Linda Troost and Sayre Greenfield's "Jane Austen in Hollywood" (1998) examines how modern adaptations reinterpret Austen's characters and themes, often highlighting or reimagining gender dynamics for contemporary audiences. These adaptations offer new insights into Austen's work, emphasizing the enduring relevance of her critique of gender norms.

---

## DISCUSSION

### Thematic Evolution Across Novels

Austen's novels collectively depict an evolution in gender roles, moving from strict adherence to social norms to a more nuanced understanding of individual worth and partnership. While her early works, such as "Sense and Sensibility," reflect more traditional roles, later novels like "Persuasion" showcase characters who break free from societal constraints.

### Critique of Social Norms

Through her characters, Austen critiques the restrictive nature of gender roles in her society. Her heroines often struggle against the limitations imposed on them, seeking personal fulfilment beyond marriage and social status. Similarly, her male characters frequently grapple with the pressures of societal expectations, highlighting the universal impact of rigid gender norms.

### Austen's legacy

Jane Austen's nuanced portrayal of gender roles has left a lasting impact on literature and feminist thought. Her works continue to be studied for their rich characterisations and subtle critiques of societal norms. Austen's exploration of gender dynamics offers valuable insights into the complexities of human relationships and the ongoing evolution of gender roles.

### Conclusion

Jane Austen's novels provide a profound commentary on the evolution of gender roles in early 19th-century England. Through her richly drawn characters, Austen critiques the rigid societal norms of her time while offering a vision of more balanced and egalitarian relationships. Her works remain relevant today, offering timeless insights into the human condition and the ongoing struggle for gender equality.

### References

Austen, Jane. "Sense and Sensibility." (1811).

\_\_\_\_\_. "Pride and Prejudice." (1813).

\_\_\_\_\_. "Mansfield Park." (1814).

\_\_\_\_\_. "Emma." (1815).

\_\_\_\_\_. "Northanger Abbey." (1817).

\_\_\_\_\_. "Persuasion." (1818).

Brown, Julia Prewitt. "Jane Austen's Novels: Social Change and Literary Form." (1979).

Johnson, Claudia L. "Jane Austen: Women, Politics, and the Novel." (1988).

Kirkham, Margaret. "Jane Austen, Feminism and Fiction." (1997).