



# **Sisterhood as a Survival System in a Patriarchal Society in Sense and Sensibility**

**Indira Naru**

Rishi Bankim Chandra College, PG

Email: innaru5656@gmail.com

## **Abstract**

Women's lives in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were shaped by legal, social and economic systems that gave power and property to men. In such circumstances emotional security and economic survival often depended on marriage or the support of male relatives. Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* presents the relationship between Elinor and Marianne Dashwood as something deeper than a simple family bond. Their connection functions as a practical system of survival within a patriarchal society where women possess limited financial independence and little legal authority. This paper examines how the sisterly relationship between Elinor and Marianne helps them confront emotional vulnerability, social judgement and economic insecurity. Using feminist literary criticism and close textual reading, the analysis demonstrates that sisterhood in the novel operates through emotional care, moral guidance and shared economic adjustment. The study also compares this relationship with the bond between Jane and Elizabeth Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice* to show that Austen repeatedly presents female solidarity as a stabilizing force within patriarchal structures. The findings suggest that sisterhood should be understood not merely as affection but as a structured response to patriarchal limitations. Austen's portrayal of female unity therefore becomes a subtle yet powerful commentary on women's strategies for endurance and dignity within restrictive social systems.

Keywords: sisterhood, patriarchy, survival, Jane Austen, emotional support, economic vulnerability

## **Introduction**

Patriarchal social systems historically restricted women's access to property, education, and independent income. In eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century England these restrictions were reinforced through inheritance laws and social customs that prioritized male authority. Women were expected to depend upon fathers, brothers or husbands for economic stability and social legitimacy. As a result, emotional security and financial survival were often closely tied to marriage. Within such a structure relationships among women could become important sources of emotional support and mutual guidance.

Jane Austen's novels frequently explore the pressures placed upon women by these social conditions. *Sense and Sensibility*, first published in 1811, provides an especially clear representation of women negotiating patriarchal limitations. The novel follows the experiences of Elinor and Marianne Dashwood after the death of their father leaves them financially insecure. Because the estate passes to a male heir, the Dashwood women must leave their home and adapt to reduced circumstances. This situation highlights the vulnerability created by inheritance laws that favoured men and restricted women's economic independence.

The central question guiding this study asks how the relationship between Elinor and Marianne Dashwood functions as a survival system within these conditions. Rather than interpreting their bond merely as emotional affection, the present analysis considers sisterhood as an active strategy that helps women endure social and financial instability. Their mutual support allows them to process disappointment in love, maintain moral judgement and confront economic uncertainty without collapsing into despair.

In this discussion the term patriarchy refers to a social structure in which men control property, authority and economic resources while women remain dependent upon male power. Sisterhood refers not only to biological relation but also to a shared network of emotional care, advice and practical support among women. Through close textual reading and comparison with *Pride and Prejudice*, this study argues that Austen repeatedly presents female unity as a quiet but significant response to patriarchal power.

## Literature Review



Scholarly interpretations of *Sense and Sensibility* often focus on the contrast between Elinor's rational restraint and Marianne's emotional sensibility. Critics traditionally read the novel as a moral lesson about balancing feeling with judgement. While this interpretation remains valuable, it tends to overlook the importance of the sisters' relationship as a system of support within a restrictive social order.

Feminist critics such as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar have emphasized how female relationships in nineteenth-century literature create spaces where women can express emotional experience and resist isolation. Their influential work *The Madwoman in the Attic* argues that women writers frequently construct networks of female solidarity to counterbalance male authority. Within this framework the Dashwood sisters' relationship can be understood as a protective emotional community.

Mary Poovey's analysis of the cultural expectations placed on women further illuminates this dynamic. In *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer* she explains how eighteenth- and nineteenth-century ideals of femininity demanded modesty, obedience and emotional control. Elinor's composure reflects these expectations, while Marianne's passionate responses challenge them. Their sisterhood allows these contrasting behaviours to coexist and gradually influence one another.

Claudia L. Johnson also emphasizes the subtle political implications present in Austen's novels. Johnson argues that Austen's female characters demonstrate intellectual independence and moral authority even within conservative social structures. From this perspective the Dashwood sisters' relationship becomes a form of shared reasoning that allows them to interpret male behaviour and social expectations critically.

Historical studies such as Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall's *Family Fortunes* provide further context by examining the economic vulnerability faced by women in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Because property laws frequently favoured male heirs, unmarried women often depended on family networks for survival. This historical reality helps explain why the Dashwood sisters' mutual support becomes essential after the loss of their inheritance.

Although these studies examine gender roles, morality and marriage, relatively few analyses focus specifically on sisterhood as a survival structure. The present research therefore builds upon feminist criticism while emphasizing how emotional care, moral advice and shared economic adaptation combine to create a practical survival strategy for women in Austen's fiction.

### **Theoretical Framework: Patriarchy and Women's Limits**

Feminist literary theory has long argued that women's subordinate position in literature often reflects historical realities rather than personal weakness. During Austen's lifetime inheritance laws frequently prevented daughters from inheriting property if a male heir existed. Such conditions created economic vulnerability that made marriage almost essential for women's security.

Within this framework emotional disappointment could easily become financial crisis. A broken engagement meant not only personal heartbreak but also the loss of economic opportunity. Austen's novels portray these pressures without overt political protest, instead revealing their consequences through everyday domestic life. The Dashwood sisters' situation illustrates how quickly women could lose financial stability after the death of a male relative.

In this environment sisterhood becomes an alternative support system. Emotional labour, moral advice and shared experience help women manage the pressures created by patriarchal structures. Feminist critics suggest that such relationships form moral communities that exist alongside male authority rather than directly confronting it. The bond between Elinor and Marianne reflects this dynamic by creating a shared emotional space where judgement and sympathy coexist.

### **Sisterhood in Sense and Sensibility**

The financial crisis faced by the Dashwood family establishes the conditions in which sisterhood becomes essential. After losing their inheritance, the sisters must adapt to a reduced social position and uncertain marriage prospects. Elinor's role as emotional protector appears clearly when she hides her own romantic disappointment to prevent further distress within the family. When she learns about Edward Ferrars's secret engagement, she chooses silence in order to preserve family harmony. Austen writes that "Elinor, though greatly shocked, still felt a strong inclination for the

good of all, to be silent on the subject.” This moment demonstrates how emotional restraint becomes a form of protective labour.

Marianne represents the opposite emotional tendency. Her intense reaction to Willoughby’s betrayal shows how social judgement and romantic disappointment threaten both reputation and health. When Marianne falls seriously ill, Elinor’s steady care becomes crucial to her recovery. Austen describes Marianne suffering from fever while Elinor watches anxiously beside her. In this situation emotional survival emerges not through male intervention but through female care and responsibility.

Marianne later acknowledges the importance of Elinor’s influence when she declares, “My feelings shall be governed and my temper improved.” This statement reflects the moral dimension of sisterhood. Elinor’s rational discipline guides Marianne toward emotional balance, while Marianne’s openness reminds Elinor of the value of genuine feeling. Their contrasting personalities therefore create a complementary system of support.

Economic vulnerability further strengthens their bond. Living together under reduced circumstances forces the sisters to share practical responsibilities and emotional burdens. Rather than competing for advantageous marriages, they demonstrate loyalty and cooperation. This unity challenges the social expectation that women must compete within the marriage market for financial security.

### **Comparative Support from *Pride and Prejudice***

A similar pattern appears in *Pride and Prejudice* through the relationship between Elizabeth and Jane Bennet. Jane’s gentle optimism and Elizabeth’s perceptive judgement resemble the emotional contrast between Marianne and Elinor. When Jane suffers from Bingley’s apparent rejection, Elizabeth’s companionship prevents despair from overwhelming her.

The Bennet sisters also confront financial insecurity caused by entailment, which threatens to leave them without property. Their shared anxiety about the future strengthens their emotional solidarity. Elizabeth frequently consults Jane’s moral judgement, demonstrating how sisterhood shapes personal decisions and interpretations of male behaviour.

Through these parallel relationships Austen repeatedly emphasizes the importance of female unity. Although marriage ultimately resolves economic instability in both novels, the emotional endurance required before marriage depends largely on sisterly support. Sisterhood therefore functions as a stabilizing structure that allows women to confront patriarchal pressures without isolation.

### **Findings and Discussion**

The analysis suggests that sisterhood in *Sense and Sensibility* operates through three interconnected functions. First, it provides emotional protection during moments of crisis. Elinor's self-control and Marianne's emotional openness together create a balanced system of support. Second, sisterhood offers moral guidance. Through conversation and reflection the sisters evaluate male behaviour and social expectations, helping each other avoid destructive decisions. Third, sisterhood encourages financial cooperation rather than rivalry within the marriage market.

These findings challenge interpretations that view marriage as the sole solution to women's vulnerability. While marriage eventually provides stability, the period before marriage reveals the importance of female relationships in sustaining emotional resilience and moral judgement. Sisterhood therefore prepares the characters to enter marriage without losing dignity or independence of thought.

### **Conclusion**

This study asked how the relationship between Elinor and Marianne Dashwood functions as a survival strategy within patriarchal society. The analysis demonstrates that their bond provides emotional protection, moral guidance and cooperative adaptation to financial hardship. Through patience, conversation and mutual understanding the sisters transform vulnerability into shared resilience.

Comparison with *Pride and Prejudice* further confirms that Austen consistently portrays female solidarity as an essential support system for women facing social and economic limitations. Sisterhood does not overthrow patriarchal authority, but it enables women to endure its pressures with dignity and intelligence. In *Sense and Sensibility* the relationship between Elinor and



SRIJAN: Global Review of Arts, Science & Humanities

ISSN: XXXX-XXXX (online)

Volume 1, Issue 1 (April 2026)

Marianne therefore represents more than affection—it becomes a practical structure of survival that preserves emotional stability and moral independence within a restrictive social world.



## Works Cited

Austen, J. (2014). *Pride and prejudice*. Penguin Classics.

Austen, J. (2014). *Sense and sensibility*. Penguin Classics.

Butler, M. (1987). *Jane Austen and the war of ideas*. Oxford University Press.

Davidoff, L., & Hall, C. (1987). *Family fortunes: Men and women of the English middle class 1780–1850*. University of Chicago Press.

Gilbert, S. M., & Gubar, S. (2000). *The madwoman in the attic: The woman writer and the nineteenth-century literary imagination*. Yale University Press.

Johnson, C. L. (1988). *Jane Austen: Women, politics, and the novel*. University of Chicago Press.

Poovey, M. (1984). *The proper lady and the woman writer: Ideology as style in the works of Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley, and Jane Austen*. University of Chicago Press.

Stone, L. (1977). *The family, sex and marriage in England 1500–1800*. Harper & Row.

Todd, J. (2006). *The Cambridge introduction to Jane Austen*. Cambridge University Press.