



## **LITERATURE AS A MIRROR OF SOCIAL ISSUES: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF AUSTEN'S AND KAPUR'S FICTION**

**Ramsha Munir**, M. Phil English Literature, Government College University Faisalabad, Punjab, Pakistan. [ramshy786khan@gmail.com](mailto:ramshy786khan@gmail.com)

**Farrukh Munawar**, M. Phil English Literature, Visiting Lecturer at Baba Guru Nanak University Nankana Sahib. [Farrukh1munawar@gmail.com](mailto:Farrukh1munawar@gmail.com)

**Hameeza Hussain**, M. Phil English, Literature, The University of Faisalabad, Faisalabad, Punjab, Pakistan. [hameezachudry@gmail.com](mailto:hameezachudry@gmail.com)

**Amanullah**, PhD Scholar English Literature, The University of Faisalabad, Faisalabad, Punjab, Pakistan. [Princesunder123@gmail.com](mailto:Princesunder123@gmail.com)

### **Abstract**

*The connection between literature and society is inseparable, as literature reflects life and portrays the essence of social reality. This study presents a comparative study of social issues in Jane Austen's **Sense and Sensibility** and Manju Kapur's **A Married Woman**, examining how both novels portray the intersection of gender, marriage, and societal expectations. It focuses on the representation of social issues in *Sense and Sensibility* and *A Married Woman*, with an emphasis on themes such as marriage, class, patriarchy, and gender roles. Despite being set in vastly different historical and cultural contexts—early 19th-century England and post-colonial India—this study explores the ways in which both novels critique patriarchal structures and their impact on women's autonomy. While Austen's work examines the social constraints surrounding marriage, inheritance, and class, Kapur's novel portrays the tensions between tradition and personal freedom in a modernizing society. Both authors highlight the struggles of their female protagonists in negotiating societal norms and assert their agency within restrictive frameworks. The paper further investigates the role of marriage as a social institution and the ways in which both authors challenge traditional gender roles. By focusing on generational conflicts, societal pressures, and the transformative power of education, this study highlights how both novels depict the persistent quest for women's identity and autonomy, despite differing cultural and historical contexts.*

**Keywords:** Comparative Literature, Gender Roles, Marriage, Patriarchy, Social Class. Women's Autonomy, Societal Expectations

### **Introduction**

"Social problems are conditions considered to be undesirable by many people" and they emerge when collective perceptions highlight certain issues as problematic (Manis, 2014, p. 305). Literature, as a creative expression, serves as a mirror to society, capturing its virtues and flaws. Through its representational function, literature not only critiques societal shortcomings but also highlights values worthy of emulation. "Literature mirrors the ills of the society with a view to making the society realize its mistakes and make amends" (Duhan, 2015, p. 192). This reflective capacity forms the basis of the sociology of literature, a discipline that examines the relationship between literary works and the social environments from which they arise. It probes into how societal conditions shape the creation, form, and reception of literary texts (Arisky, 2019).

This comparative study focuses on the intersection of the societal reflections in the works of two authors, Jane Austen and Manju Kapur, whose novels—*Sense and Sensibility* and *A Married Woman*—depict contrasting yet equally poignant portrayals of social issues. Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) offers a keen insight into the social fabric of the early 19th century,



particularly the role of women within the constraints of marriage and class structures. Through the contrasting personalities of Elinor and Marianne Dashwood, Austen (2010) critiques the rigid societal expectations placed upon women and examines the tension between rationality and emotion in navigating personal and social duties. She highlights the socio-economic challenges that women of her time faced, where marriage was not only a personal affair but also a societal transaction, often dictated by financial security and status. Kapur's *A Married Woman* (2002) brings forth the struggles of women in contemporary India, particularly focusing on the complexities of marital life, societal expectations, and personal identity within the patriarchal structure. The novel focuses on the psyche of Astha, a woman caught between her duties as a wife and mother and her search for personal fulfillment and sexual liberation. Kapur (2002) highlights the societal pressure to conform to traditional gender roles while questioning the possibilities for women's empowerment and independence within the changing socio-political landscape of modern India.

Both novels, Austen (2010) and Kapur (2002) though rooted in distinct historical and cultural contexts, offer profound critiques of the constraints placed on women, albeit through different narrative techniques and social milieus. Through their contrasting portrayals of the struggles women face in both traditional and evolving societal frameworks, Austen (2010) and Kapur offer valuable insights into the social issues of their times, creating a dialogue between the past and the present concerning gender, identity, and social expectations. Austen and Kapur (2002), though separated by centuries, geography, and cultural contexts, share a profound commitment to dissecting the societal expectations placed upon women. Austen's 19th-century English narrative *Sense and Sensibility* explores themes of love, class, and gender within a patriarchal society where marriage and social standing dominate a woman's agency. Similarly, Kapur's contemporary Indian novel *A Married Woman* unravels the complexities of identity, marital discontent, and resistance to gendered oppression within a culture steeped in tradition and familial obligation. Austen (2010) employs wit and irony to subtly challenge patriarchal norms, while Kapur (2002) adopts a more direct and poignant approach to address issues such as gender discrimination, marital disenchantment, and sexual autonomy. Both authors illuminate the timeless quest for identity and self-empowerment, showcasing literature's capacity to challenge, reflect, and redefine cultural norms across time and cultures.

### **Literature Review**

Kusumawardhani and Rahayu (2020) assert that Jane Austen critiques 19th-century social norms, especially regarding women's roles in marriage and inheritance in *Sense and Sensibility*. The Dashwood family's financial decline, caused by inheritance laws favoring male heirs, highlights women's economic vulnerability. The Dashwood sisters, Elinor and Marianne, are left with limited options and are pressured to marry well for financial security. Austen uses their situation to examine how societal expectations shaped women's dependence on marriage to maintain social and economic status, emphasizing the intersection of gender, class, and personal fulfillment. "Women do not get much inheritance over men and they do not get education so they cannot make money themselves, they only expect to be married by rich men" (Kusumawardhani & Rahayu, 2020, p. 41).



Ali and Otoluwa (2021) contend that *Sense and Sensibility* is a romantic novel by Jane Austen, believed to be influenced by her personal experiences during the Georgian Era (1714–1830). The novel's themes and issues are thought to reflect aspects of Austen's own life and the social realities of the time. The two Dashwood sisters, at the age of marriageable maturity, must navigate the complexities of 18th-century English society, where marriage, inheritance, and social reputation are fraught with intrigue. In this world, personal lives are vulnerable to scandal and must maintain an image of perfection in the eyes of others. "Through this novel, Jane Austen wanted to show British life at the time. How the historical, social, and culture, to describe the personality of the character of Elinor and Marianne" (Ali & Otoluwa, 2021, p. 76).

Larasati and Prastiwi (2023) contend that Austen contrasts the characters of Elinor and Marianne Dashwood, who represent rationality and emotion, respectively. Elinor is composed, prioritizing duty and social expectations, while Marianne follows her heart, driven by passion. These differences influence how they navigate challenges: Elinor balances responsibility with personal sacrifice, while Marianne seeks romantic fulfillment without considering consequences. Over time, both characters grow—Elinor learns to express her emotions, and Marianne finds value in combining passion with reason. Austen explores the dynamic between reason and emotion, highlighting their role in personal growth and human experience. "Elinor's sense and responsibility guide her actions, while Marianne's sensibility and passion shape her behavior. Both characters experience personal growth as they learn to find a balance between sense and sensibility" (Larasati & Prastiwi, 2023, p. 14)

Sasikala (2018) observes that in *A Married Woman*, Manju Kapur addresses the theme of lesbianism with boldness, placing less focus on societal norms surrounding such relationships. The novel delves deeply into the impact of historical conventions on personal relationships within traditional Indian families amidst the shift toward globalization. At the same time, these relationships have the potential to reshape history, offering glimpses of new and more inclusive forms of human connection—utopian in their vision, even if partial and temporary. "Kapur in her novel presents the changing image of women moving away from traditional norms like self-sacrificing women towards modernity that is self-assured assertive and ambitious women and also provides a medium of self-expression" (Sasikala, 2018, p. 25).

Hariharasudan and Gnanamony (2017) argue that Manju Kapur emphasizes transforming patriarchal norms to uphold women's individuality and rights. Through cross-caste and cross-faith unions, Kapur illustrates women's rejection of traditional constraints, highlighting their pursuit of coexistence, equitable treatment, and resistance to oppression in a postmodern context. When their individuality is threatened, they are prepared to confront and challenge the entire system. "Manju Kapur has defied such subjugation against women in her novels". Astha, the central character in *A Married Woman*, challenges the conventional notion of women's submissiveness and tolerance, often symbolized by the 'holy cow,' as she strives for independence (Hariharasudan & Gnanamony, 2017, p. 6140). Economic freedom alone does not suffice for women; their individuality must also be acknowledged and respected within the socio-religious culture. Society must allow them the autonomy to make their own choices and



recognize the integrity that has been denied to them for generations. Women can no longer endure a life of submission, subjugation, or discrimination.

Mary and Theresa (2021) points out that Kapur's works portray women who challenge societal constraints and patriarchal norms. Her heroines seek individuality and independence through education and take on roles beyond traditional domestic responsibilities. These proactive and resolute female characters address domestic challenges independently, embodying a new archetype of empowered women. "Though they dare to cross the patriarchal threshold, they are caught into another, where their free spirits are curbed and all they do is adjust, compromise and adapt" (Mary & Theresa, 2021, p. 3022). Gaonkar (2022) contends that *The Married Woman* deals with the complexities of man-woman relationships, depicting a range of experiences. While Astha and Hemant face challenges and misunderstandings, Aijaz and Pipeelika share a brief, harmonious bond. The older generation, in contrast, maintains amicable relationships, resolving conflicts effectively. Kapur highlights the diverse dynamics of relationships, from joyful to troubled and harmonious. "Though a feminist, and a staunch one at that, Manju Kapur has given the message that understanding and compatibility forms the foundation of a successful marital relationship between the partners" (Gaonkar, 2022, p. 9).

While both *Sense and Sensibility* and *A Married Woman* offer profound insights into the constraints of marriage, class, and gender within their respective societies, there is a clear gap in comparative scholarship that examines how these novels, written in different times and cultural contexts, mirror social issues. A focused comparative study can highlight how literature not only reflects but critiques the social systems that shape women's lives, offering valuable perspectives on female agency, societal norms, and gender dynamics across different cultures and eras.

### **Methodology and Theoretical Framework**

This comparative study analyzes Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* and Manju Kapur's *A Married Woman*, focusing on how both novels reflect social issues of their respective eras. The research uses feminist literary criticism and social realism to examine themes such as women's roles, marriage, class, and societal expectations. By comparing the selected texts, the study identifies common themes of societal pressure, economic dependence, and the search for personal fulfillment, providing insights into how both authors critique societal structures and use literature as a mirror of social realities.

"Comparative literature is an academic field dealing with the literature of two or more linguistic and cultural groups" (Ramish, 2022, p. 7). Over time, it has developed into what is now known as "comparative cultural studies," which integrates theories and methods from both comparative literature and cultural studies to provide a deeper understanding of the relationships between different cultural expressions. According to Tötösy de Zepetnek (1998), comparative cultural studies approaches literature within a wider cultural framework, employing interdisciplinary techniques to investigate the interconnections between cultural forms. Sahin (2016) emphasizes the expansion of literary studies beyond national borders, exploring how local literatures interact with global traditions and foster cross-cultural exchanges.

Literature has "an important role in exposing social problems, as basically literature is born and is intended for the community" (Manugeran et al., 2020, p. 150). A prominent issue



explored in literature is patriarchy, which continues to restrict women's autonomy and opportunities. Qasim et al., (2024) note:

Patriarchal system has significantly influenced the societal status of women. It is inherently male-centric, being man-made, and it relegates women to the status of the 'second sex,' subaltern, and even slaves. It subjugates women with the setoff biased rules which are the reflections of patriarchy in culture. It remains as a grey area in the unwritten pages of history. By perpetuating ideologies and cultural values that shape belief systems, patriarchy contributes to the formation of gender identities. (Qasim et al., p. 172)

As Beauvoir (1949) argues, true emancipation for women is only achievable through economic and social equality. This idea resonates in *Sense and Sensibility* and *A Married Woman*, where societal norms impede women's personal agency. Beauvoir (1949) asserts that women have historically gained only what men are willing to concede, rather than asserting their inherent rights. Both novels illustrate the oppressive nature of patriarchal structures, which deny women opportunities for independent work or creative fulfillment, highlighting the significant challenges they face in asserting autonomy and agency within a male-dominated society. Qasim et al., (2024) claim:

In a patriarchal societal structure, women are relegated to subordinate roles, with their femininity and personal identities constrained by strict, traditional norms. Patriarchy creates gender-based social hierarchies, placing men in dominant, 'first-class' positions, while relegating women to a 'second-class' status, perpetually subordinate to men. (Qasim et al., 2024, p. 176)

Similarly, class conflict, another critical social issue, is often portrayed in literature as it encapsulates struggles between social classes over resources, power, and ideological dominance. These conflicts, characterized by both violent and nonviolent actions, are shaped by competing ideologies rooted in economic, political, social, or religious values (Al Areqi, 2022; Lee, 2024). The intersection of patriarchy and class conflict in literature reveals a compounded struggle for women, particularly those from marginalized social classes, as they must navigate both gender-based oppression and class-based disparities. This interplay is evident in *Sense and Sensibility* and *A Married Woman*, where the experiences of women are shaped by the overlapping influences of patriarchy and class conflict. These novels critique societal norms, revealing the challenges women face and offering insights into identity, autonomy, and agency through the lenses of gender theory, class conflict, and sociology of literature.

### **Textual Analysis and Discussion**

This comparative study examines Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* and Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*, focusing on social issues such as marriage, class, patriarchy, and gender roles. Set in England during the early 1800s and post-colonial India, the study explores how women's agency is influenced by the social structures they navigate. Austen (2010) critiques the complexities of marriage, class, and gender in a conservative society, while Kapur (2010) addresses the evolving role of women in a patriarchal India. Both novels explore how women





navigate their identities and autonomy within societal constraints, reflecting both changing and enduring social issues across different contexts. A detailed analysis of the selected novels is provided below.

**a). Social Issues in Austen's *Sense and Sensibility***

In Jane Austen's novels, the quest for suitable partners for her heroines is shaped by misunderstandings and challenges, providing a nuanced exploration of human nature through realistic social dynamics and well-developed characters. In *Sense and Sensibility*, the Dashwood family exemplifies the tension between emotion and practicality. Despite Mr. and Mrs. Dashwood marrying for love, financial instability follows, as the family is left without inheritance after Mr. Dashwood's death, highlighting the challenges of balancing romantic ideals with societal realities. When their home is seized by her step-son and daughter-in law, Fanny, she joins her second daughter Marianne in grief. "But Mrs. John Dashwood was a strong caricature of himself; more narrow minded and selfish" (Austen, 2010, p. 8).

Matrimony is the central theme of *Sense and Sensibility*. Mrs. Henry Dashwood is deeply invested in securing happy marriages for her daughters, hoping they will find loving husbands with whom they can share mutual affection. She is particularly pleased when she observes the growing attachment between Elinor and Edward Ferrars, believing that their union will soon lead to marriage. Elinor, the eldest daughter, is courted by Edward, who is Fanny's brother. "Mrs. Dashwood was alike uninfluenced by either consideration. It was enough for her that he appeared to be amiable, that he [Edward] loved her daughter, and Elinor returned partiality" (Austen, 2010, p. 7).

In *Sense and Sensibility*, marriage is a central theme reflecting societal norms of Austen's time, where mothers like Mrs. Dashwood seek practical unions for their daughters. While Elinor marries Edward Ferrars, Marianne's romantic ideals clash with reality, leading her to marry Colonel Brandon. This contrasts with modern views, where women, including in India, increasingly choose their own partners. Austen (2010) presents Mrs. Jennings as an older woman dedicated to matchmaking, reflecting the societal role of older women in facilitating marriages. After securing marriages for her daughters, she focuses on pairing off others, emphasizing the importance of matrimony. Lucy Steele's shifting affections from Edward Ferrars to Robert underscore the transactional nature of marriage in Austen's society, where women often prioritized financial stability and social standing over emotional connections, as exemplified by characters like Mrs. Jennings and Lucy. *Sense and Sensibility* paints a vivid and realistic picture of marriage as a "matchmaking market" in Austen's (2010) era, where social and financial stability were often prioritized over love.

Austen (2010) contrasts Fanny Dashwood's manipulative materialism with Sir John Middleton's cheerful social engagement, highlighting differing family dynamics and social roles in the novel. Sir John Middleton's role underscores the importance of socializing and gossip in Austen's society, illustrating the contrasting values of materialism and social pleasure in shaping relationships and family interactions. He enjoys entertaining guests without favoritism or pride, appreciating both rural and town social life, while his wife dislikes hosting dinners and dances. In fact, she takes pride in the decency of her guest list. "Mrs. Jennings was a widow with an



ample jointure. She had only two daughters, both of whom she had lived to see respectably married, and she had now therefore nothing to do but to marry all the rest of the world. “(Austen, 2010, p. 35)

In *Sense and Sensibility*, characters like Mrs. Jennings, Mrs. Palmer, and Robert Ferrars exemplify the superficiality of social life, focusing on gossip, trivial conversation, and materialistic pride. Mrs. Jennings and Sir John Middleton enjoy casual chats, while Mrs. Palmer participates in lighthearted social events. Robert Ferrars, marked by arrogance and pride in his education, highlights a shallow sense of self-worth based on external achievements rather than genuine character. He is, really, a foolish person who entraps into the plan made by a very greedy and cunning woman, namely Lucy.

Lucy became as necessary to Mrs. Ferrars, as either Robert or Fanny; and Edward was never cordially forgiven for having once intended to marry her and, and Elinor, though superior to her in fortune and birth, was spoken of as an intruder, she was in everything considered, and always openly acknowledged, to be a favourite child. (Austen, 2010, p. 286)

Elinor’s steadfast love for Edward, despite doubts about his sincerity and his engagement to Lucy, reflects her belief in his true affection. She values his understanding and principles, which are often hidden by his shyness and silence. As she reflects: “The excellence of his understanding and his principles can be concealed only by shyness, which too often keeps him silent” (Austen, 2010, p. 21). Elinor’s trust in Edward contrasts with Lucy’s opportunism and Mrs. Ferrars’ materialistic views on marriage, highlighting the upper-class focus on status and wealth. This theme is also seen in Fanny Dashwood’s character, reflecting the rigid social structures of Austen’s time.

Willoughby’s extravagance contrasts with the more reserved Edward and Colonel Brandon, showcasing different responses to social and economic pressures. Willoughby’s reckless behavior and Edward’s generosity, influenced by the prospect of wealth, highlight how wealth and status shape their actions and decisions in a society focused on material security. “Yes, he would give them three thousand pounds; it would be liberal and handsome! It would be enough to make them completely easy” (Austen, 2010, p. 9). Mrs. Ferrars is focused on marrying her son to someone of the right social class to elevate their family’s status. Willoughby, despite his affection for Marianne, marries Miss Grey for financial reasons. John Dashwood, influenced by his wife Fanny, turns against his half-sisters and stepmother. Mrs. John Dashwood disapproves of John’s plan to give three thousand pounds to his stepdaughters, arguing that it would impoverish their son and questioning the fairness of such an action.

*Sense and Sensibility* blends romance with social realities, using characters like Marianne Dashwood and Colonel Brandon to contrast idealized love with more grounded affection. Marianne, embodying ‘Sensibility,’ falls for Willoughby, whose initial gestures evoke a fairy-tale romance, but his betrayal forces her to confront love’s harsh realities. Colonel Brandon’s steadier affection exemplifies a more genuine love, highlighting the tension between romantic idealism and societal expectations. This clash highlights the complexities of love, showing that in Austen’s world, love is not merely an emotion but a social construct shaped by circumstance,



with Marianne and Colonel Brandon's friendship evolving into a deeper relationship. Mrs. Dashwood, optimistic about their future, believes Willoughby will marry Marianne, while Elinor remains doubtful. Mrs. Dashwood, however, offers comfort to Marianne when she fears she may never find her ideal romantic partner, reminding her, "Remember, my love, that you are not seventeen... Why should you be less fortunate than your mother? In one circumstance only, my Marianne, may your destiny be different from hers" (Austen, 2010, p. 9).

In *Sense and Sensibility*, Mrs. Dashwood, emotionally supported by her late husband but financially unstable, contrasts with Elinor, who takes a pragmatic and selfless approach to life. While Elinor accepts a modest marriage with Edward Ferrars without resentment, Mrs. Dashwood favors Colonel Brandon as a suitable match for Marianne due to his wealth, maturity, and affection. Marianne's relationship with Willoughby, driven by impulsive romanticism, contrasts sharply with the more practical, respectful love between Elinor and Edward, as Willoughby's idealism proves to be ethically flawed. The narrative of Colonel Brandon's past, as revealed to Elinor, contains elements of romanticism. He had once been deeply and passionately in love with Eliza Williams, who reciprocated his feelings. However, due to family circumstances, she was forced to marry his brother. Colonel Brandon, heartbroken, left for the East in search of Eliza, only to find her imprisoned due to debts incurred after her divorce. She had also borne an illegitimate child, whom she entrusted to Colonel Brandon's care. Later, when Eliza's daughter had grown up, Willoughby seduced her, which led Colonel Brandon to challenge him to a duel. This narrative, filled with sexual passions, adventure, danger, and unusual events, is undoubtedly romantic in nature. A romantic element in *Sense and Sensibility* emerges when Willoughby, upon hearing of Marianne's illness, arrives at Cleveland to seek forgiveness for his past wrongs. His remorse and attempt to atone for his behavior suggest a transformation, driven either by guilt or lingering passion for Marianne. This moment of personal change reflects romantic ideals of redemption and emotional awakening. In brief, Austen (2010) weaves together themes of money, class, education, marriage, and love, but she does so with a clear moral vision. She uses these themes to highlight the complexities of human relationships while also reinforcing the moral principles she seeks to uphold, balancing the realistic with the romantic in her portrayal of society.

**b). Social Issues in Kapur's *A Married Woman*,**

In Indian society, marriage is often seen as a woman's defining value, tied to childbearing, especially male offspring. Women face pressure and marginalization if unable to conceive, and their personal desires are often overlooked. While marriage provides stability, societal norms prioritize duties over love, restricting emotional connections and discouraging love before marriage. In Kapur's *A Married Woman*, the protagonist, Astha, embodies these societal expectations. Living in New Delhi, Astha initially accepts the traditional role assigned to her by her parents, navigating her journey through adolescence and early adulthood. In the early chapters, Kapur (2002) effectively highlights the societal emphasis on a daughter's marriage and its perceived importance. "Her education, her character, her health, her marriage, these were their burdens. She was their future, their hope, and though she didn't want them to guard their precious treasure so carefully, they did, oh they did" (Kapur, 2002, p. 1). Astha, the protagonist





of *A Married Woman*, is the daughter of a progressive, educated father and a traditionally conservative mother, both of whom strongly uphold Indian cultural traditions. Astha herself aspires to maintain harmony and foster peaceful coexistence within her family, reflecting her internalization of these values.

Astha was brought up properly, as befits a woman, with large supplements of fear. One slip might find her alone, vulnerable and unprotected. The infinite ways in which she could be harmed were not specified, but Astha absorbed them through her skin, and even after was drawn to the safe and secure.” (Kapur, 2002, p. 1)

In Indian society, parents often prioritize marrying off their daughters at the “ideal age” with little regard for their individuality or independence. Education is seen as preparation for household duties rather than empowerment. Societal expectations focus on the birth of a male child, and a daughter, though accepted, is still viewed as a burden. Astha’s parents navigate these conventional attitudes and expectations. Her mother also said “When you are married, our responsibilities will be over. Do you know shashtras say if parents die without getting their daughter married, they will be condemned to perpetual rebirth? ... Every day in her temple corner in the kitchen, she prayed for a good husband for her daughter.” (Kapur, 2002, p. 1) Astha falls deeply in love with Rohan during her youth, which consumes her emotionally and disrupts her life. However, their relationship ends when Rohan leaves for Oxford. This marks a turning point for Astha, as she experiences a profound loss of identity and faces the threat of her physical relationship with Rohan jeopardizing her chances for a traditional marriage and a stable family life. Reflecting on the aftermath, Astha realizes Rohan’s betrayal: “Free from everything except the terrible things she was feeling, because Rohan didn’t love her, Rohan had lied to her. Rohan was what mother had been warning her about since she was old enough to be warned, and how pleased she would be to know she had been right all along” (Kapur, 2002, p. 31).

After marrying Hemant, Astha initially has no resentment but becomes disillusioned as his love and respect fade. Her family, particularly her mother-in-law, pressures her to conform to traditional roles of self-sacrifice. Overwhelmed by the pressure to meet household demands, Astha struggles to fulfill these expectations while bearing the weight of her responsibilities. She is “always adjusting to everybody’s need” (Kapur, 2002, p. 227). Astha feels the status of a married woman is meaningless, constantly accountable to her family and husband. In her quest for independence, she engages in social and religious activities but feels trapped by her familial duties. As the family faces financial and emotional struggles, Astha grows frustrated and increasingly irritated by their demands. She is frustrated with her liabilities and opines “a tired woman cannot make wife good” (Kapur, 2002, p. 154). She is suffering the strain and depression of a married woman who is just an unpaid housemaid. She has to make her husband happy and for which she must be “A willing body at night, a willing pair of hands and feet in the day and an obedient mouth” (Kapur, 2002, p. 231). Astha faces harsh criticism from her family in a restrictive social environment, which leads to feelings of pressure, stress, and depression. Seeking relief, she believes that a good job will bring her independence, thinking, “with a good job comes independence” (p. 4). She becomes a teacher, but even this new role does not free her



from the emotional burden or the sense of isolation she continues to experience. After her father's death, Astha's mother becomes very lonely, and Astha offers for her to live with her, saying, "Live with us, Ma" (Kapur, 2002, p. 94). However, her mother refuses, citing social concerns, explaining, "It doesn't look nice. Mother-in-law comes and never leaves" (Kapur, 2002, p. 94). In traditional belief, married daughters are expected to provide no social or economic support to their parents, as they are seen as "sold" into marriage. Instead, they bear the full responsibility of being daughters-in-law or wives, which highlights the societal preference for male children.

*A Married Woman* emphasizes the societal preference for a male child. When Astha is pregnant for the second time, she faces constant reminders from those around her—colleagues, in-laws, her husband's friends' wives, and even household staff—who all express their opinions about the baby's gender. The prevailing belief was that it would be a son and heir (Kapur, 2002, p. 68). When Astha's mother arranges a special puja to ensure a grandson, Hemant is pleased, but Astha is disturbed. She asks him what would happen if, despite the puja, she has a girl. Hemant reassures her, saying, "Don't worry, sweetheart, then we will try again, it's perfectly all right. Why do you get so tense for nothing?" Astha replies, "But Hem, I do not wish to go on trying and trying until we get a son" (Kapur, 2002, p. 68). In a country like India, where the population continues to grow rapidly, people like Hemant perpetuate this cycle. Astha's life becomes increasingly tragic as she grapples with overwhelming responsibilities, emotional neglect from her husband, and societal pressures, leaving her feeling like an unpaid servant. Hemant dismisses her work as a teacher, devaluing her contribution: "Oh-ho, what is there in teaching? Hardly a serious job, you just go, talk to some children about poems and stories, organize a few clubs, and come back" (Kapur, 2002, p. 68). Astha defies the patriarchal norms and rigid societal expectations that confine women to traditional roles, challenging the silent endurance imposed by her family and religion. Embracing her autonomy, she explores the taboo subject of lesbianism, confronting societal rejection and marginalization.

In *A Married Woman*, lesbianism becomes a means for Astha and Pipeelika to fulfill emotional and sexual needs, offering them a path to self-discovery and resistance against patriarchal structures. Both women face violence—Astha endures domestic abuse, and Pipeelika suffers social violence, losing her family after her husband's death in a riot. Despite the constraints of traditional society, Astha seeks to break free from dependence and achieve a fuller identity, challenging male superiority through her lesbian relationship. Astha develops a deep emotional and physical connection with Pipeelika, finding solace in her caring nature, which she had long sought in her husband, Hemant. Their growing intimacy leads to tension with Hemant, and Astha rejects his advances after discovering his infidelity. She shifts her focus to Pipeelika, embracing the idea that true love transcends physical attraction and involves a union of souls and ideologies. This relationship becomes an act of rebellion against male dominance and a quest for personal identity, challenging societal and familial expectations. She believes, "Religion is a choice as much as other things" (Kapur, 2002, p. 89), and defies societal norms and expectations to pursue her own sense of fulfillment. She also admires Pipeelika's courage in marrying Aijaz Akhtar Khan, a Muslim, despite belonging to a high-caste Hindu family. Pipeelika made this



decision against her mother's wishes and societal limitations, asserting her right to marry the person she loves.

Domestic struggles in *A Married Woman* are portrayed as a common experience for many women in society, and Astha is no exception. She faces challenges in managing her home while suffering from periodic migraines and growing isolation from her husband. Her feeling of marginalization and neglect takes a toll on her, even though doctors diagnose no physical ailments, only stress: "Tension, he stated, the disease of modern life. The secret of health is a balanced mind... I try to be calm, said Astha earnestly, but still I have headaches, and the pain lasts quite long" (Kapur, 2002, p. 76). Astha is overwhelmed by the pressures of caring for her children, the demands of her home, and the silent rejection from her in-laws and her emotionally distant husband. In search of relief, Astha turns to writing and sketching. She begins composing poetry, which provides her with a temporary escape from her emotional burdens. Despite composing over two hundred poems, her husband dismisses her efforts: "Writing alleviated the heaviness within her, a heaviness she found hard to deal with. Discussing her feelings with Hemant usually led to argument, distance, and greater misery. In the struggle to express herself, she found temporary relief" (Kapur, 2002, p. 79). Meanwhile, Hemant's increasing involvement in his business ventures only further isolates Astha. As he becomes absorbed in his new TV manufacturing unit, he has little time for his family, leaving Astha to navigate her loneliness.

*A Married Woman* focuses on Astha's religious struggles as she seeks to redefine her identity beyond the rigid boundaries of her Hindu upbringing. Her involvement with Aijaz, a Muslim activist, challenges her religious views and engages her with the political and religious conflicts surrounding the Babri Masjid issue. As Astha becomes disillusioned with her indifferent husband, Hemant, and finds emotional solace in her work and thoughts of Aijaz, she increasingly distances herself from traditional roles. After Aijaz's tragic death, she turns to painting and becomes involved with activism, eventually meeting Pipeelika, Aijaz's widow. Together, they form a deep connection, and Astha challenges her subordination by pursuing a lesbian relationship, exploring her autonomy and feminine sensibility while raising social issues related to women. As Astha finds comfort and affection from Pipee—something she does not receive from Hemant—she reflects, "... if husband and wife are one person, then Pipee and she were even more so. She had shared parts of herself she had never shared before. She felt complete with her" (Kapur, 2002, p. 243). Consequently, Astha's marriage to Hemant begins to unravel. She perceives herself as a faithless wife and accepts the sorrow that comes with this realization. She reflects on her emotional distance from Hemant, saying, "When she was with Hemant, she felt like a woman of straw, her inner life dead, with a man who noticed nothing, with whom for that very reason it was soothing to be with. Her body was his, when made love it was Pipee's face Astha saw, her hand she felt. She accepted the misery of this dislocation as her due for being a faithless wife" (Kapur, 2002, p. 287). In the end, Astha's journey toward self-discovery and independence leads her back to her family, as she finds it impossible to break free from the constraints of traditional Indian patriarchy. Despite exploring a socially taboo lesbian relationship, she returns to her conventional married life, recognizing that a woman's place is



often seen within the family structure. Astha symbolizes the struggle of women in patriarchal societies to assert their identity, only to be pulled back by societal norms.

**c). Comparative Study of *Pride and Prejudice* and *Difficult Daughters***

A comparative study of Austen's (2010) *Sense and Sensibility* and Kapur's (2002) *A Married Woman* explores gender, class, and marriage within distinct societal contexts. *Sense and Sensibility*, set in Regency-era England, critiques the limited agency of women in a class-bound society where marriage is both a social necessity and an emotional journey. The Dashwood sisters navigate societal pressures around wealth, love, and duty. In contrast, *A Married Woman*, set in post-partition India, challenges the institution of marriage through Astha's quest for self-fulfillment and sexual autonomy, exploring issues of fidelity, identity, and personal liberation. While Austen (2010) critiques the tension between personal desires and societal obligations, Kapur (2002) interrogates marriage's role in restricting women's agency and identity in a post-colonial context.

**1. Marriage and Gender Roles in Society**

"[Austen's] fictional works can be viewed as works of a woman activist that challenge the man-centric society" (Chaudhuri, 2021, p. 135). In *Sense and Sensibility*, marriage as a union of man and woman is not only a romance but also a social and economic responsibility that women have to take in their lifetime. Because of the inheritance laws of England in the nineteenth century, women such as Elinor and Marianne Dashwood are left penniless when their father dies. This shows the societal expectation, reflecting that the woman's security and status depend on marriage. Women again had low decision-making power and were mainly used to make critical decisions regarding their choice of husbands with stability supplanting affection. The pressure of the need to marry well for both love and security is one of the story's significant themes because, throughout the novel, characters struggle to determine between the concepts of obligation and passion. "Kapur is the post-colonial writer who perceives the position of women in a patriarchal society and deals with the problems of woman. She is one of the greatest writer in expressing the female sufferings and cause" (Muthamil, & Kamala, 2018, p. 243). Similarly, in *A Married Woman*, marriage institution is represented as a suppressor of women's freedom. Astha, the main character in the novel, is trapped in the roles of a wife and a mother and desires to be free to have sexual liberality. The novel critiques marriage as a confining institution, particularly for women in post-colonial India, where societal expectations often trap them in traditional roles.

**2. Financial Dependence and Inheritance Laws**

"Social status of an individual depends upon the property attained by him as at that time people valued the patriarchal system the most" (Chaudhuri, 2021, p. 133). A significant social issue in *Sense and Sensibility* is the absence of financial independence for women. The inheritance laws of the time ensured that only male heirs could inherit property, leaving women dependent on the wealth and generosity of male relatives or a good marriage. When Mr. Dashwood dies, his property passes to his son John Dashwood, and his wife and daughters are left with little. On Mr. Dashwood's death, the estate reverts to his son, John Dashwood, and his wife and daughters are left with very little. This issue highlights the vulnerability of women who are not financially self-sufficient and must rely on the goodwill of male relatives. Likewise, in *A*



*Married Woman*, Astha's economic situation is defined by her marriage. While the novel addresses her financial independence in more modern contexts, the struggle for economic autonomy remains a key issue. The economic dependence of women, whether in 19th-century England or 20th-century India, underscores the limited options they have in determining their futures.

### **3. Class and Social Status**

Social class is a determinant factor in a character's decisions and behavior in *Sense and Sensibility*. Marriage is seen as a tool to maintain or elevate one's social status. For example, Willoughby's attraction to Marianne initially appears romantic, but his eventual marriage to Miss Grey is motivated by her wealth, illustrating how marriage was often driven by class considerations. The Dashwood sisters' low social standing after their father's death complicates their prospects, and much of the novel revolves around how characters navigate social expectations based on wealth and lineage. Karal (2024) claims that "*Sense and Sensibility* presents a poignant exploration of the economic vulnerabilities of women" (p. 2).

In *A Married Woman*, the social hierarchy also plays a role, especially in terms of religious and cultural divides. Astha's struggle to balance her desires for independence and her responsibilities within her marriage reflects the pressure of societal norms and expectations on women's lives, especially in a post-colonial context where tradition and modernity collide.

### **4. Sexuality and Identity**

The portrayal of sexuality in *A Married Woman* by Manju Kapur stands in stark contrast to Jane Austen's (2010) *Sense and Sensibility*. In Kapur's (2002) novel, Astha's sexual and emotional awakening through her affair with a woman challenges deeply entrenched societal norms surrounding marriage and gender roles. The narrative delves into the complexities of human desire and identity, illustrating Astha's journey of self-discovery. It becomes clear that her true self cannot be confined to the traditional expectations of being a wife and mother. Kapur presents Astha's experience as a poignant exploration of individuality in a society that often suppresses sexual freedom. On the other hand, *Sense and Sensibility* approaches sexuality in a more conventional and restrained manner. Marianne's passionate relationship with Willoughby is driven by emotional and physical attraction, yet the story continually underscores the social consequences of their bond. Austen (2010) portrays a world where passion is tempered by societal expectations and moral frameworks. Marianne's journey highlights the limitations imposed on the expression of sexuality, as her eventual reconciliation with societal norms becomes central to her story. Through these contrasting depictions, both novels shed light on the interplay between personal desires and societal constraints, albeit from different cultural and historical perspectives.

### **5. Individualism vs. Social Expectations**

In both *Sense and Sensibility* and *A Married Woman*, the tension between personal desires and societal expectations plays a central role. In Austen's (2010) novel, Marianne embodies the romantic idealist, following her heart with little regard for the consequences. Her passionate relationship with Willoughby exemplifies her belief in the power of unrestrained emotion. However, her journey teaches her the importance of balance—she comes to value





restraint and the need to harmonize her feelings with reason. Elinor, her sister, stands in contrast as a model of social propriety. She suppresses her emotions, prioritizing her family's well-being and adhering to societal norms. Her relationship with Edward Ferrars, while based on mutual respect and understanding, lacks the intensity of Marianne's romance, reflecting the compromises often required in adhering to societal expectations. In *A Married Woman*, Astha's struggle is a deeply personal one. Her desire for freedom and fulfillment leads her to question the traditional roles of wife and mother that society expects her to uphold. Her affair with a woman becomes a catalyst for self-discovery, as she grapples with the conflict between her own needs and the demands placed upon her by cultural norms. Astha's journey is a poignant exploration of identity and autonomy, as she strives to create a space where she can honor her true self while navigating the responsibilities of her familial life. Both novels, in their own ways, illuminate the delicate balance between individual desires and the pressures of conformity, offering profound insights into the human experience.

### **6. Morality and Responsibility**

In *Sense and Sensibility*, morality is a recurring theme, particularly in the realm of love and relationships. Willoughby, who initially appears charming and idealistic, ultimately reveals himself to be irresponsible and uncommitted. His actions, though seemingly romantic, lead to significant emotional and financial consequences for the women involved, particularly Marianne and the ill-fated Eliza. In contrast, Colonel Brandon's past is marked by its own moral complexities, yet his genuine care and sense of duty toward Marianne stand in stark opposition to Willoughby's recklessness. Austen (2010) uses these contrasts to explore how immorality and irresponsibility, especially in men, can deeply impact women's lives in a society where their security often hinges on the actions of others.

[Kapur] all made an effort to depict modern women who had resisted the constraints of tradition, culture, patriarchy, and societal mores, and did it successfully. Her goal is to be freed from the oppressive taboos and practises that the male-dominated society has placed on women. (Murugesan, & Udhayakumari, 2024, p. 323)

In *A Married Woman*, Astha's infidelity and her exploration of her desires confront the traditional moral framework of her society. Her emotional and sexual transgressions are not framed simply as betrayals, but as acts of resistance against a world that limits her agency. For Astha, these choices are a way to rediscover herself, to break free from the confines of her roles as a wife and mother, and to assert her individuality in a restrictive social structure. Both novels, though set in different times and cultural contexts, critique societal notions of morality and responsibility. They highlight how these constructs often serve to regulate women's lives and choices, exposing the double standards and constraints that shape their experiences. Through their characters' journeys, both Austen (2010) and Kapur (2002) invite readers to question conventional definitions of morality and to consider the deeper, often painful, complexities of human relationships.

### **7. Familial Relationships and Gender Expectations**

[Austen's] work continues to resonate today, prompting readers to reflect on the ongoing conversations surrounding class, gender, and societal expectations" (Karal, 2024, p. 3). Both



*Sense and Sensibility* and *A Married Woman* focus on the pressures women face from familial expectations. In Austen's (2010) novel, Elinor embodies the responsible daughter, sacrificing her own feelings for the sake of her family's well-being. Her unwavering sense of duty to her mother and sisters often comes at the expense of her personal happiness, mirroring the societal belief that women should prioritize family over themselves. Meanwhile, Marianne's emotional openness and refusal to hide her passions challenge these norms, though her journey ultimately reveals the limitations imposed by societal expectations. Together, their experiences highlight the tension between duty and desire, and the cost of conforming to—or defying—societal roles. *A Married Woman* “deals with the real practical problems of a woman pre and post marriage. Astha is the only child of her parents and hence her parents have a lot of expectations from her” (Ahluwalia, 2015, p. 400). Astha's experience as a wife and mother brings these pressures into a more contemporary and culturally specific context. Her desire for independence and personal fulfillment clashes with her familial obligations, creating a poignant struggle to reconcile her own aspirations with the expectations placed upon her. Astha's journey reflects the universal tension faced by women as they navigate their roles as caregivers while yearning for self-actualization.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, both *Sense and Sensibility* and *A Married Woman* offer profound critiques of the societal structures that limit women's choices and define their lives through marriage, financial dependence, class, and gender roles. Austen's (2010) novel, set in early 19th-century England, portrays a society where women's opportunities are constrained by inheritance laws, the pressures to marry well, and the emphasis on financial security and social status. Through the experiences of Elinor and Marianne, Austen (2010) highlights the emotional and practical challenges women face in navigating these rigid frameworks. In contrast, Kapur's (2002) *A Married Woman* explores the complexities of modern, post-colonial India, where societal expectations remain deeply entrenched even as the world around them changes. Astha's journey reflects the tension between fulfilling traditional roles as a wife and mother and seeking personal freedom and sexual autonomy. Her story challenges not only societal norms but also the institution of marriage itself, questioning its relevance and fairness in a rapidly evolving cultural context. Both novels emphasize the weight of societal expectations on women and the delicate balance they must maintain between personal desires and familial obligations. While Austen's characters contend with emotional and financial constraints within a rigid class structure, Kapur's (2002) protagonist confronts the limitations of identity and agency in a more contemporary, yet equally restrictive, setting. Despite their differences in time and place, these two works highlight the universal and enduring challenges women face in asserting their individuality and autonomy within confining social norms. Through their exploration of marriage, societal roles, and the struggle for self-actualization, both novels offer timeless insights into the resilience and complexity of women's lives.

### **References**

- Ahluwalia, S. (2015). Manju Kapur's *A Married Woman*: Theme of female struggle. *International Journal of Applied Research*, 1(4), 400-402.



- Al Areqi, R. M. M. (2022). The upper class's violence and violations in Megha Majumdar's *A Burning*. *مجلة العلوم التربوية و الدراسات الإنسانية*, 21, 564–581.  
<https://doi.org/10.55074/hesj.v0i21.431>
- Ali, F. F., & Otoluwa, M. H. (2021). New historicism analysis in *Sense and Sensibility* novel by Jane Austen. *British: Jurnal Bahasa dan Sastra Inggris*, 10(1), 65-77.
- Arisky, H. (2019). The sociology of literature: Theoretical premises. *Academia*. Retrieved from <https://www.academia.edu/30119257/>
- Austen, J. (2010). *Sense and sensibility*. Delhi, India: Sahni Publications.
- Beauvoir, S. de. (1982). *The second sex* (H. M. Parshley, Trans. & Ed.). Harmondsworth: Penguin. (Original work published 1949)
- Chaudhuri, A. (2021). Jane Austen's novels: A study from feminist perspective. *The Creative Launcher*, 6(5), 130-136.
- Dubey, A. (2013). Literature and society. *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, 9(6). Retrieved from <http://iosrjournals.org/iosr-jhss/studys/Vol9-issue6/O0968485.pdf?id=6191>
- Duhan, R. (2015). The relationship between literature and society. *Language in India*, 15(4). Retrieved from <http://www.languageinindia.com/april2015/roshiniliteraturesociety1.pdf>
- Gaonkar, K. (2022). Complexities in relationships portrayed in Manju Kapur's *A Married Woman*. *International Journal of Education (IJE)*, 3(2), 5-9.  
<https://iaeme.com/Home/issue/IJE?Volume=3&Issue=2>
- Hariharasudan, A., & Gnanamony, S. (2017). Feministic analysis of Manju Kapur's *A Married Woman*. *International Journal of Scientific Research and Education*, 5, 6135-6141.  
<https://doi.org/10.18535/ijrsre/v5i01.01>
- Kapur, M. (2002). *A married woman*. New Delhi, India: Faber and Faber Ltd.
- Karal, L. (2024). Exploring social class and gender roles in Jane Austen's novels. *International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research (IJFMR)*, 6(1), 1-4.
- Kusumawardhani, M., & Rahayu, E. (2020). Women independence in Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* as a feminism study. *Dinamika Bahasa Dan Budaya*, 15(1), 40-51.  
<https://doi.org/10.35315/bb.v15i1.7894>
- Larasati, I., & Prastiwi, Y. (2023). An analysis of individual behavior in Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*: A social psychological perspective. [Skripsi thesis, Universitas Muhammadiyah Surakarta]. Universitas Muhammadiyah Surakarta Repository.
- Lee, S. (2024). Struggle as class motif: 'Difficulty' in Douglas Stuart's *Shuggie Bain*. In *The Routledge Companion to Working-Class Literature* (1st ed., p. 14). Routledge.  
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003226246>
- Manis, J. G. (2014). The concept of social problems: Vox populi and sociological analysis. *Social Problems*, 21(3), 305–315. <https://doi.org/10.2307/799900>
- Manugeran, M., Suhadi, J., & Pardi, P. (2020). Literature as a medium of exposing social problems through Thomas Gray's *Elegy Written in A Country Churchyard*. *Journal of Language and Literature*, 20(1), 128.



- Mary, J. T. M., & Theresa, F. M. (2021). Tradition and autonomy in Manju Kapur's *A Married Woman*. *International Journal of Early Childhood Special Education (INT-JECSE)*, 13(2), 3022-3027. <https://doi.org/10.48047/intjecse/v13i2.21169>
- Murugesan, A., & Udhayakumari, K. (2024). Fragmented lives of women in the novels of Manju Kapur. *Boletín de Literatura Oral-The Literary Journal*, 11(1), 319-324.
- Muthamil, M. S., & Kamala, V. (2018). Portrayal of women in Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*. *Research Journal of English Language and Literature (RJELAL)*, 6(3), 243-246.
- Qasim, Z., Afzal, M., & Ali, F. (2024). Patriarchal subjugation of women in Sabyn Javeri's *Hijabistan: A feminist perspective*. *Journal of Applied Linguistics and TESOL (JALT)*, 7(4), 171-181.
- Ramish, R. (2022). *An introduction to comparative literature and investigating the mystical influence of Mawlana Jalaluddin Mohammad Balkhi on Walt Whitman* (Unpublished thesis). Ghazni University. <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/373426001>
- Sahin, E. (2016). On comparative literature. *International Journal of Literature and Arts*, 4(1-1), 5-12. <https://doi.org/10.11648/j.ijla.s.2016040101.12>
- Sasikala, A. (2018). Towards modernity in Manju Kapur's *A Married Woman*. *International Journal of English Literature and Social Sciences (IJELS)*, 3(1), 24-25. <https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels.3.1.5>
- Tötösy de Zepetnek, S. (1998). *Comparative Literature: Theory, Method, Application*. Rodopi. Amsterdam and Atlanta, The Netherlands and USA.