
Realism in the Portrayal of Women in the Select Novel of Jane Austen and Barbara Pym

Dr. Chhatbar Disha Jitendrabhai

Assistant Professor, School of Arts and Humanities, Dr. Subhash University, Junagadh, Gujarat.

Article Received: 26/04/2026**Article Accepted:** 29/05/2026**Published Online:** 30/05/2026**DOI:** 10.47311/IJOES.2026.8.05.514

Abstract

While dealing with limited characters from upper-middle-class English society, Jane Austen provided realistic picture of 19th century in her novels with acute observation. With female characters in the center, her novels end up with their marriage, which is the central theme too. Barbara Pym, a 20th century novelist, who is compared to Jane Austen by many critics, in many ways differs from Austen as well, specifically in her portrayal of the sadness of spinsters' life who are central characters in her novels. They are well educated and working women while Austen's heroines depend on men for money. However the increase in men's financial status depends on the dowry one's wife brings. But with this picture of women's place in society, Austen provides the real picture of her age the same applies to Pym's spinsters. They reflect the impact of the World Wars in society and also the effect of Education Act on women's literacy and their financial independence. As Austen's novels, Pym's novels too deal with the love affairs, but they do not end up with their union. This paper focuses on the traits of their characters, themes of the novels, and their realistic approach with the reference of selected novel by both the novelists.

Key Words: Realism, Realistic Novel, Women's role and education, Marriage.**Introduction:**

Through the ages the way women are portrayed in literature has changed in many ways with the changing society and the power women could hold and the positions they could gain in working place. In the novels of Jane Austen, women characters could be more prominent and active. With limited characters, Austen could show the place of women in society and their activities. The image of women is positive and they are self esteemed. They have emotional as well as rational bent of mind and they develop during the course of novel by learning through experiences. Barbara Pym, a 20th century novelist is many times compared to Jane Austen. Jane Austen, living in 19th century presented the reality of her time

and Barbara Pym does the same while writing about women in society through her novels in 20th century. She gives the freedom and opportunity to her women characters which Jane Austen could not give living in 19th century. She is known for the portrayal of the spinster's life. As in Austen's novel, there is a marriage plot, but it is not successful with the happy ending of marriage as in Austen's novels. In the novel of Barbara Pym, the protagonist is not bounded by any social conventions by marriage and it ends up with the protagonist's being unmarried and enjoying freedom it gives. For the analysis, 'Sense and Sensibility' by Jane Austen and 'Jane and Prudence' by Barbara Pym is taken into consideration.

Realism and Realistic Novel:

J.A.Cuddon defines realism in literature as, "the portrayal of life with fidelity. It is thus not concerned with idealization, with rendering things as beautiful when they are not, or in any way presenting them in any guise as they are not, nor, as rule, is realism concerned with presenting supernatural or transcendental." (Cuddon 590)

M.H. Abrams defines Realistic Novels as, "the fictional attempt to give the effect of realism by representing complex characters with mixed motives who are rooted in social class, operate in a developed social structure, interact with many other many other characters, and undergo plausible, everyday modes of experience." (Abrams 254) "If a realistic novel focuses on the customs, conventions and the ways of thinking and valuing of the upper social class, it is often called novel of manners." (Cuddon 54)

Jane Austen and Barbara Pym are realists when they represent women in their novels. In the novels of Jane Austen, readers are introduced to the 19th century English society and its customs and manners. Through her characters she gives the idea of their mentality and beliefs. Barbara Pym, with her developed women characters, describes the social scenario of her time. By creating humorous situation, she points out vices of society and by mocking at them, she satirizes orthodox views on women.

Women's place and independence in the novels of Jane Austen and Barbara Pym:

Jane Austen's novels, being novels of social manner, present realistic picture of society at her time and laughs at human follies while satirizing them gently. With emotional qualities, she gives intellectual quality to her Women characters. Sometimes they have power to control the male characters as well, as in 'Sense and Sensibility' Mrs. Fanny Dashwood could easily convince her husband to take decision in a way she wants. Mrs.Ferrars has every power to make any of his two sons as her inheritor. On the other hand there are characters like Mrs. Dashwood and Marianne who react to the situation and end up being disappointed as happens in the case of Willoughby. Elinor is practical and behaves as a stable person throughout the novel, and Marianne behaves irrationally and lives in the world of her own fancies. Both the sisters are shown as interested in reading and are having artistic talents. In a way the women protagonists are portrayed in a positive light, with development in their characters throughout the novel.

Caroline Zilboorg in 'Women's Writing: Past and Present' mentions that "Since women in the 19th century continued to be denied the education their brothers received, their hopes for an adult future lay in making a 'good' marriage. Without such financial security, a woman would continue to be a 'child', reliant on her father's income and good will, confined to her parents' home and dependent on her parent's will. Without an economically sensible marriage, a woman could neither bring up her children sensibly nor have a measure of independence of herself. It is no surprise, then, that 'the marriage plot' was central to most 19th century novels, and especially to those women writers" (Zilboorg 38).

Writing in 19th century, for Austen also marriage was a central plot as it is in 'Sense and Sensibility'. The dependence of women for financial support on men becomes clear in the thoughts of Mr. John Dashwood when he finds Colonel Brandon as a suitable match for Elinor without knowing intention neither of Elinor nor of Brandon. Lucy leaves Edward when he is disinherited. Though being intellectual and wise, women in Austen's novel are depended on men for wealth and social status.

Barbara Pym, a 20th century novelist, gives this financial independence to her female characters which gives them choice of remaining unmarried throughout the life. They are well educated women, belonging to Oxford in her novel 'Jane and Prudence'. As Caroline Zilboorg mentions, in 20th C. women got right to vote and in 1920 Oxford decided to grant degree to women for the first time. Still women had fewer choice of occupation open to them. If they worked as a teacher, they could teach young children. If they chose the field of medicine, they could be nurse, not a doctor. They were paid lower than men and were given lower position. This situation of inequality is also altered in Pym's novel.

In the first chapter of 'Jane and Prudence', Pym shows the place women have gained in society. The novel opens with a "Reunion of old Students" at Oxford. The role of principal and teacher are given to women and the protagonists of the novel, Jane and Prudence, are shown a friend but they met for the first time as a tutor and student respectively. Through the character of Jane, Pym presents possibilities provided to and obstacles faced by a married woman. It was due to her husband, Nicholas's working place that she got chance to help Ms. Birkinshaw, another spinster, who had taught many generations of students and one of whom was Jane, to help her with English students. But she could not continue it after two years due to the change of her husband's working place.

She had a dream of doing a research which could not be fulfilled due to her marriage. When she tried to recall her subject for research she was unable to recollect it rightly. When she was engaged to Nicholas, she had thought about the clergymen's wives who used to write articles in the 'Church Times' and had fancied about it but she was disillusioned soon when in a town her "outspokenness and fantastic turn of mind were not appreciated" (Pym 2) The

women in the reunion have not fulfilled their dreams after being married that is revealed by Jane in her conversation to Prudence.

She is very much influenced by her learning literature and it is seen in her day to day life and her attitude towards situations. She finds herself many times as behaving as a character from literature and any situation similar to another situation in literature. She has preserved her notebooks of Oxford and reads them. At first it is seen when she thought about Miss. Birkinshaw, who had started study of Metaphysical poets which is still incomplete, if she had ever fall in love or not. Then she, in her imagination, concludes that her husband might have been killed or died of typhoid fever or she might have rejected him in the favour of Donne, Marvell and Carew. When Miss. Birkinshaw talks to her about the country where she is moving with her husband is near the cathedral town, she again recalls the novels by Hugh Walpole. She is very intellectual and thoughtful at times. While going to London, during conversation with Miss Doggett she ponders over Wordsworth's poem, 'We are Seven'. She had expected Mr. Grampian to be a man like Mr. Rochester, from 'Jane Eyre'. When she succeeds in making Prudence and Fabian meet, she feels that she is like Emma Woodhouse, a protagonist of 'Emma' by Jane Austen. She is so much involved and influenced by literature that any other subject than Literature seems boring to her. When her daughter, Flora who has obtained literature at Oxford at the age of 18, informs her in the letter that her friend, Paul has obtained Geography, she feels it strange. Jane ponders over his choosing Geography, "which seemed to her, in her ignorance, a barren, dry subject, lacking the excitement of English or Classical Literature or Philosophy" (Pym 139) She even assumes that after a party at her home, he must have talked about Geography during an evening walk with Flora.

Impact of marriage on friendship is also mentioned in the Novel. Prudence thinks that husbands took friends away and Jane has taken the most independence among her friends. Pym writes, "Compared with Jane's life, Prudence's seemed rich and full of promise. She had her work, her independence, her life in London and her love for Arthur Grampian" She also mentions that Prudence has freedom to fall in love with another person.

When Jane has failed as a Vicar's wife and is bound by her responsibilities, she finds time for herself and her interests. She finds excuses to be absent from Parish duties and to stay a night with Prudence at her flat. She visits Literary Society's meeting at London. There were speakers, and elderly female novelist, a distinguished critic and a beautiful young poet. She meets a novelist, Barbara Bird there who has written seventeen novels but not a prominent novelist yet. Here Pym satirizes the novelists who write for public and publishers instead of producing a work of real value when Barbara Bird, whose first name is the same as the novelist herself, says, "Miss Bird's readers know what to expect now and they will not be disappointed." (Pym, Barbara 126)

At her home too, she has her own voice and her husband applies her suggestions. She suggests informal setting for P.C.C. meeting, with comfortable chairs, opportunity to smoke and to have a tea whenever needed. She is very outspoken and reacts in the meeting in the discussion on the cover of a magazine which disappoints Nicholas too and she also regrets on it later on. Here also her fanciful nature has its effects. She thinks that the people of country were noble, through contact with the earth and Nature but is shocked to know that they were worried about petty things.

To indicate the freedom of an unmarried independent woman, Pym portrays the character of Prudence. Prudence says, "I often think being married would be rather nuisance. I've got a nice flat and am so used to living in my own I should hardly know what to do with a husband" (Pym 5) Prudence is a personal assistant to Dr. Grampian and her work is of seeing books through the press. She is affectionate towards Dr. Grampian but her love is not returned. She is dedicated to her work and does not indulge in the petty conversation of her co-workers. In other employers, two are females and one is male. Jane thinks Fabian Driver, a widower, to be a perfect match for Prudence, despite being acknowledged that he has been unfaithful to his wife, Constance, who had died when Jane saw him for the first time. This brings change in Prudence's life. After meeting Fabian, she loses her affection for Dr. Grampian and he becomes a common man for her.

With the positive aspect of female characters, Pym also portrays female jealousy which brings disaster in the other's life. Jessie Morrow becomes an antagonist in the love of Prudence and Fabian. She does not reveal her love till Prudence enters his life, with whom she becomes insecure and with the knowledge of her being less beautiful than Prudence and therefore unable to attract Fabian directly, she attempts in other ways to win his heart. She was a neighbor to him so she started visiting him frequently and ultimately wins his favour which ends up with the rejection of Prudence and the marriage fixing of Jessie and Fabian. To this situation, Prudence reacts wisely. It does not affect her work and rather she behaves like a bold woman and instead of sobbing and cursing, her grief finds another way and she gets ready excessively and goes to a new place to have lunch. In this way she hides her broken feelings from the world and handles this situation. She becomes friend to her co-worker, Geoffrey Manifold and enjoys time with him. At the end of the novel, when she is invited for a dinner with Dr. Grampian, whom she had loved once, she denies it firmly just by saying that she had an engagement that evening. In this way, she chooses her self-respect over unreturned love.

Not only major characters but also the minor women characters in the novel are also shown as intelligent and independent. Women are shown as involved in every occasion in the novel. The Church is decorated by middle class ladies for Harvest festival. Among them, Jessie Morrow and Miss Dogget work at church. They are also running a tea-shop with home-made cakes.

Women are better at writing and observing as Elinor and Marianne in 'Sense and Sensibility'. Fabian tries a lot to write in a great manner like Prudence but fails to do so. Prudence could identify change in his behavior and in the way of his writing but at first avoids it by believing in his excuses on the name of his duty and position. The women in the novel are good readers. Constance was also a reader. This comes into the notice when Jane finds some books of poetry in her room. She believes that she might be reading it secretly as her neighbors are not aware of it. She thinks that people seems to feel ashamed of admitting that they read poetry unless they have degree in English. She also finds a letter with the mentions of poetic lines.

With positive female characters, Pym also introduces traditional views on women through some of her characters which are proved wrong by the women in the novel. By this she laughs at such views and criticizes them. Fabian is astonished at the idea that Jane could have written books and says, "I always think women who write books sound rather formidable" (Pym 107) One of the reasons he leaves Prudence is his fear of the changes she may bring in his life and home. Mr. Mortlake, a member in P.C.C meeting says, "Man is known by his wife" He also says that due to Jane, Vicar may not get promotion as she is not a good cook as Mrs. Pritchard, a wife of previous Vicar, was. She is so careless about household things that everything is handled by a maid. This proves to be ridiculous when Mr. and Mrs. Pritchards visit them and there was soap in the shape of rabbit. Later Eleanor Hitchens, a friend of Prudence also shows the view that a marriage can settle a woman.

Conclusion:

In 'Jane and Prudence', Pym covers many aspects of women's life and through her characters shows how they fulfill their duties. The aspect of married woman, a mother is introduced by Jane and how marriage becomes hurdle to the fulfillment of dreams in spite of being capable of completing it, is focused. Her failure to be a good wife also shows the impact of unfulfilled and sacrificed dreams. On the other hand the situation of a working and financially independent women and more possibility of getting more freedom and space for themselves are shown through the character of Prudence. Not just by protagonists, but also by other women characters, the scope of women to work is widened in Pym's novel. She criticizes the orthodox views on women and proves women to be intellectually and emotionally capable of surviving without man. Like in the novels of Jane Austen, Pym's women characters do not need a male counterpart to make them enjoy life fully.

Works Cited

- Abrams, M.H., and Geoffrey Galt Harpham. A Glossary of Literary Terms. 11th ed., Cengage Learning, 2015 Pp. 333-35
- Austen, Jane. Sense and Sensibility. New Delhi: FP Classics, 2017.

SP Publications

International Journal Of English and Studies (IJOES)

An International Peer-Reviewed and Refereed Journal; **Impact Factor:8.337(SJIF) ISSN:**
2581-8333|**Volume 8, Issue-5(May);2026**

Cuddon, J.A. Dictionary of Literary Terms & Literary Theory. 5th ed., Penguin Group, 2013
Pp. 590-93

Pym, Barbara. Jane and Prudence. UK: Virago Press, 2007.

Zilboorg, Caroline. Women's Writing: Past and Present. Barlow, Adrian, editor. UK:
Cambridge University Press, 2004.