

Feminism and the Film Adaptation of Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*

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Abstract

Sense and Sensibility is Ang Lee's first Hollywood film, which is adapted from Jane Austen's 1811 novel of the same name. Produced in 1995, it cinematically visualizes an early, inchoate stage of feminist consciousness that is crafted in the binary opposites of Austen's main fictional characters. This article engages with the feminist theme of the film version of *Sense and Sensibility* directed by Lee. Through an elaborate analysis of the two female protagonists' sense and sensibility by reading some relevant scenes, it will explore the representation of British women's life experiences and argue that the rendering of feminism extends a transcendental sympathy for women's sufferings, or rather, their emotional distress in the synchronic patriarchal society in *Sense and Sensibility*. What underlies the discourse of sense and sensibility is the two heroines' nonautonomous life predetermined by the male-dominated social system in the late eighteenth-century England. The purpose of this essay is to examine the feminist messages of Ang Lee's film in his portrayal of the Dashwood women's predicament, with reference to the original fiction that is contextualized in particular social and cultural context.

Keywords: *Sense and Sensibility*, Ang Lee, feminism, Jane Austen, women, marriage.

1. Introduction

Sense and Sensibility is Ang Lee's first Hollywood film. It won the Best Adapted Screenplay at the Oscar Awards in 1995 and rapidly brought tremendous fame to the Chinese American director. The film is a British period drama adapted from Jane Austen's first novel by the actress Emma Thompson, who also acted as the leading role of Elinor Dashwood in the film. Despite the fact that "identity" is an overarching theme permeating most of Ang Lee's film works, feminism is a notable subject matter which has been

relatively neglected by scholars but worthy of investigation. In the context of this female-centered film, one can discern the obvious feminist messages.

This study engages with the feminist theme of *Sense and Sensibility* directed by Ang Lee. Through an elaborate analysis of the two female protagonists' sense and sensibility by reading some relevant scenes, it will explore the representation of British women's life experiences and argue that the rendering of feminism extends a transcendental sympathy for women's sufferings, or rather, their emotional distress in the synchronic patriarchal society. In the film narration, Ang Lee utilizes binary opposites in the delineation of two parallel protagonists with contrasting personality traits. In the unfolding of the storyline, after undergoing mental torture in varying degrees, the characters gradually transform from weak into strong individuals, capable of coping with the adverse social and cultural milieu. Starting from the history of feminism and critical theories of feminism in cinema, my study principally attempts to deal with this research question: To what extent does *Sense and Sensibility* reveal the feminist theme? The purpose of this essay is to examine the feminist messages of Ang Lee's film in his portrayal of the Dashwood women's predicament caused by sexist law, with reference to the original fiction that is contextualized in particular social and cultural context.

2. What is Feminism?

Feminism, broadly speaking, can be concisely defined as a monolithic concept of social movements and ideologies whose guiding principles aim at women's equality and rights with men. The activists of feminism are called feminists. To know more about what feminism is, it is necessary to examine the evolution of feminism in retrospect. Chronologically, feminism, which modern feminist scholars commonly refer to, can be divided into three stages: Women's Liberation Movement (retrospectively called first-wave feminism as well), second-wave feminism, and third-wave feminism. Originally, Women's Liberation Movement was the first feminist movement which arose in Europe and North America in the late nineteenth century. Its major concern related to "women's suffrage." To be more specific, holding the common contemporary belief that all men and women should be equal under the law, the campaign was committed to striving for equal voting rights with men. After its ultimate success in the 1920s, there emerged the second-wave feminism spanning from the early 1960s to the late 1980s which aimed to expand women's equal rights in more areas, such as education, employment, health care, politics, and the like. Simply stated, second-wave feminists fought against sexism in a much broader scope. And the second wave emphasized the importance of unity and sisterhood. Then the last decade of the twentieth century witnessed the third-wave of feminism, which purportedly launched itself as a response to the unfulfilment of the second-wave feminism's goals.

It was known for transcending the barriers of race, ethnicity, belief, class, social status, and sexual orientation to pursue equal rights for all women throughout the world. Compared with the second wave, the agenda of the third wave became more inclusive and global.

The third-wave turned out to be a turning point for the continuous feminist movement. It seemed to have gradually lost its momentum, in contrast to numerous activists' massive initiatives and campaigns in the past. During this period, academia and popular media became the main site for discussing feminism. But the polarization of pro- and anti-feminism forces complicated the issue of feminism. On the one hand, there emerged within feminism a division of activist groups and different theories of academic feminism, thus causing various conflicts. As a consequence, the connotations of feminism became diversified. On the other hand, oppositional voices and negative images concerning feminism and feminists came to the fore. According to Kim A. Loudermilk's summary in her book *Fictional Feminism: How American Bestsellers Affect the Movement for Equality*, three aspects were primarily involved in the heated debates of the 1990s: "the battle over 'political correctness,' the idea of 'postfeminism,' and the 'backlash' phenomenon."¹

Now, it is debatable that we are living in a new era of "postfeminism." Despite its frequent appearance in the literature of feminism, there is neither a unanimous definition of postfeminism nor a distinct boundary between postfeminism and the third wave. Generally, the former is closely interrelated with the latter. As Kathleen Rowe Karlyn notes, in *Unruly Girls, Unrepentant Mothers: Redefining Feminism on Screen*, postfeminism evolves into "a contradictory mixture of feminist and antifeminist notions."² Karlyn also claims that postfeminism is "a sensibility that has characterized contemporary, popular understandings of gender, and the broad discursive field that frames both Girl Culture and the Third Wave."³ Echoing Karlyn's argument, Rosalind Gill writes that "postfeminism should be conceived of as a sensibility." Moreover, in Gill's definition, it embraces some interwoven elements, such as:

the shift from objectification to subjectification; the emphasis upon self-surveillance, monitoring and discipline; a focus upon individualism, choice and empowerment; the dominance of a makeover paradigm; a resurgence in ideas of natural sexual difference; a marked sexualization of culture; and an emphasis upon consumerism and the commodification of difference.⁴

In the ongoing discussions of postfeminism, a strange cultural phenomenon is occurring that more and more young women increasingly repel the label of feminism or refuse to identify themselves with being a feminist, despite the fact that most of them approve of the fundamental principles of

feminism. Nonetheless, in the feminist discourse, postfeminism is a highly polemic concept, which some feminist scholars even deprecate. As Lisa Tuttle contends, “no matter how the term is redefined or justified, its use is anti-feminist, for it works against the continuing feminist struggle by seeking to limit feminism, to define it and place it in history.”⁵ In this regard, Esther Kaplan responds by saying: “Maybe we’re in an age of postfeminism, but that doesn’t mean feminist objectives have been accomplished, so much as that antifeminism is acceptable.”⁶

Needless to say, feminism is a problematic term that is difficult to conceptualize, let alone the multifarious feminist theories. Apart from the three “waves” of feminism and postfeminism, there exist diverse versions of “feminisms” in current feminist scholarship, within different analytical approaches. To take an example, Isobel Armstrong, among others, classifies feminism into three categories in *The Radical Aesthetic*: “Expressive, Phallic, and Ludic feminism.”⁷ Her taxonomy of feminism is based on the commonality of a large range of major writings by feminism’s scholars. “Expressive” writers, like Helene Cixous, Elaine Showalter, and bell hooks, revolve around women’s universal experience of violence or oppression which triggers women’s cry of pain and invokes the call for solidarity. “Expressive” feminism contributes to improving the “practical lives of ordinary women.”⁸ “Phallic feminism” is basically a unified name of two patterns of feminism, Marxist and Freudian or psychoanalytical feminism which dominate the feminist critiques. The essential element of the former is “the anguish of class,” and that of the latter is “the anguish of Oedipal sacrifice.”⁹ As Armstrong puts it, “the economic structure of women’s oppression, the ‘without’ which organizes sexual difference, women’s psychic lives and their entry into the symbolic order – these are the inexhaustible lyric themes of Phallic thought.”¹⁰ “Ludic feminism,” under the lead of Judith Butler, refers to the models of sexuality in which the intricate relationship between language and body, sex and gender are elucidated in detail.

Rather than debating feminism per se or expatiating on theories pertaining to it, this study attempts to investigate the feminist attributes of the female-centered film *Sense and Sensibility*. Hence, when it comes to the term feminism, in my interpretation of Ang Lee’s cinema I use it very loosely. No matter how differently feminism has been defined, from my standpoint, feminism, in whatever medium it is presented, means standing for women’s rights, equality, freedom, opportunity, autonomy, choice, and well-being. No one will deny that women’s liberation movement and historical waves of feminist campaigns have substantially changed women’s lives and influenced the world.

3. *Sense and Sensibility*

Although many literary scholars account *Sense and Sensibility* as one of Jane Austen's most obscure or least studied novels, if compared with other works like *Pride and Prejudice*, *Emma*, and *Mansfield Park*, its 1995 film adaptation largely reversed the original work's fate. The film achieved enormous success, commercially and artistically. It made such a hit that it aroused a new surge of Austen's adaptations on silver screen and television in the years that followed. Undoubtedly, Emma Thompson's Oscar-winning screenplay, Ang Lee's characteristic directing, excellent actors and actresses and so on, deserve the credits for the film's widespread tremendous popularity. Also, as Lindsay Doran, the film's producer from Columbia Pictures, writes in her introduction to Thompson's book *The Sense and Sensibility Screenplay and Diaries* (1996), the film epitomizes all the key qualities that would constitute a good novel-turned-into-film, such as "wonderful characters, a strong love story (actually, three strong love stories), surprising plot twists, good jokes, relevant themes, and a heart-stopping ending."¹¹

3.1. Contextualizing Feminism in *Sense and Sensibility*

Sense and Sensibility reproduces the social conventions, traditional codes of conduct, and most importantly the intricate relations between love, marriage, money, property, and duty, in the countryside of England at the turn of the nineteenth century. Through the portrayal of the outer social milieu and the inner struggle of these female characters, it brings the contemporary viewers back to their hardship, helplessness, repression, and agony that the women in Austen's time underwent. At the very beginning, the film provides the historical and cultural setting of the tale. What comes into our sight is a deathbed scene when Mr. Dashwood, unburdens his apprehension to his son John Dashwood from an earlier marriage. The dying old man is deeply worried about the dowry thing of his daughters and their ominous future after his demise. Accordingly, the father, at his last gasp, implores his sole legitimate heir to make a serious promise to be generous to his half-sisters. Clearly, he feels so anguished about the statutory inheritance which will immediately lead to the impoverishment and misery of his wife and daughters. The dialogue between Elinor (Emma Thompson) and her little sister Margaret (Emilie François) exposes the cruel reality the Dashwood women have to face:¹²

ELINOR: Margaret, are you there? Please come down. John and Fanny will be here soon.

MARGARET (V/O): Why are they coming to live at Norland? They already have a house in London.

ELINOR: Because houses go from father to son, dearest - not from father to daughter. It is the law.

ELINOR: If you come inside, we could play with your atlas.

MARGARET (V/O): It's not my atlas any more. It's their atlas.
(34)

It is true that upon their arrival John and his wife Fanny (Harriet Walter) displace the elder Mrs. Dashwood (Gemma Jones) as head of the manor. Moreover, John, under his wife's interference, soon breaches his promise of giving more financial support to the impoverished Dashwood women. Elinor's explanation about "the law" brings to light the eighteenth-century women's fundamental unfair treatment in entailment. In a large sense, the unequal right of inheritance relegates women to a passive state without financial autonomy, which will easily bring about females' subordination to males. They are driven into a dilemma: marriage, as a matter of fact, becomes the only way to change women's destiny; but it is basically difficult for women without a considerable dowry to marry well. It is conceivable how eager women are to find a good husband, thereby attaining financial security and improving their social standing. One might think that it is not far-fetched to associate Jane Austen's similar family encounter with her unmarried life. Or to put it another way, Austen interweaves her personal misfortune into her fiction to voice her feminist complaint against the patrilineal inheritance.¹³

The subsequent depiction of the Dashwood women's misery is likewise able to strike a chord with spectators who identify with feminism. We are shown that they dramatically fall from a prosperous life of landed gentry to a precarious situation of poverty. For instance, after they are dispossessed of the entire estate at Norland, Elinor has no choice but to discharge most of their servants and sadly say goodbye to her beloved horses, which implies that they are losing their comfortable life. The transition from prosperity to poverty, along with the marked disparity of identity, makes all of them suffer: Descending from hostess to homeless, Mrs. Dashwood cannot forbear weeping all day long; Filled with grief and apprehension, Elinor desperately tries all means to seek a new residence with an extremely tight budget; Marianne (Kate Winslet) becomes truculent, and vents her displeasure with plaintive music; Little Margaret chooses to hide herself from seeing anybody. Visibly, the early part of the film is suffused with a doleful tone. There is no exaggeration to say that the vicissitudes of the central characters' life, which will be discussed in detail later, are rooted in the patriarchal society of the late eighteenth century when British women unfortunately did not share some basic rights with men that we contemporary audiences take for granted.

Aside from the inequality in the right of inheritance, *Sense and Sensibility* illuminates the issue of women's employment in relation to gender roles. Back to the days when Austen grew up, women were still restricted within the domestic sphere. Conventionally, it was uncommon that women freely jumped out of the confines of tradition to take up a profession and make their own money. In the bucolic horse-riding scene, Elinor and Edward enjoy themselves

in the pastoral view and their developing intimate relationship. But their conversation delivers a thought-provoking message of the awkward predicament the Dashwoods are stuck in:

ELINOR: You talk of feeling idle and useless. Imagine how that is compounded when one has no choice and no hope whatsoever of any occupation.

EDWARD: Our circumstances are therefore precisely the same.

ELINOR: Except that you will inherit your fortune.

ELINOR: We cannot even earn ours.

EDWARD: Perhaps Margaret is right.

ELINOR: Right?

EDWARD: Piracy is our only option. (49)

Elinor's words sound so audacious and blunt that they "shock" Edward. Having neither heritage nor work, she is straightforward enough to pour out her worries about their difficult situation in front of her suitor. Her ironic allusion to the disadvantageous status quo of women at that time—no legacy, no means of livelihood, which Austen personally experienced as well, hits the nail on the head. Without access to employment women were rendered incapable of obtaining economic independence, which justifies the assumption that all they could do was to procure a good husband. In this regard, Mary Wollstonecraft relates women's dependence upon marriage with their destitution of a proper education in her *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. She assumes that "If they were better educated, women would not then marry for support, as men accept places under government, and neglect the implied duties."¹⁴ Wollstonecraft's view is reasonably plausible, but it does not necessarily apply to the case of Dashwood sisters. As far as the film and the novel are concerned, both Elinor and Marianne are well-educated and intelligent, as with the author Miss Austen. Nevertheless, Austen had to have her first novel *Sense and Sensibility* published at her own expense after almost sixteen years of its completion.¹⁵ As a rebuttal to Wollstonecraft's point, it might be convincingly argued that Austen's case serves as incontestable evidence of the straitened circumstances that educated women were likely caught in. To a certain degree, it mirrors what Margaret Kirkham observes in *Jane Austen, Feminism and Fiction* when she responds to Wollstonecraft's aforementioned opinion: "But as things are, the employments open to them 'far from being liberal are menial.' Even a girl of good education could look forward to nothing better than being a governess."¹⁶ A heavy feministic message is articulately conveyed in the disguise of this romantic horse-riding episode. Simultaneously, the unfavorable circumstances throw the two heroines into a passive position and foreshadow the setbacks they are to be confronted with.

As the plot unfolds, the film shifts its focus on the central theme of love and marriage. Edward Ferrars (Hugh Grant) is the elder of Fanny's two brothers, namely, the legal inheritor of the Ferrars' large estate. His visit to Norland Park embarks on a bumpy road to love. In stark contrast with his snobbish, selfish, avaricious sister, Edward is surprisingly found to be an affable, considerate, cultivated gentleman. His qualities, such as wit, modesty, morality, and compassion, resonate with those of Elinor. Naturally Edward and Elinor hit it off well. Before long, his sojourn ignites Mrs. Dashwood's hope for a potential good marriage for her eldest daughter Elinor. Therefore, she intentionally delays their departure for the new habitation—Barton Cottage in Devonshire which is rather far, so that Elinor can take advantage of the opportunity to develop the romance. Yet, beyond her expectations, she finds herself overwhelmed with humiliation and anger instead of happiness.

Following a long shot of the camera, we see another sweet scene in which Elinor and Edward are strolling down a beautiful field. With their backs on us, they seem to be immersed in their happy chitchat in an intimate atmosphere. Then the camera rapidly switches to a close shot where Mrs. Dashwood and her daughter-in-law Fanny coincidentally catch sight of the couple's intimate contact—Edward drapes Elinor's falling shawl back over her shoulders. At the very moment, from the visual angle of Mrs. Dashwood and Fanny, the audience can see their side faces. While Edward is full of tenderness and affectionateness, Elinor smiles coyly but happily. On beholding this scenario, Mrs. Dashwood, beaming at Fanny, initiates a substantial conversation, which is so significant that it is worth quoting here completely:

MRS DASHWOOD: We are all so happy that you chose to invite Edward to Norland. He is a dear boy and we are all very fond of him.

FANNY: We have great hopes for him. Much is expected of him by our mother with regard to his profession-

MRS DASHWOOD: Naturally.

FANNY: And in marriage. She is determined that both he and Robert will marry well.

MRS DASHWOOD: Of course. But I hope she desires them to marry for love, first and foremost? I have always felt that, contrary to common wisdom, true affection is by far the most valuable dowry.

FANNY: Love is all very well, but unfortunately we cannot always rely on the heart to lead us in the most suitable directions.

FANNY: You see, my dear Mrs. Dashwood, Edward is entirely the kind of compassionate person upon whom penniless women can prey - and having entered into any kind of understanding, he would

never go back on his word. He is quite simply incapable of doing so. But it would lead to his ruin. I worry for him so, Mrs. Dashwood. My mother has always made it perfectly plain that she will withdraw all financial support from Edward, should he choose to plant his affections in less . . . exalted ground than he deserves. (56-57)

The overtones of Fanny's logic on love and marriage are both comprehensible and threatening to old Dashwood: Your "penniless" daughter can never match up with my brother; if he chooses an unsuitable marriage at his own will, his right of primogeniture will be abrogated. Fanny's acerbic words, along with her air of overbearing superiority, make Mrs. Dashwood almost petrified. Fanny severely thwarts her ambition and incites her sense of humiliation. She flies into rage. To maintain her self-esteem, immediately afterwards Mrs. Dashwood summons her daughters to set off for Barton Cottage, a guest accommodation on the estate of her cousin, Sir John Middleton. In doing so, the budding love between Elinor and Edward strikes aground because of the problem of "dowry." As we know from the later plot, Elinor's great anguish is increasingly exacerbated by Edward's previous secret engagement with Lucy Steele and the rumor of their marriage.

In the social context of Austen's fiction, marriage was virtually likened to the conversion of currency, or rather, an event of merging assets. In the matrimonial alliance of families, economic and social status normally took precedence over true affection. Furthermore, according to Deborah Kaplan's extensive study in her *Jane Austen among Women*, "marriage was the only option that enabled women of the lesser gentry to secure their social status economically. Even women with substantial legacies could not achieve adequate social repute without realizing the conjugal destiny marked out for them in conduct books."¹⁷ Kaplan's study explains why making a good marriage was the main goal which young girls were trained for in the conventional rules of the mainstream society. Likewise, it vindicates the popularity of the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century conduct books, which accorded great importance to marriage as a means of changing women's destiny. Despite this, as the statistics gathered by Kaplan have confirmed, approximately a quarter percent of daughters descending from English middle- and upper-class families failed to find ideal spouses in their lifetime in the last decade of the eighteenth century. What deserves our attention is that the essential cause of the high celibacy rate lay in the "intensification of patrilineage customs."¹⁸ Concerning this phenomenon, there could be no better example than Jane Austen herself. The novelist, as well as a large number of her contemporaneous elite women, was forced to remain unmarried all her life. From another point of view, one can argue that Austen's lifelong singlehood is per se a feminist declaration of independence which protests

against patriarchal social customs, pecuniary matrimonial values, and the exploitation of women in the marriage market. For many of those widowed women and their daughters just like the Dashwood family, life was so hard that they “could only attach themselves as dependents to the domestic circles of their relatives.”¹⁹ With the downturn in fortune, their daughters’ marriage prospects were destined to be murky.

The gender-based social and historical milieu in England, which reappears authentically in the initial scenes taking place at Norland Park, frames the tone of *Sense and Sensibility*. It recounts far more than the romance of the main characters. From all indications discussed above, the victimization of the young women, represented by their constraints of inheritance right, freedom of employment, and choice of marriage, is arguably more central to the subject matter. What is in store for the two sisters are emotional and mental trials and tribulations in their pursuit of love and marriage. The feminist rendering of the film is inextricably linked with the feminist tendencies of Austen’s original work. That is to say, the director visually lays bare Austen’s feminist thinking hidden in her debate of the two sisters’ sense and sensibility.

3.2. Contrasting Two Main Characters’ “Sense” and “Sensibility”

To investigate the representation of the film’s female images, it helps to conceptualize “sense” and “sensibility”. As the title manifests, *Sense and Sensibility* contrasts the two Dashwood sisters’ oppositional temperament which leads to the tension of their sisterhood as well as their different kinds of wretchedness in their courtship. To better understand what the two terms imply, it is indispensable to go back to Austen’s narrative. At the end of the novel’s first chapter, the writer introduces the two heroines at length. The elder sister Elinor, nineteen years old, exemplifies “sense”. She is depicted as a prudent girl who behaves moderately and has a good control of her emotions:

[Elinor] possessed a strength of understanding and coolness of judgment which qualified her ... to be the counselor of her mother, and enabled her frequently to counteract ... that eagerness of mind in Mrs. Dashwood which must generally have led to imprudence. She had an excellent heart;--her disposition was affectionate, and her feelings were strong; but she knew how to govern them ...²⁰



Marianne (L) and Elinor (R)

In marked contrast, Marianne, two years younger than Elinor, personifies “sensibility”. She is painted as an impulsive, unbridled girl who has no reserve to express feelings on any occasion: “Marianne’s abilities were, in many respects, quite equal to Elinor’s. She was sensible and clever; but eager in everything, her sorrows, her joys, could have no moderation. She was generous, amiable, interesting: she was everything but prudent.”²¹ Although she endows them with some common merits, clearly Austen attempts to underline the remarkable difference of the two sisters’ disposition, especially in their expression of feelings.

The dichotomy of Elinor’s sense and Marianne’s sensibility essentially reflects the contrasting relation of two ideological trends—Rationalism and Romanticism. In the post-Revolutionary period of the eighteenth century, Rationalism, with its dominant role in the ethos of British society, valued reason or rational thought and choice in scientific areas and many spheres of life. Then towards the century’s end, when Austen and her characters lived, Romanticism, which is often associated with liberalism, emerged to propagate the significance of emotion and nature, thus forming a confrontation with rationality. As Gilbert Ryle points out in *Jane Austen and the Moralists*, “*Sense and Sensibility* really is about the relations between Sense and Sensibility or, as we might put it, between Head and Heart, Thought and Feeling, Judgment and Emotion, or Sensibleness and Sensitiveness.”²² For the women intellectuals in Austen’s age, the sense vs. sensibility question was reduced to a man vs. woman debate. In a mass of literary works, man was made to be the incarnation of rationality, while woman was stereotyped as an emotional creature. Here Susan Moller Okin’s reading of Jean-Jacques Rousseau offers us a good example:

Woman’s function is seen as physical and sensual, whereas man’s potential is seen as creative and intellectual. For centuries, the extreme disparities between the method and extent of the education of the two sexes have been conveniently glossed over, as they are in Rousseau, as the case is made that women, while intuitive and

equipped with a talent for detail, are deficient in rationality and quite incapable of abstract thought.²³

However, the enlightened women refuted such an assertion of women's innate tendency of irrationality. "Like other 'moralists,'" as Margaret Kirkham notes, "they thought Sense, or Reason, a better guide to moral principles than Sensibility, or Feeling, and wished to show that women were no less capable of rational judgment than men."²⁴ On the grounds of this, many critics state that Austen gives more weight to Elinor's compliance with social conventions, like decorum and restraint, than Marianne's recalcitrant sensibility, thus concluding that Austen endorses Rationalism rather than Romanticism.

Yet, based on the film version's *Sense and Sensibility*, it can be argued that the director offers equal importance to both Elinor's sense and Marianne's sensibility. By constructing elaborate parallels and contrasts between the two central characters, from the feminist point of view, the film features the affliction and struggle which Elinor and Marianne both experience, their temperamental conflicts in relation to values of love, and their gradual transformation into a balance between sense and sensibility, when both relationships, as well as their sisterhood, go through turns and twists.

4. Conclusion

Ang Lee's film *Sense and Sensibility* cinematically visualizes an early, inchoate stage of feminist consciousness that is crafted in the binary opposites of Austen's fictional project. What underlies the discourse of sense and sensibility is the two heroines' nonautonomous life predetermined by the male-dominated social system in late eighteenth-century England. It puts forward a series of prominent feminist issues, such as equal right of inheritance, free choice for occupation, and so on. Their inferior economic status puts their fate into a vicious circle of poverty. On the one hand, their loss of economic independence forces them to take recourse in marriage. On the other hand, their autonomy in marriage is greatly impaired in a capitalist society where marriage is more like assets merging between families.

Consequently, Elinor and Marianne, despite their contrasting ideologies, are vulnerable to the repercussions of their thwarted relationships. After living through hardships and emotional tortures, the two sisters come to realize that neither the sense nor the sensibility each of them persists in is a perfect principle in providing the strength for either of them to cope with the real difficulties they are ineluctably confronted with. In such a particular social and historical context, they need to reach a balance of sense and sensibility, which the director interprets as "two elements that represent the core of life itself."²⁵ The double wedding of the heroines does make a happy ending of *Sense and Sensibility*, which might be considered as an ideal in fictional

feminism. However, what calls the audience's attention is in effect these women's hardship, setback, anguish, and temperamental transition along the sinuous course of pursuing happiness. Before directing this film, Ang Lee confidently said to the producer Lindsay Doran that "I want this film to break people's hearts so badly they'll still be recovering from it two months later."²⁶ There is no doubt that the director has accomplished that.

Notes

1. See Kim A. Loudermilk, *Fictional Feminism: How American Bestsellers Affect the Movement for Equality*. New York&London: Routledge, 2004, p. 1. For a detailed interpretation, see Loudermilk's introduction to "Fictional Feminism," pp. 1-15.
2. See Kathleen Rowe Karlyn, *Unruly Girls, Unrepentant Mothers: Redefining Feminism on Screen*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011, p. 27.
3. Ibid., p. 27.
4. Rosalind Gill, "Postfeminist Media Culture: Elements of a Sensibility." *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 10.2 (2007): 147-66.
5. It is cited in Loudermilk, *Fictional Feminism*, p. 6. See Lisa Tuttle, *Encyclopedia of Feminism*. London: Longman Group Limited, 1986, p. 256.
6. It is also cited in Loudermilk, p. 6. See Esther Kaplan, "Gunning for Feminism," *Village Voice* 26 December 1989, p. 23.
7. Isobel Armstrong, *The Radical Aesthetic*. Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 2000. See "Debating Feminisms" of Part 4 "Feminism and Aesthetic Practice," 197-238: 208.
8. Ibid., p. 210.
9. Ibid., p. 211.
10. Ibid.
11. Emma Thompson, *The Sense and Sensibility Screenplay and Diaries*. New York: Newmarket Press, 1996. See Lindsay Doran's introduction, 7-16: 11. Also, I would like to note that the British spelling remains unchanged in all the quotations from Thompson's work throughout my thesis.
12. All references to the film lines come from Thompson's *The Sense and Sensibility Screenplay and Diaries* and are noted with page numbers parenthetically.
13. Gene W. Ruoff, *Jane Austen's Sense and Sensibility*. New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992, pp. 7-11. According to Gene's interpretation of the historical context of Austen's writing, Austen's family misfortune partly resembles that of the Dashwood women.

14. Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, ed. Miriam Kramnick. Penguin edition, 1975, ch. 5, *passim*. Cited in Margaret Kirkham, *Jane Austen, Feminism and Fiction*. Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1983, p.44.
15. Gene W. Ruoff, *Jane Austen's Sense and Sensibility*, p. 9.
16. Margaret Kirkham, *Jane Austen, Feminism and Fiction*. Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1983, p. 44.
17. Deborah Kaplan, *Jane Austen among Women*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992, p. 22.
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid.
20. Jane Austen, *Sense and Sensibility*, eds. James Kinsley and Claire Lamont. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982, p. 4.
21. Ibid., pp. 4-5.
22. Gilbert Ryle, "Jane Austen and the Moralists," *Critical Essays on Jane Austen*, ed. N.c. Southam London, 1968, p. 107.
23. Susan Moller Okin, *Women in Western Political thought*, London, 1980, pp. 99-100. Cited in Margaret Kirkham, *Jane Austen, Feminism and Fiction*. Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1983, p.45.
24. Margaret Kirkham, *Jane Austen, Feminism and Fiction*, xiii.
25. 49. Emma Thompson, *The Sense and Sensibility Screenplay and Diaries*, 15. Quoted by Lindsay Doran in her introduction to the book.
26. Ibid., p. 15.

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