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**| RESEARCH ARTICLE**

**Richardson's Pamela: A critical analysis from feminist and narrative perspectives**

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**| ABSTRACT**

Narratology is the primary lens that shapes the reader's experience of the plot in a novel. In *Pamela*, Richardson uses the epistolary structure for the protagonist to represent herself as a paragon of virtue, gender performance, albeit with undertones of social ambition. This study uses feminist and narratology perspectives to explore how Pamela constructs her identity through selective storytelling, rhetorical self-presentation, and emotional persuasion. It also examines the critical conflict in her portrayal either as a moral exemplar or as a strategically unreliable narrator shaped by desire for upward mobility. Textual analysis indicates that the epistolary voice functions not only as a confessional space but also as a strategic tool through which the protagonist negotiates power within a patriarchal social order. By analyzing the narrative against the historical context of eighteenth-century female servitude, the research highlights how the character's literacy, autonomy, and eventual social mobility deviate from the typical experiences of domestic servants, emphasizing her exceptional skills. Key themes examined here include narrative unreliability, gendered performance, social aspiration, and class mobility through visibly moral discourse. Findings suggest that the novel's apparent celebration of virtue is complicated by the protagonist's calculated self-projection and narrative control. The study concludes that *Pamela* is a complex exploration of identity formation, agency, and power dynamics, contributing to broader debates on female authorship, narrative authority, and cultural construction of virtue in early English fiction.

**| KEYWORDS**

Feminist literary theory; gender performance; social mobility; domestic fiction; class identity; narratology

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**Introduction**

Richardson's *Pamela* (1742) is an important milestone in the history of the early English novel, especially in its epistolary form on the themes of moral and social progression of a young woman servant. Although the story has long been regarded as didactic in which righteousness is compensated with a husband and social status, it has been observed that there is more in its intricate approach to the subject of gender roles, social mobility, and authority of storytelling. Below its surface of moralism, it represents a protagonist who actively develops her image through letters written to her parents and thus, manipulates theirs, her master's, and the readers' perceptions of the unfolding events (Dulong, 2020).

Epistolary narration in the novel narrows the readers' lens for viewing Pamela and her life, her emotions and self-representation strongly impact our opinions about the events and other characters in the story. Readers anticipate Pamela's goodness, integrity, and trustworthiness in the tale, thinking of these as her natural virtues. The analysis of these expectations reveals the influence that the descriptions of Pamela have on the interpretations of the readers forcing the discernible reader to question the validity of her narrative (Aljumah, 2025).

Aldowkat and Aldukhayil (2024) contend Richardson wrote *Pamela* at a historical point in time marked by literary and social upheavals and the novel as a genre was a platform to explore the changing notions of social status, virtue, and morality. Due to its epistolary format, the story is suggestive of clashes between individual morality and hierarchical social structure. It presents virtue as being independent of one's birth and social class while simultaneously upholding the tradition of aristocratic prejudices. These contradictions mandate close examination of Pamela's representation in the novel to elaborate on how these conflicting systems affect her personality in the ideological backdrop of the story.

Eighteenth-century English literature mirrors significant socioeconomic transformations in the Augustan Age characterized by changing class relations and the controversy over virtue versus social mobility. Following the ideological pattern of McKeon, novels like *Pamela* debate the conflict of aristocratic and idealistic values and the need to preserve old social norms. At the center of this debate are virtue and honor as major markers of status and identity negotiations. A closer look at Pamela as a representation of these competing ideologies shows what the readers expect her character and morality to be (Alsoud, 2023).

This study claims that Pamela's letters are not just honest confessions but also a kind of rhetoric aimed at displaying her as righteous, innocent, and hence worthy of upward mobility. The epistolary narrative style, emotional appeals, and willful omissions raise legitimate questions on her reliability as a narrator and undermine the idea of her being nothing but the epitome of pure virtue. This narrative manipulation makes the concept of morality in this novel more problematic as it heightens the conflict between right and wrong, duty and self-determination. Placing Pamela in the historical context of domestic service during the eighteenth century and examining her through the lenses of feminism and narratology, this study demonstrates that her conduct as a servant does not conform to the standards of contemporary England. Richardson's narrative strategy and gender representation empower Pamela to climb the social and moral ladder in the eyes of the readers.

## **Literature Review**

Critical analysis of *Pamela* has been characterized by extremities: One extreme projects the heroine as a model of morality and the other unmasks her as a manipulative narrator. According to early critics, the didactic aim of Richardson was to depict Pamela as an embodiment of good and poetic justice is served when her goodness is rewarded by providence. But later feminist and narratological analyses show that it is not easy to reach this conclusion and have argued that the story of Pamela is full of uncertainty, self-contradiction, and self-invention.

Case (1999) criticizes Pamela's narration as a "performance of female writing" based in "tacticalization of sentimentalism" to achieve "rhetorical sovereignty". She places Pamela in a lineage of female writers who assert self-expression as a way of controlling social status, and the control over narrative helps them achieve socio-political progress in a male-dominated world.

Armstrong (1987) adds to this argument by suggesting that power was not achieved through outright defiance by women during the eighteenth century as depicted in works of domestic fiction, but rather through enacting the ideals of virtue and subordination established for them by men. Further, women entered history by complying with the moral terms that defined femininity at the time. Seen thus, Pamela's narrative voice is a strategic technique to be an agent of control under the garb of piety.

More recent scholarship builds upon this by finding narrative discrepancies and moral ambivalence in the voice of Pamela. Zhang (1991) perceives the novel as a field for free play and the text enables the readers to interact with layers of irony, self-interest, and manipulation in the story. The progression of Pamela from fear to piety to admiration and finally ambition throws the readers, other characters, and even her father into suspicion.

Moon (1987) admits the didactic intentions of *Pamela* but cautions that its epistolary format, grounded purely in the voice of Pamela, cannot take us to untainted truth. Casting similar doubts, Folkenflik (1993) and Steedman (2004) add valuable historical background to *Pamela*, stating that the social role of a domestic servant was highly restricted in Augustan England. The independence of Pamela, her freedom to write, and her eventual rise in the social ladder are in stark contrast to the reality. Steedman (2004) emphasizes that servants in the eighteenth century were denied all privacy or individuality; they were supposed to fade their identities and serve their masters fully. Hecht (2024) also reports that servants were the figurative continuations of the position of their masters: Pamela as portrayed by Richardson breaks this rule and forces the reader to see her story not as her individual, moral path, but as a complicated negotiation of identity and power.

Critics have also discussed Richardson's multi-narrator format in *Clarissa* as a reaction to the interpretive challenges of *Pamela*. According to Case (1999), the narrative problem presented in *Pamela* is complicated by the multi-narrator *Clarissa* which limits

the author's scope to dictate a singular moral or thematic interpretation, instead it is left to the readers to interpret the novel as they like (p. 37).

In general, literature indicates that Pamela is a subversive critique of social stratification, gender roles, and the voice of authority. This duality further supports the complexity of *Pamela* as a piece of literary work and explains why it continues to hold significance to feminist literary theory and narratology studies.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This paper is based on two overlapping theoretical lenses: narratology, specifically the theory of unreliable narrator, and feminist literary theory, specifically domestic fiction and feminist self-representation. This dual theoretical framework helps in fully unearthing the narrative richness of Pamela to highlight the contradiction between proclaimed innocence of Pamela and her hidden motives.

Booth's (1961) notion of unreliable narrator can be applied to analyze Pamela's self-representation. Booth defines 'unreliable narrator' as a person whose values are very different to those of the supposed author (p. 158). Pamela shows contradiction in her simultaneous fear and admiration of her master, in her selective revelations to her parents, and in her rhetorical hedging which projects her as a narrator whose opinion might not necessarily reflect what Richardson is explicitly advocating. The structure of the text provided by Booth enables us to doubt the honesty of the epistolary voice of Pamela as well as to consider the persuasive force that a writer has on the readers.

Similarly, Armstrong's (1987) feminist reading of domestic fiction gives an understanding of how the gendered performance operates in the novel. According to Armstrong, women in the eighteenth-century fiction would be able to possess power only by following the codes of virtue and passivity which the patriarchal society fixed for them: women entered history not by following the interests of their sex but by obeying the moral rules they were given by men. Pamela's repeated claims of piousness, humility, and gratitude can be seen as tactical obedience to these gendered expectations. These acts come across as outwardly submissive but conceal the real aim of rising up the social ladder by marriage.

Further, these frameworks bring out the contradictory nature of Pamela that plays on the patriarchal system by controlling the narrative. Her letters therefore emerge as confessions and negotiations as well as self-fashioning. She is a multi-faceted literary figure who stands at the nexus of virtue, voice, and power.

### **Historical Context: Female Servitude in the Eighteenth Century**

Pamela's narrative manipulation becomes bare when one examines the lives of women servants in the 18<sup>th</sup> century England who had few occupational options. Even domestic positions were usually short-term or temporary. Typically, female domestic servants were rather young, unmarried and of inferior social status and were supposed to observe high moral values and be obedient under constant surveillance in the households they served. It was a mark of prosperity, discipline and status in eighteenth century England to employ one or more domestic workers. As Hecht (1956) mentions, servants represented the status and honor of the family they served, thus they assisted in perpetuation of stratified social structures even with their conduct and looks. Their work did not merely stop at the physical work, but they were also involved in maintaining the prestige of their households. Therefore, personal needs, privacy, and autonomy were usually subservient to the master's. The servant time and identity became literally engulfed by the household rhythms and the possibilities of self-expression and agency opportunities were restricted to the extent of being absent (Richardson, 2010). Steedman (2004) also says that domestic service erased the distance between the worlds of the public and the private; servants were placed in the intimate domestic environment but remained socially positioned in a paradoxical situation, neither belonging to it nor protected by it.

In this historical context, the fact that Pamela is the waiting-maid of Lady B gives her a relatively advantageous place in the household as compared to the other servants as she can enter the inner circles with ease. Nevertheless, the demise of her mistress deprives her of a layer of social and emotional security, making her susceptible to explicit patriarchal authority and power dynamics. Folkenflik (1993) notes that the concept of domestic service often involved role dispossession wherein servants were deprived of personal identity by renaming, monitoring, and rigid expectations attached to their roles. By contrast, the fact that Pamela does not change her name, voice, and narrative agency is a major deviation from the typical experience of servants and shows that she was a singularly unique figure in the social hierarchy.

Her efficient prose, introspective self-examination, and status as morally special are additional reasons that she stands out among the servants who had hardly the autonomy and literacy that she enjoyed in writing of her inner life. The availability of privacy, her emotional involvement with the master, and later marriage into a higher class, highlight the unusual character of her experience. This social mobility defies usual strict boundaries of class and makes the moral discussion in the novel more difficult as virtue is often presented as a combination of strategic self-presentation and ambition in Pamela's narrative. Instead of being a mere victim of circumstance, Pamela is an active force to develop her story and social path and convert the conditions of household servitude into scope for identity creation. As a result, her behavior can be interpreted not merely as moral fortitude but also as a sort of calculated opposition to structural constraints.

### **Critical Analysis of Pamela's Narrative and Voice**

The reader is forced to view the events exclusively through Pamela's subjective vision as the entire narrative is hers in the novel. Although this mechanism creates urgency and closeness, it also poses questions regarding the credibility of her voice. Richardson creates an opposition between intent and autonomy of the character by assigning Pamela the role of narrator and protagonist. In the following section, four dimensions are discussed that are interrelated in the novel: narrative unreliability, rhetorical strategy, gendered authorship, and social ambition in the context of feminism and narratology.

### **Narrative Unreliability and Contradictory Self-Representation**

Pamela's letters display an astounding level of tactical self-consciousness making the readers wonder whether it is because of her vulnerability that she is making such statements or it is well-communicated acting. By choosing words to emotionally charge her narration she creates an image of moral purity circumventing the influence of power on how her experiences are perceived. The unreliable narrator concept gives an effective model to interpret this dynamic because her account of events in most cases seems to be distorted by certain motives and goals (Booth, 1961). Such moments as when she talks about Mr. B and calls him "the best of Gentlemen, I think" (Richardson, 2008, p.13) demonstrate masterful linguistic hedging as a defense mechanism. The words "I think" dilute her approval and let her admire and not entirely devote herself to him which leaves her morally detached in the literary space.

Critics have noted that such ambiguity reflects a deliberate process of self-fashioning in which Pamela carefully calibrates her emotional responses to maintain sympathy and credibility (Jiménez Heffernan, 2023; Aloud, 2023). The tone of her letters oscillates between fear, gratitude, indignation, and admiration, producing a tone that reinforces her perceived vulnerability while simultaneously advancing her social interests. This duality is especially evident in her portrayal of Mr. B whose troubling actions are frequently balanced by acknowledgments of his generosity or refinement suggesting that her moral outrage coexists with aspirations for social elevation (Jumaah, 2023). Consequently, Pamela's narrative voice becomes a complex blend of confession and persuasion blurring the boundary between sincere expression and calculated rhetoric. She uses a variety of components such as linguistic hedging, emotional modulation, selective disclosure, and moral framing that collectively contribute to make her narrative unreliable and highlight the intricate relationship between virtue, ambition, and narrative authority.

### **Rhetorical Strategies and Performative Voice**

The epistolary voice of Pamela serves as an active performative arena where she builds up, practices, and perfects her social and ethical identity. Through writing in the perceived disdain of her parents and the religious judgment of divine will, she makes her story accountable as an act of confession and virtue, a representation of herself as meek, submissive, and morally upright. But, behind this self-representation there lies a very well-organized rhetoric which indirectly informs the readers' perception. The fact that she constantly mentions her poor parents and low estate projects her as a helpless victim of social order while also placing her on the moral high ground in contrast to her aristocratic tormentor, legitimizing her right to rise above her station (Aljumah, 2025; Harris, 2020). With these rhetorics, she does not only draw an element of sympathy but also establishes her credibility and righteousness in a highly stratified society.

In addition, the argument in favor of Pamela's narrative unreliability is strengthened by the specifics of what she focuses on, softens, or ignores in her narration. As her emotional situation vis-a-vis Mr. B changes, her way language obscures the contradictory feelings which enables her to continue to project the image of moral stability when negotiating balance of power. According to feminist analysis, the domestic heroines often become powerful through outward compliance with modesty and submissiveness norms but with an insidious goal of acquiring agency (Armstrong, 1987). Pamela's respectful tones and statements of obedience may then be perceived as calculative performances aimed at reconstructing her social status. Her letters are also a form of persuasion and moral education as they encourage Mr. B to change and strengthen her own position in the story (Grisham, 2020).

In this, the epistolary form is not only a tool of narration but also a tool of empowerment, and thus, Pamela manages to bargain with identity, power, and social progress through language.

### **Gender, Power, and Authorial Control**

Being a woman in a male-dominated society, Pamela is marginalized twice (Betageri, 2024). But her exceptional command over language gives her power over her masters. Her letters are poignant not only in what is written therein but in their circulation; the increased obsession of Mr. B in reading her stories is an illustration of how her story changes the dynamics of their relationship. As he tries to control her on the physical and social planes, he inevitably gets attracted to her voice- a reversal of the normal power hierarchy.

Such an inversion is not easy. According to Lipsedge (2021), the physical and symbolic space occupied by Pamela is an authority contest zone. Her writing desk is symbolic of her resistance to the social norms, her letters her way of self-creation. Nevertheless, the novel's ending in her marriage restores patriarchal order by transferring her narrative potency into housewifery. The virtue rewarded also leads to the loss of her power with words with the unification of her story under the banner of her husband refiguring the restrictions of the female authorship of that century (LaPorta, 2020).

### **Virtue, Social Aspiration, and Class Performance**

The avowals of virtue made by Pamela reveal the core of her self, but even these are in consortium with aspirational motives. Critics like Helphinstine (2020) believe that the moral posturing of Pamela cannot be separated from her wish to supersede her class. It is through her storytelling that she gets to become a lady and not merely through endurance of hardships. Pamela, in this respect, symbolizes contradictions of domestic fiction: she upholds the moral principles of the home and subverts the class and gender lines which are its basic characteristic.

Murgolo (2025) and Nadeau (2020) also add that physical locations like attics, bedrooms, parlors, and so on, are symbolic arenas where identity is negotiated. The descriptions about being in the darkness, which Pamela emphasizes, about writing behind the doors, or about not burning her letters are relevant to the fact that authorship is what contributes to her social ascent. Her manipulation of domestic tropes to place herself in the roles of what is virtuous and desirable, demonstrate that the novel is consistent with wider ideological transitions of the time on the subject of female subjectivity and virtue.

### **Historical Echoes and Enduring Debate**

The conflict between truth and performance in the character of Pamela has always been a subject of critical argument which represents diverse views of scholarship. The early moralist readings were inclined to the celebration of her as a prototype of uncompromising virtue and moral perseverance whereas the modern feminist and narratological readings focus on the features of her self-representation. This timeless uncertainty begs one basic question, Is Pamela really a truly good heroine or a social climber who easily plays to her benefit? Her actions are difficult to categorize as they are seemingly submissive dotted with assertiveness and morally impressive dotted with tactical acumen. This contradiction makes it difficult to interpret her any one way.

Through the narrative and feminist critical approaches, the voice in *Pamela* becomes an influential agency of control and contradiction. Instead of seeing narrative contradictions as a sign of a lack of strength in Pamela, they can be interpreted as adaptive mechanisms within the limits of a patriarchal system in which female virtue is sought and sold. In this environment, storytelling would have been one of the survival strategies which women could use to bargain power and presence, to speak out in a system where servants are not supposed to have a voice. Pamela's multi-faced self-projection that is confessional, persuasive and performative at the same time shows how an agency of the narrative can become a tool of resistance and identity-construction. Thus, Pamela remains a controversial figure in literature whose identity and rhetorical mastery still generate wonder and force new critical interpretations (Dulong, 2020; Roberts, 2022).

### **Conclusion**

Richardson's *Pamela* has been viewed as a moral novel where good is eventually rewarded. Nevertheless, this interpretation of the text does not give adequate credit to the narrative complexity and strategic agency of its protagonist. With the help of a broad historical and theoretical perspective, Pamela becomes not a fixed ideal of the virtues but a dynamic character who plays out the

conventions of the epistolary genre, the norms of feminine virtue, and the relations of power between servant and master to construct a new social reality.

The historical background shows that the experience of Pamela was hardly the case of the servants in the 18th century and her literacy, emotional self-reflection, and marriage make her stand apart from her likes. Her self-representation in the context of feminist and narrative theories can be interpreted as an act to gain mobility and acceptance in a patriarchal world. Instead of considering her inconsistencies a weakness, it is necessary to interpret them as rhetorical strategies, one of the ways through which she manages to negotiate power, establish her authorship, and reconstruct her identity.

The aim of Richardson was perhaps to didactically praise female virtue, instead the story produces a complicated character whose virtue is bound inextricably to ambition, performance and authorship. The conflicts and contradictions in Pamela, her crafted self-fashioning and her undecided desires oscillating between servanthood and aristocracy make her one of the most interesting and controversial figures in early English fiction. By identifying these contradictions, the reader is forced to think of *Pamela* as a novel that demonstrates the fears of the era and the consciousness of agency in femininity in the process of transformation.

### **Recommendations and scope for future research**

Studies of *Pamela* may be informed by taking a comparative view that encompasses other epistolary novels published at the same time to bring to light conventions of gender, virtue, and social mobility in early English novels. In addition, discussion on the experiences of other female characters in *Pamela* and how they overlap with Pamela's story might provide insight into the issues of women's power and status in eighteenth century England. In addition, interdisciplinary techniques such as historical or cultural studies might add depth by contextualizing the story in a broader socio-political context, thus taking into account the aspects of class, economic transformation, and regional variations that influence the lives of the characters. An exploration of current feminist theory may also provide a new understanding of the agency and ethical issues involved in Pamela's case, especially in a world where intersectionality is a reality. Studies may also examine how *Pamela* was introduced to different media, changed, interpreted, and analyzed. Lastly, the application of a reader-response methodology would provide insight into how various groups of people perceive and approach Pamela as a character and would once again show the issues of character with various layers influencing the idea of virtue and identity formation.

### **Limitations**

This research has a few limitations. To begin with, emphasizing *Pamela* as an isolated context can limit the extrapolation of the results to other writings of Richardson or other writers, overlooking the larger literary patterns in early English fiction. Also, although the study situates the story in eighteenth-century England, it might not reflect the experiences of women from all social strata, resulting in a simplified reading of gender relations. Moreover, the focus on the voice and self-representation of Pamela threatens to undermine the importance of audience's reaction, which may help provide a subtler impression of her credibility and agency. The use of the feminist and narrative approaches, though informative, might unintentionally exclude other theoretical frameworks that could inform the meanings in the text. Additionally, the analysis may not convincingly address contemporary reader responses, limiting its applicability to a modern audience. Finally, by focusing on Pamela, the research may have overlooked the depths of secondary characters, whose contribution to the story may be crucial in a discussion on virtue and ambition.

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