

Embodiment and Compromise of Feminism in 18th and 19th Century Romantic Literature — An Example from *Pride and Prejudice*



Xinya Wen^{1,*}

¹ School of Foreign Languages, Hengyang Normal University, China

Abstract: As a well-known romantic novel, *Pride and Prejudice* reflects to a certain extent the changes in female consciousness in the general environment of female literature in the 18th and 19th centuries. This paper will study the historical factors and background of the emergence of feminism in the 18th and 19th centuries based on the development of the characters' stories in the above two books, and explore the deep reasons for the emergence and compromise of feminism in romantic literature.

Keywords: feminism; romantic literature; *Pride and Prejudice*

As a representative work of women's awakening in the 18th and 19th centuries, *Pride and Prejudice* centers on the story of Elizabeth, the heroine, who gradually dissolves her "inherent" prejudices in the process of getting along with Darcy, the heroine, and ultimately reaps the benefits of "ideal love". The author, Jane Austen, shows us in a funny and humorous tone the problem of women's marriage in the 18th and 19th centuries in British society, and a series of stories about the women of the Bennet family enable readers to understand more about the traditional concepts of marriage in the society at that time, as well as the ideological resistance and compromise of the phenomenon of inequality in the status of men and women in the society.

1. The Development and Changes in Women's Writing in Literary History

The increase in the number of women literary writers can reflect the changing development of feminist thought in their time. "Women had less intellectual freedom than the descendants of Greek slaves, so women would have no chance to write poetry." By the 18th century, more and more

middle-class women were taking up writing, a phenomenon that foreshadowed a dramatic change in women's education. Jane Austen, an English woman writer, is one of the iconic female writers who surfaced during this era. During the time of Chaucer and Shakespeare, and for some time afterward, women in literature were often viewed as objects of observation and desire, and in some cases, the female figure was used as a symbol of the "devil" of lust. In most male writers, women are sanctified to make up for the sacrifices they have made for men or to satisfy men's inner imaginary needs; and women are demonized because of the disgust and fear that they refuse to obey. These are all distortions of the image of women (Wu, 2000).

As the process of capitalist development accelerated, the number of female writers entering the literary arena increased dramatically, and literature began to be written from a female perspective and with women as its subjects. In the long history of women's literature, Jane Austen contributed greatly to the establishment of a tradition of women's writing and the development of feminist thought.

According to the aesthetics of acceptance, literary works have a "meaning" gap and "meaning"

Corresponding Author: Xinya Wen
School of Foreign Languages, Hengyang Normal University, China
Email: 3173688750@qq.com

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uncertainty, implying a variety of interpretations and evaluations, calling the subject of appreciation to discover the potential significance of the work (Wu, 2000). Interpretation of any literary work is a process of re-reading and digesting, so we focus our attention on Austen's masterpiece *Pride and Prejudice* again, and it is not difficult to find that this work jumps out of the traditional male-dominated literature for the distortion and degradation of the image of women, and through irony, contrast, and characterization of clever words to dissolve the male-centered discourse strategy, and through the female characters to convey a sense of the importance of breaking through the traditional constraints and disregard for the female characters, which is the most important thing. Through the female characters, they convey the desire to break through the traditionally bound and disregarded women's rights, and to a certain extent promote the emancipation of women's thoughts in the history of literature. Compared with Brontë's "cry", Austen's voice is weaker, she criticizes the traditional corrupt ideas in a gentle and euphemistic way, but it is also an embodiment of women's call for freedom in the 18th and 19th centuries.

2. Stereotypes of Gender Marriage in *Pride and Prejudice*

Pride and Prejudice opens with "It is a truth universally acknowledged that a rich bachelor must always marry a wife." (Austen, 1990) This bluntly points out to us the social situation in 18th and 19th century England, and for the family of the woman to be married "the families of the four neighboring houses, though ignorant of his thoughts, regarded him as the rightful property of one of their daughters." (Austen, 1990) It follows that it was more important for middle-class English families of the time to marry their daughters to a wealthy squire than to marry someone of a more compatible character or even heart so that the opening sentence of the article might be understood to mean that it was not so much the property-owning bachelor who needed to marry a wife as it was the propertyless unmarried woman

who desperately needed to marry a property-owning husband.

Viewing marriage as a veiled economic transaction between two families was common in Austen's time, and the natural dependence and parasitism of this form of marriage on economic status was intended by Austen to demonstrate the reality of women's precarious economic position in the nineteenth century. In the second half of the eighteenth century, the Industrial Revolution first took place in England, and with it came great changes in society. Against the backdrop of rapid economic growth, which continued into the nineteenth century, Britain's population continued to grow. According to the 1851 British census, women outnumbered men by half a million, and there was an imbalance in the ratio of men to women. Against this background, it is understandable that Mrs. Bennet in Austen's novel is so anxious to marry off her daughter.

Among the principles of marriage in England during the 18th and 19th centuries, the principle of "right match" was highly valued. Both the upper and middle classes tended to look for marriage partners from the same class. Thus, near the end of the story, an unexpected guest, Lady Catherine, arrives at Bennet's home to express her disapproval and contempt for Elizabeth's relationship with Darcy. Unlike the upper class, which adheres to the concept of "pairing", the middle class, because of their awkward position, neither wanting their daughters to be "married off" nor having difficulty in crossing the class divide, consider their spouse's family's wealth when choosing a spouse, which is why the arduous task of increasing the family's wealth is so important. Because of this, the difficult task of increasing family wealth falls on the shoulders of unmarried women in the family, i.e., to increase family wealth through marriage. In the story, Mrs. Bennet is in a hurry to marry off her daughters because of the high probability that the family wealth will fall into the hands of Mr. Collins (the only male in the Bennet family with the right of inheritance), which is also related to this historical background.

About the above context, the author comes to the following view: to a certain extent, women in the 18th and 19th centuries were more obviously on the selective side of marriage, with family and social pressures forcing women to accept “unfair” marriages. In the marriage relationship, women were more like a conveyor belt between their husbands and the family, with wealth and power as commodities on the conveyor belt. In Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*, it is said, “In the agricultural community, women often have an unusual degree of authority.” With the child as the bond, “Self-completion and self-transcendence in the child.” (Beauvoir, 2011) Such a phenomenon is also reflected in *Pride and Prejudice*: Mrs. Bennet’s extreme marketing of her daughters, as well as the change of heart from her extreme grief at Lydia’s abduction by Wickham to her joy at hearing of the pair’s marriage, reflects Mrs. Bennet’s ability as an ordinary middle-class woman to equate her pursuits with her daughters’ marriages and to accomplish a limited amount of self-transcendence within her perceptions in the marriages of several of her daughters.

3. The First Appearance of Female Consciousness in *Pride and Prejudice*

The viewpoints or ideas that a work reflects are closely related to the era in which the writer lives, so in Jane Austen, the majority of female characters are unable to break away from the traditional view of marriage. But again, as a character that the author has devoted a great deal of space to, Elizabeth is Jane Austen’s ideological counterpoint to the injustices of her time. Austen believed that women were just as capable of acquiring knowledge as men, and she did not see obedience as a virtue but rather aspired to a relationship based on equality and respect. Such a viewpoint is the seed of Elizabeth’s “rebellion”, and feminism is reflected in the book. As the heroine of Elizabeth, “she was not particularly skilled in music, painting, dancing, nor particularly beautiful, but she had read some books” (Huang, 2002), compared with the majority of ordinary women who have never been

exposed to education, she has a clear judgment and opinion, intelligent and sensitive, firm self-confidence, and seldom troubled by the views of others. Elizabeth and Darcy are unequal on a social class level, but Elizabeth never lets herself fall into a disadvantageous position in the course of their relationship. The contrast between words and thoughts emphasizes the excellence of Elizabeth as a woman. She has her insistence, so when Darcy confesses to her, she refuses calmly and rationally, so that Darcy puts Elizabeth on an equal footing with himself, and seriously thinks about the real charm and different values under Elizabeth’s skin.

Elizabeth’s feminist ideology is also reflected in the heated conversations between the “two men and two women” in the Bingley household: the four of them engage in a heated debate about what constitutes versatility. Bentley first takes the male point of view and realizes that the ladies can “paint tables, hang curtains, and weave purses”, while her sister, Miss Bentley, takes herself as an example and says that a woman who does not have this kind of “talent” is not “versatile”; not only this ‘gait and demeanor, tone of voice, speech and expression, all must be elegant and decent.’(Fu & Yang, 2020) In the social environment of gender imbalance at that time, women took on a good “housewife” position, usually making themselves “perfect wives” to serve as part of the husband’s reputation, and at the same time, unmarried women to get married to a “good man”. Unmarried women also aimed to marry “good men” to gain an advantage in the marriage market and to show that they were qualified to be the “canary” for their wealthy husbands. Elizabeth, however, has been widely read as a child and is already aware of her femininity, which is why she seems so different from Darcy, who is used to seeing traditional middle-class ladies. In this conversation of defining women and calling them “perfect,” Austen’s portrayal of Elizabeth demonstrates his attitude that long-held stereotypes are not correct. The word “woman” should not be given any “label”.

4. The Collision of Feminist and Secular Views on Marriage in *Pride and Prejudice*

The three types of marriages Jane Austen considered are summarized in *Pride and Prejudice* as Charlotte and Collins, based on wealth and finances; Lydia and Wickham (Fu & Yang, 2020), Jane and Bingley, based on beauty and lust; and Elizabeth and Darcy, based on the idea of gender equality. According to Austen, love and marriage are lifelong relationships of peace; and happiness, and therefore all the more reason to be incredibly careful and not just gloss over the surface. As the heroine of the story, Elizabeth does not realize this from the very beginning, in this writer's opinion, *Pride and Prejudice* is more like a record of Elizabeth and Darcy's process of maturing in the process of their ideological knowledge. Elizabeth is prejudiced against Darcy when she is treated badly by him at the ball, and she becomes attracted to the "unsuspecting" Wycombe when he pays her a compliment and even deepens her prejudice by listening to his rumors about Darcy. In later accounts, Elizabeth blames herself, stating that this is purely a matter of vanity; first impressions do not sum up a person, and not all women are capable of such thoughts.

Although Elizabeth's independent and feminist ideas countered the "unequal" views of marriage that were common in society at the time, the "seemingly perfect" marriages of some of the women in the book still caused readers to reflect on the situation of women in society at the time. The marriage between Jane, the eldest daughter of the Bennet family, and Bingley, the squire, was on the surface the best ending for an unmarried woman's marriage at that time, but the marriage that seemed to be a perfect match was in fact "love at first sight" based on looks. Compared with Elizabeth and Darcy's relationship of equality of soul and mind, the marriage of the beautiful and gentle Jane and the opinionless Bingley lacked a solid foundation of reality in the long run, and the beautiful and illusory utopia of "true love" was very fragile.

Jane Austen's rationality and intelligence are fully realized in Elizabeth, but her inner conception

of the ideal world is far from the real world. In terms of Austen herself, her marital status is very different from that of Elizabeth in the book. She never met her "Darcy" and remained unmarried for the rest of her life. At the same time, she also shows the readers that she always insists on her own choice: a marriage without love is better than no marriage at all.

The clash between traditional women's thinking and the progressive feminism of the time is also centered on the argument between Elizabeth and Charlotte (later Mrs. Collins) over her engagement to Collins in Chapter 22 of Book I. Elizabeth is surprised that Charlotte would reject good feelings in favor of worldly interests, while Charlotte shows that true love is not the same as a stable and happy home. Elizabeth marvels at Charlotte's choice of marriage, which eschews good feelings in favor of worldly gain, while Charlotte demonstrates that true love is not the same as a stable and happy home, "I only wish to have a comfortable home." This was a widespread dilemma faced by women in the 18th and 19th centuries, with Charlotte, like the vast majority of women at the time, choosing marriage as her only way back. This idea contrasts sharply with Austen's idea of female independence and autonomy in Elizabeth's affluence, and it is for this reason that the sparkle of a female character such as Elizabeth shines through. She does not think she is a male subordinate and accompaniment, not to satisfy the desire of men to create a "perfect wife", on the contrary, in wisdom and spirit, she showed unprecedented confidence and independence.

"The fascinating thing about getting along with each other is that the image of the all-knowing, all-powerful male is pushed back, and the moral high ground is no longer taken to turn to or teach a woman in a vulnerable position with a sense of compassion, that men and women have the same rights and are bound to make mistakes, and that they should be equally responsible for making their own and each other's mistakes. Men and women have the same rights, are bound to make mistakes, and are equally responsible for the growth of self and each other into sound and independent personalities (Huang, 2002).

Austen combines liberal feminist ideas with the characterization of his writing, embodying a strong tendency for women's awakening in Elizabeth, while giving the other female characters in his writing a lamentable and compromising ending, reflecting the male-dominated social tendency of the 18th and 19th centuries. Although the capitalist system had been established, deep-rooted feudalism still affected the majority of people; the freedom of women advocated by Austen was under great pressure in the social and historical background of that time. Whether choosing freedom or passively accepting marriage is not the friendliest choice for women. *Pride and Prejudice* is not an outright comedy, but rather a profound tragedy (Zhao, 1986).

5. *Pride and Prejudice*: A Truly Feminist View of Free Marriage

The whole book of *Pride and Prejudice* mainly centers on the story of marriage between two pairs of men and women, and Austen appeals to the freedom of women's rights through the portrayal of female characters, narrative plots, and contrasting writing techniques. At the same time, from her other works, we can conclude that Austen always insists on her way of writing and creation, rejects the male grand narrative, breaks through the shackles of the female standard set by men, and stays true to her own real experience and feelings, writing stories with unique female soft and tough strokes. In Austen's writing, women should have the right to mold themselves freely, the right to fight back in the face of injustice, and, most importantly, the right to choose their marriages. The same word can be used in English to express freedom, Liberty, which in the Middle Ages was synonymous with privilege, the privilege to do something. In Austen's novel, the traditional male-dominated marital relationship is shaken up, for example, in the passage where Darcy proposes to Elizabeth, and the balance of "power" between the two men is tilted in favor of Elizabeth, who seems to hold the "high ground" in their relationship. The moment she rejects Darcy's proposal, the position of the man, who usually has the absolute upper hand in

the relationship, is undermined, which is exactly the point Austen conveys to us: women have the right to choose whether to accept or reject marriage. In the face of the unreasonable questioning of the conservative and stubborn Lady Catherine, Elizabeth still maintains her senses and reasonably counters every challenge that is not friendly to her. As the saying goes, the marriage relationship between a man and a woman in the 18th and 19th centuries was like the development of the battle for freedom in England, from eruption to struggle to fusion, with both sides being transformed by each other and retaining their true nature, thus generating an avenue of modernity leading to peace and gradual progress amid traditions and changes. (Qian & Chen, n.d.) The mutual transformation of Elizabeth and Darcy in the book is evidence of this, and this is the kind of relationship that Austen aspires to and advocates.

Marcuse famously asserted, "Art is revolt." (MARCUSSE, 1987, p. 105) Although Austen's sense of women's liberation was not as distinctive and radical as that of some later female writers due to the limitations of the historical background, she used literature as a medium to show readers her confrontation with the erroneous social consciousness of that era and demonstrated the unique way of female writers' writing, which is to think about the possibilities of women outside the patriarchal system from their female point of view. Through her female perspective, she considers the possibilities that women have outside the patriarchal system.

Changes in the social status of men and women have not remained constant. From primitive society under the matrilineal clan system, where women enjoyed a higher status in society and the family because of their key role in childbearing, to slave and feudal society, where women gradually lost their dominant position and were regarded as subordinate to men as a result of the increase in the number of heirs born to them and the establishment of the patriarchal clan system; to modern society, where, with the development of capitalism and the industrial revolution, and against the backdrop of a patriarchal

society, the improvement in the socio-economic situation has prompted more and more women to join the ranks of those fighting for equal rights. In modern society, with the development of capitalism and the industrial revolution, in the context of a patriarchal society, the improvement of the socio-economic situation has prompted more and more women to join in the fight for equal rights. In today's society, feminist thinking is becoming more and more diversified, including changes in the thinking and writing topics of female writers, reflecting the increasing popularity of feminist thinking. Objectively speaking, the biggest difference between the two sexes lies in their genders, and both men and women have their gender-specific ways of looking at problems and thinking. Equality is only meaningful if it is built on differences, so in the author's opinion, reading feminist romantic novels is an important way to understand the views of female literary figures on the relationship between men and women in different times. "Seeking common ground while reserving differences" preserves each other's value and significance to the greatest extent possible, and pays tribute to the original roots of human civilization. A fierce confrontation will not produce a real winner, but will instead leave both sides with a lot of injuries. The part where "male" and "female" meet is the "human being", so both have the same rights.

Taking the romantic novels written by women writers in the 18th and 19th centuries as a guide, the pursuit of a healthy marriage relationship between a man and a woman on the path of mutual tolerance between the two sexes is an important step in the promotion of women's rights and freedoms.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that she has no conflicts of interest to this work.

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