

An Analysis of Jane Austen's Feminist Thoughts

-- Taking *Pride and Prejudice* as an Example

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Abstract: *Pride and Prejudice* tells the story of marriage and daily life between Victorian men and women. The narrative style of the work is easy, but it reveals a concept that is of far-reaching social significance: women should be independent and have their own ideas, instead of serving as male vassals. This article explores Jane Austen's feminist thoughts from the angle of her portrayal of female characters with Elizabeth and her mother as examples, pointing out that Elizabeth is depicted to be an independent female. It also attempts to interpret the marriages of two couples in *Pride and Prejudice* from a feminist perspective, thus digging into Jane Austen's feminist thoughts from this aspect. In addition, since Jane Austen lived in a patriarchal society and was born to a middle-class family, she was more or less influenced by the patriarchal social outlook. As a result, this article also discusses limitations in the feminist thoughts of the author as reflected in *Pride and Prejudice*.

Keywords: *Pride and Prejudice*, feminism, marriage, female characters.

1. Introduction

Jane Austen (December 16, 1775 – July 18, 1817) was an English novelist whose works included *Pride and Prejudice*, *Persuasion*, and others. Austen's own feelings about marriage and love were mirrored in the characters she created. The rural aristocracy and landlord youth were also influenced by bourgeois views about humanity after the Renaissance. In *Pride and Prejudice*, for example, Austen presented the marriage and love model that she aspired to with Elizabeth's marriage as example. In her romantic relationship with Darcy, Elizabeth believes that men and women should be treated equally. She rejects the absurd notion of male dominance and feminine inferiority and believes that humans require noble emotions to function properly. Meanwhile, Austen held freedom and understanding, as well as equality and mutual admiration, in high regard as elements of an ideal marriage, which were expected to help people break away from conventional thinking so that they could realize their self-worth. Embroidery is a famous intangible cultural heritage in China.

(1) Literature Review

The current research on *Pride and Prejudice* can be divided into the following four categories. The first category is research on the ironic language in *Pride and Prejudice*. In domestic studies, Zhu Xiaodan, Hu Shuli, Hu Jiasheng and others have all studied the irony arts in *Pride and Prejudice*. Zhu Xiaodan illustrates on the ironic wording of *Pride and Prejudice* in "Speech Act Theory and irony in *Pride and Prejudice*" from the macro and the micro aspects. From the micro aspect, ironic linguistic behavior is shown in imperative irony, declarative irony, expressive irony and commitment irony. From the macro aspect, ironic language acts are shown in ironic plot arrangement and ironic narration. The second category is discourse analysis, which have fascinated many applied linguistics in previous years. The third and fourth categories are role analysis and research on the view of marriage, which are the focus of this paper. This paper analyzes the characters of Elizabeth and Mrs. Bennet and reveals Jane Austen's feminist thoughts through the

analysis. Finally, it explores what role women play in society in the novel and the stereotyped marriage model so as to point out the limitations of Jane Austen's feminist thoughts as reflected in *Pride and Prejudice*.

(2) Feminism

Feminism is a social ethical and political movement that promotes gender equality and criticizes and protests against unequal gender relations in society. According to feminist theories, the current social system is based on a male-centered patriarchal social system and it calls for all classes and races to pay attention to and understand the root causes of unequal gender relations. Feminists hold that under the domination of male superiority, the development of female literature must break through the bondage of male discourse power and construct a new pattern of feminist literature development. In order to establish the literary discourse power, women should dare to challenge the patriarchal discourse, get rid of the value constraints of the patriarchal system, reinterpret the real world according to women's thinking and speak up bravely. In the 19th century, women no longer kept silent and a large number of female writers appeared in the literary world with the creation of female literature entering an unprecedented stage of prosperity. "With the upsurge of the feminist movement in the 19th century, British feminist literature began to sprout and develop. Feminist literature examines the society from a female perspective, exposes the social reality and shapes a group of female images who dare to break free and pursue equal love." (Wang 10) Elizabeth, the heroine in *Pride and Prejudice*, is such a typical woman. Jane Austen's portrayal of female characters in *Pride and Prejudice* and her unique female writing perspective are of great significance to the study of feminist criticism. *Pride and Prejudice* has been studied in almost every period of feminist research since the 1920s. It is a bold attempt to break through men's discourse power so that women can walk into the center of novel research and see the world through their own unique practice.

2. The Portrayal of Female Images in *Pride and Prejudice*

In *Pride and Prejudice*, Jane Austen portrayed many vivid female characters, including: Mrs. Bennet, who always wanted her daughters to marry rich bachelors; Jane Bennet, beautiful and caring, who fell in love with Mr Bingley and got married to him; Lydia Bennett, who was naive and reckless; Charlotte Lucas, who married Collins for benefits, etc. The most representative of them is the heroine, Elizabeth Bennet.

(1) Elizabeth's feminist consciousness

Elizabeth's feminist consciousness is mainly reflected in her strong sense of equality. Despite Darcy's noble status, Elizabeth thought he was too arrogant and indifferent at the dance. So, when Darcy volunteered to invite Elizabeth to dance, Elizabeth refused him on the spot. Elizabeth would not obey him merely because of his noble status. In addition, when the mediocre and short priest, Collins, proposed to her, she did not hesitate to refuse. Later, the flattering Collins turned to Charlotte and was also blocked by Elizabeth. In her opinion, Collins was a pedantic and boring man, not worthy of herself or the intellectually generous Charlotte. As a woman without property, Elizabeth dares to give up the comfort and status brought by marriage. She is courageous and confident, which reflects her feminist consciousness. Elizabeth's feminist consciousness is also reflected in her independent personality and her independent judgment on marriage and love. Elizabeth's concept of marriage and love is individualistic. She denied taking material conditions as the only criterion, insisting on emotional supremacy and finally obtaining cross-class love. Unlike her sisters and other women, Elizabeth was adamantly opposed to the traditional views of marriage and love at the time and her views on marriage were both reasonable and independent. Most people believed that a woman's life goal was to marry and that the only criteria for judging the beauty of marriage were the man's status and wealth. However, in Elizabeth's opinion, such a lucrative marriage was a tomb for women and she believed that sincere love for one another was the most valuable thing. She had expressed her thoughts on marriage to Darcy during her time with him, and she laughed at individuals who accepted marriage as a guarantee of survival as well as criticizing people's premature marital decisions. When the only heir to the Bennet family fortune—Collins—showed his affection to her, she had the fortitude to defy her mother's wishes. Furthermore, as the novel progressed, Elizabeth always showed her bias against Darcy and voiced her opposition to Darcy's pompous attitude without saying anything. Women's resistance to the corrupt marital structure and family concept was represented in Elizabeth's attitudes toward Darcy, which also expressed her yearning for independence and freedom.

(2) Elizabeth's mother: question the inheritance

In the novel, Mrs. Bennet, mother of Elizabeth, was portrayed vividly. At the beginning of the novel, Mrs. Bennet was described as a woman of "intellectual poverty, incompetence and moodiness". And whenever she encountered disappointments, she called herself neurasthenia. These descriptions outline the image of a vulgar and uneducated mother, leaving readers with the first impression of a woman constantly making complaints and nonsense. But in fact, Mrs. Bennet was not a useless mother: her five children were daughters. But only men had inheritance rights

in their society. Therefore, Mrs. Bennet was deeply concerned about her daughters, ardently hoping that they could marry into good families and live a comfortable and rich life. In addition, when she mentioned that the Bennet family's property could only be inherited by Collins, she questioned "Why should he have it more than anybody else?" (Austin 52) This not only reflects Mrs. Bennet's love for her daughters, but also her ideological progress: when everyone else acquiesces that the system is reasonable, she still shows her dissatisfaction with it.

3. Feminism in marriage in *Pride and Prejudice*

As we all know, writing novels about love and marriage is Jane Austen's strength and *Pride and Prejudice* is one of her masterpieces describing love and marriage. By describing the marriage of Elizabeth and her sisters, Jane Austen analyzed the definition of marriage in the British society at that time and also expressed her own views on marriage, reflecting her feminist thoughts.

(1) Elizabeth's marriage to Darcy

Elizabeth, the heroine of the novel, was born to a really common family. She was a woman with independent thinking and she was also the girl most loved by her father in the family. The hero, Darcy, was born to a noble family and he had extraordinary arrogance. In Meligan's party, Elizabeth mistakenly thought of Darcy as a cold person and alienated him because of others' slanderous words. Later on, in her sister's emotional disputes, her misunderstanding of Darcy was deepened. Darcy looked down on Elizabeth's powerful mother and humble relatives, but was deeply attracted by her unique character. However, it was difficult to break free of the bondage of family concept. Finally, Darcy could not suppress his love for Elizabeth and boldly expressed his love to Elizabeth. However, because of her misunderstanding of Darcy, Elizabeth rejected his proposal flatly. Later, Darcy explained to Elizabeth in a letter that he had not appropriated Wickham's fortune. Instead, Wickham had squandered it himself and even tried to entice Darcy's sister Joanna to elope with him. The letter became the bond that turned their relationship around. Elizabeth felt guilty for having wronged Darcy, and then she heard Darcy's housekeeper's praise of him. In addition, Darcy helped her family generously when it was humiliated by Lidia's scandal. He also firmly expressed his support and love for her when she was humiliated by Lady Catherine. Finally, Elizabeth was moved by Darcy and her prejudice against him was removed. They were eventually married. Elizabeth's feminist consciousness is mainly reflected in her strong sense of equality. When Collins, a plain and diminutive clergyman, asked her to marry him, she refused without hesitation. Later, the obsequious Collins turned to propose to Charlotte, which was also thwarted by Elizabeth. In her opinion, Collins was a pedantic and boring man, not good enough for her or the intellectual and generous Charlotte. Elizabeth believed that if she agreed to marry Collins, the huge gap between the two parties would cause the marriage to end. Elizabeth's "marriage view is rational, which is a strong evidence of her feminist consciousness" (Yuan 70). "Elizabeth cares about the worldly bondages on women" (Zhu 56). She firmly believed that marriage was a bond of souls in mutual dependence. In Jane Austen's view, equality between men and women is very important, whether in love or in marriage, and this can be reflected in the marriage of

Elizabeth and Darcy. In addition, she also strongly criticized the idea of male superiority in society at that time.

(2) Charlotte's marriage to Collins

Charlotte Lucas was one of several children of a former tradesman, Sir William Lucas. She was Elizabeth's intimate friend. Apart from Mr. Bennet, Charlotte was the person in Elizabeth's world who was closest to her in temperament and intelligence. She had her own ideas and was fair and objective on issues. Charlotte was a really "sensible, intelligent young woman" (Austen 14), her marriage with Collins, however, shocked people most, but proved her sense and wisdom. As a really common clergyman, Mr. Collins, however, would inherit the estate of Longbourn after Mr. Bennet's death. He visited Longbourn only to find a wife to marry. He was very pretentious and narrow-minded and he had absolutely no idea what love was. He intended to marry just because Lady Catherine de Bourgh had urged him to do so. He only regarded marriage as a task that must be done. Since he was going to inherit his uncle's estate, he wanted to choose a daughter of his uncle's as his wife and thought that's what he should do. In fact, he also made his proposal to Elizabeth a task. He never even thought that Elizabeth would reject his marriage proposal so firmly. He saw it as the perfect deal, but not for Elizabeth, who didn't want to marry him. After being turned down by Elizabeth, he swiftly shifted his attention to Charlotte, who rationally accepted his proposal with great satisfaction. What a clever woman Charlotte was! She had known that Mr. Collins was not reasonable or glamorous and that getting along with him was really boring. Even worse, his love for her must be "an illusion". But Charlotte still chose him to be her husband because the choice of this kind of marriage was the safest and was sure to avoid suffering from cold and hunger. She never needed to worry about her husband's cheating. A happy marriage placed into the secondary position was reasonable. However, Charlotte's attitude towards marriage was exactly the attitude of most people in Austen's era. This view of marriage was realistic but also completely unromantic, and had lost the true meaning of love. A man's view of marriage determined a woman's marriage, which in turn determined a woman's tolerance in marriage. In Jane Austen's time, most marriages were based on money. So, when it came to marriage, a man's family rank became the most important thing for women and their families. Jane Austen believed in women's "own strength and thought" (Luan 10), and believed that women should not limit themselves or focus on family quarrels and emotional entanglements, but should pursue equality and freedom in marriage, which reflects her "thinking on gender relations as a woman" (Zhuang 9). Jane Austen was good at depicting the life of women in British squire families with delicate brushstrokes, reflecting women's inner demands for emotion and social status. Elizabeth, the heroine created by her, has the courage to think independently and can challenge the traditional secular concept of marriage. She thinks that the rules of marriage and the so-called perfect woman standards are set by men for women. Women should break out of this cage and realize the balance and equality between the sexes in marriage. Through the character of Elizabeth, Jane Austen expressed her opposition to and criticism of the secular view of marriage and conveyed her desire for a harmonious marriage between both sexes. It can be said that Elizabeth carries the ideal pursuit of Jane Austen and her own view of marriage. Jane Austen always advocated women's independent personality in love and marriage, believing that

"women's thematic consciousness can be re-established through their own efforts" (Zhao 8). Women should fight for their right to speak in marriage because harmonious marriages can only be achieved when men and women are equal and respect each other. Jane Austen advocated marriage based on true love, and was opposed to regarding family and money as the primary criteria. However, she also protested against marriages without material basis, as marriages should have both emotional and rational foundations.

4. The Limitations of Jane Austen's Feminist Thoughts in *Pride and Prejudice*

Even though this fiction is a master work of female literature which demonstrates Austen's female consciousness, it has its limitations. In that era, although the author's view of women was progressive to some extent, the female consciousness was not completely displayed in her works. Britain at the beginning of the 19th century was governed by patriarchy and women were oppressed. In addition, the author lived in an isolated rural area and a middle-class family, so her works were inevitably limited.

(1) Limitations on women's social roles

Jane Austen wanted to appeal to women to go away from the constraints of tradition and hoped that women could do whatever they liked equally and pursue true and equal love. However, Austen failed to rescue women from doing housework. The women in this novel revolved around housework chores but failed to think about how to seek their own careers or to realize their own value. What Mrs. Bennett did all day was talking about food and clothing. Married Charlotte sought pleasure from her own housework. And Elizabeth was mending all day long, even though she was brave and independent. It can be seen that their minds are still bound to a certain extent, which also shows that they are still influenced by patriarchal culture.

(2) The stereotyped pattern of marriage

The women in this novel were consumed by domestic chores, but they were unable to consider how to pursue their own careers or recognize their own worth. Mrs. Bennett spent the entire day talking about food and clothing. Charlotte, who was married, found joy in doing her own cleaning. Even though she was brave and independent, Elizabeth spent the entire day mending. It can be seen that their brains are still confined to some extent, indicating that patriarchal culture continues to influence them. The female characters in this tale spend their entire day discussing marriage. According to them, every woman's destiny is to marry a wealthy guy, and only then will she be content. Furthermore, such a traditional image of marriage has not been abolished, and Elizabeth has not totally abandoned this idea of marriage. Elizabeth's remarkable personality is used as a bargaining chip to attract men, and she eventually becomes a victim to patriarchy. She learns that the only way she may have a safe and happy future is to marry a wealthy man. The novel's female characters eventually bow to men's status, and they are unable to live alone without their families. All the above reveal the author's own inadequacies. Because she was unable to transcend patriarchal culture, her art was inevitably influenced. Regarding marriage, even though the author wanted to get rid of the feudal model and desired to create a marriage model that transcended materials, her view on marriage and love was

still flawed. The love between Elizabeth and Darcy is based on the feeling of love: they gradually fall in love with each other despite hating each other at the beginning, which is romantic and ideal. The author seemed to want to advocate a love-based marriage, but she still expressed the importance of material conditions to marriage in the text. Therefore, her concept of marriage was not perfect or completely ideal. Her concept of marriage and love was still influenced by the social environment at that time, so the novel presents a traditional marriage model.

5. Conclusion

Pride and Prejudice demonstrates the stereotype of love and marriage in 19th century of British society. Meanwhile, through the female character, Elizabeth, Jane Austen's independent personality, her interpretation of a happy marriage and her belief in the consistency of love are revealed. The marriage concept and female consciousness advocated by the author still resonate with people today. However, Jane Austen wrote in a patriarchal society where the role of women was still "homemakers" and marriages were mostly based on money. However, in the patriarchal society at that time, the description of women in mainstream literary works was not based on the feminist perspective. Austen, contrary to the traditional idea of literary creation, had feminist ideas sparkling in her novels and perfectly shaped characters with female consciousness and characteristics. The female language and thinking mode in the novel are the author's

challenge to the patriarchal society and have made great contributions to the development of female literature.

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