

# Feminism in Realist Fiction in the East and the West: A Comparative Analysis of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* and Cao Xueqin's *Dream of the Red Chamber*

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## Abstract:

Feminist literary criticism has now become one of the important research directions in the field of literary criticism. Increasingly more scholars are focusing on the works of different eras, and through these works studying the development of feminism in the current era, as well as the attitudes of different writers and cultures towards feminism. Realist fiction, as an important part of literature, deserves to be associated with feminism. In order to study feminism embodied in both Eastern and Western realist novels, this thesis chooses feminism revealed in *Pride and Prejudice* and *Dream of the Red Chamber* as its research topics. The two works are compared and analyzed from multiple perspectives through the comparative literature research method. By analyzing two works, this paper summarizes the ways of presentation of feminism in both Eastern and Western realist novels, including the characters in the novels, the plot narratives of the novels, and the attitudes of the authors as well as the social context towards feminism.

**Keywords:** Feminist literary criticism; comparative literature; *Dream of the Red Chamber*; *Pride and Prejudice*.

## 1. Introduction

Feminism has consistently served as a significant topic in literary criticism and commentary. Its manifestation in literary works can largely reflect the societal landscape and ideological currents of a particular nation or era. In both Eastern and Western literary histories, a significant portion of works reflect feminist themes, particularly within the realm

of realist novels [1]. *Dream of the Red Chamber* by Cao Xueqin and *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen serve as representative literary works of realist fiction in their respective cultures. The writing timelines of the two works differ by only 60 years, and both novels feature female ensembles as their protagonists. Additionally, the authors have crafted remarkably avant-garde female characters that were unprecedented at the time [2].

As two renowned works in both Eastern and Western literature, there are not a few studies and analyses of these two works by literary critics. There have been many papers examining the plot of the story, the characterization of the female protagonists and the period in which the work is presented, but they have not covered everything. There is also a lack of research in literature that links these two works together, as well as a lack of research on the similarities and differences between the East and the West in terms of feminism as presented in literature during the same period.

This paper focuses on the display of feminism in realist fictions in the Eastern and Western cultural backgrounds, using *Dream of the Red Chamber* and *Pride and Prejudice* as examples. For both of these works, it is possible to focus on the feminism they embody in a number of different ways. Firstly, the female characters portrayed in these two works are worth exploring, as there are both positive and negative female characters in the works, and there are both similarities and differences in the comparison of the single characters. Secondly, both works have the theme of marriage and love, which can most directly express the gender conflict in literature and depict feminism through the display of conflicts. In addition, there are similarities and differences in the two authors' attitudes towards the women in their works, which is related to the different genders of the two authors. Finally, the different literary traditions and social trends between the East and the West have also greatly influenced feminism in literature.

This paper adopts the research method of comparative study of literature to exemplify expressions of feminism in both Eastern and Western literature, especially in realistic fiction, by comparing two works, *The Dream of the Red Chamber* and *Pride and Prejudice*. This comparative research aims to fill the research gap in this area and contribute to subsequent comparative literary studies and feminist studies on these two works.

## 2. Theoretical Background

Comparative study of literature is a kind of literary study with the themes of inter-ethnicity, inter-language, inter-culture and inter-discipline [3]. It emphasizes the similarities and differences between different types of literature and tries to explain why they arise. Comparative literature is essentially a new discipline that uses comparative methods to study the relationships between literature and literature, or literature and other art forms and ideologies, among different peoples and countries. Comparative literature has developed well in both the East and the West and has been studied by critics as an important literary

discipline.

As the academy takes notice of feminism, more critics have associated literature with feminist theories. Some writers may not be writing solely to express feminism, but feminism is already reflected in their works, due to the fact that their ideas were ahead of their time. For these reasons, feminism in literature is equally worth studying. Today feminist literary criticism exists as a very important branch of modern literary theory. More and more scholars are involved in the study of feminist literary criticism.

## 3. The Characteristics of Female Figures Represented in *Dream of the Red Chamber* and *Pride and Prejudice*

Both *Dream of the Red Chamber* and *Pride and Prejudice* are renowned in the literary world for their portrayal of iconic female characters. However, influenced by various factors such as geography, cultural background, and society, the female representations in the two books exhibit both similarities and differences.

In fact, in the history of Chinese literature, novels like *Dream of the Red Chamber*, which focus on multiple female protagonists, are quite rare. Researchers typically consider the most pivotal female protagonists in *Dream of the Red Chamber* to be Lin Daiyu and Xue Baochai. Much like the two female protagonists—Jane and Elizabeth—in *Pride and Prejudice*, the protagonists characters in the two works are endowed with numerous admirable qualities during the character creation process.

The most important thing that the two works have in common is that they both portray women with independent thoughts and minds. In terms of the time when *Dream of the Red Chamber* was written, China was in the feudal period, and women were usually not allowed to study or participate in important family decisions due to the traditional patriarchal concepts. *The Dream of the Red Chamber*, on the other hand, contains many scenes depicting women writing. Lin Daiyu and Xue Baochai, the main characters of the book, likewise represent the highest level of poetry writing by the characters. Women's achievements in literature are much higher than men's - something that is unique in the history of Chinese literature [4]. Apart from literary creation, *Dream of Red Mansions* also portrays Wang Xifeng, a woman with the talent to rule. In the face of incompetent men, Wang Xifeng keeps the whole family in order. And among *Pride and Prejudice*, the female characters with this great trait are Jane and Elizabeth. Although they are not of noble birth, they are free from the shortcomings and bad habits of rural people. Austen skillfully contrasts their mother and sisters throughout the

book, highlighting the wisdom of the two protagonists by the narrowness of their vision. Elizabeth, in particular, is a very independent-minded woman who does not follow the crowd and does not easily change her opinion based on others' judgement [5].

Another common character shared by women in both works is that they both have a strong sense of rebellion. Lin Daiyu, the protagonist of *Dream of the Red Chamber*, is dissatisfied with the traditional concepts of the feudal society, which is not only special in the book, but also very rare in the social context of China at that time. Apart from her, there are many other women in *Dream of the Red Chamber* who do not yield to power and are even willing to give up their lives for it. Elizabeth in *Pride and Prejudice* also possesses this quality. When confronted with Darcy, who initially shows arrogance, she strikes back relentlessly. Her visit to her sick sister in the rain is also a satire of her noble sisters who are so proud of themselves. These acts of defiance were undoubtedly the best expression of feminism in the context of the time.

For various reasons, the female characters in the two novels also have differences. In contrast, the two sisters in *Pride and Prejudice* are shown as optimistic and outgoing, especially Elizabeth, who clearly possesses the trait of bravery. The women in *Dream of the Red Chamber*, however, appear to be more introverted and more of a gentle character. Despite the rebellious nature of the story's female protagonists, most of the female characters remain submissive. They defer to the male elders in the family and rarely make rebellions.

These similarities and differences come from the influence of the social and cultural background. During the time period in which both works were written, women were given a lower status than men. Being a woman meant unconditional obedience to male elders or husbands, and they were not qualified to receive an education, which resulted in their ignorance. It was a new and difficult challenge to portray an intelligent woman, especially since these women were to be superior to men in many ways. The two authors have given the female characters in their books many qualities that are different from the stereotypes, which in itself is an resist to the hierarchical male power. Additionally, the differences in female characters most likely stem from the differences in traditional gender roles between the East and the West. Oriental women have always been regarded as quiet and gentle. Cao Xueqin was influenced by this traditional concept when he wrote and inevitably retained such qualities. Western women are relatively more lively and outgoing, so Austen also shows such characteristics in her protagonists.

#### 4. Feminism Showed through Portrayal of Marriage and Love in the Two Works

When a work of literature features women, marriage and love often happen together; and when people talk about women's rights, gender relations are also a topic that cannot be ignored. Both *Dream of the Red Chamber* and *Pride and Prejudice* confront this point and use it as one of the main themes in their plots and narrations. It is desirable for readers to analyze the feminist ideas embodied by the authors through the discussion of the narratives of marriage and love in the novels [6]. The major difference between the two works is related to the feminism they expressed.

The main thread of love in *Dream of the Red Chamber* revolves around two women and one man, which allows the novel to contain a huge contradiction from which the rest of the plot unfolds. *Pride and Prejudice*, while also featuring the previous love stories of the men and women, seems relatively more peaceful. The reasons for this huge difference are varied. Firstly, marriages in traditional Chinese society are often heavily influenced by family elders. In old China, young people often did not have the right to fall in love freely, and they were more inclined to follow their parents' arrangements completely. This is particularly evident in the case of women. In the book, Lin Daiyu and Jia Baoyu liked each other but eventually failed to get married, and Lin Daiyu even sacrificed her life for this tragic love. Another character in the book, Xue Baochai, was abandoned by Jia Baoyu after her marriage, which is also a reflection of the tragic fate of women. It can be said that Cao Xueqin's narrative about marriage is a portrayal of female tragedy. In *Pride and Prejudice*, on the other hand, the ending of Darcy and Elizabeth's romance shows more of the power of women. Throughout, Elizabeth faces her marriage calmly. The ultimate happy ending is also obtained by her with her own efforts.

The differences in the marriage narratives in the two works also stem from the differences between Eastern and Western societies [7]. It is easy to see that the experience of love between the main characters in *Pride and Prejudice* seems easy, while it is more difficult in *Dream of the Red Chamber*. The status of women in Eastern societies is much lower than in the West, which means that they have fewer chances to change their destiny in love.

Another difference is seen in the book's characters' attitudes towards marriage. In *Dream of the Red Chamber*, everyone seems to avoid talking about the topic of marriage. In *Pride and Prejudice*, on the other hand, everyone tends to be proactive in seeking love for themselves. As

mentioned before, the setting of tragedy in *Dream of the Red Chamber* allows the whole work to serve as a presentation of women's tragic fates. *Pride and Prejudice*, on the other hand, informs the reader of the power of women to the fullest extent.

## 5. The Attitudes of the Two Writers towards Their Female Protagonists

The author, as the highest-ranking narrator of the whole novel, exists above all stories and has the right to decide on the plot and the method for the narrative. Therefore, the author's attitude towards his characters can reflect some of the author's ideas. In order to analyze the possible presence of feminism in the text, it is necessary to analyze the author's attitude towards the female characters in the book. Both authors discussed in this paper have sympathy and blessings for the female characters they have created. Austen expresses this by giving them happy endings, while Cao Xueqin expresses his feelings by mapping reality.

Jane Austen, removed from being a writer, is also considered by many critics to be one of the earliest proponents of feminism. Her work received much attention at the time [8]. She portrayed both positive and negative female characters in *Pride and Prejudice*, and she held different attitudes towards both types of female characters. Firstly, the best examples of positive female characters are Jane and Elizabeth. Austen clearly uses many positive descriptions of them. They are both mentioned several times in the book as possessing beauty and intelligence and being liked by others. Austen does not mince words in her praise of them and sets them up for a perfect ending at the end of the story. Positive characters get happy endings through their own efforts, which is a more conventional way of writing. By writing in this way Austen seems to be promoting to the reader the idea that women can come to happiness through their own good qualities and efforts.

But as a spokesperson for early feminism [9], Austen's writing has subtle gender biases that cannot be ignored: when the women finally achieve happiness in their marriages, the stories that belonged to them come to an abrupt end. For Elizabeth and Jane, they both get good endings at the end, but such endings end with marriage to the male of their choice. The flaws in this are very obvious. In modern feminist theory, marriage is no longer considered the number one priority in a woman's life. Academics, work, and achievement are all much more important. When we measure a woman's happiness, marriage is only one of the criteria that makes up a very small part of it. It does not represent anything. For Elizabeth and Jane in the book,

They do marry good husbands, but Austen doesn't give a description of the subsequent story, which makes the end of the whole novel seem a bit scribbled. Instead, the synopsis written at the beginning of the novel feels more like a set-up for something bad. For example, the prejudice of the upper class against the rural people, or the objectionable shortcomings of the mother and the three remaining sisters in the story. All of these could bring bad things to Elizabeth and Jane. And Austen doesn't mention this. The problem isn't really solved, and the marriage brings only fleeting pleasures, not the happiness of women dominating their lives.

Austen's tolerance of female characters is equally noteworthy. She also does her best to give the women who are treated as negative characters a relatively good ending at the end of the novel. They may have made mistakes, but they all achieve happiness by the end of the novel. This compassion for the characters in the book is likewise a reflection of feminism, the expectation of a better future for women.

Comparatively, Cao Xueqin appears much more brutal than Austen in this regard. *Dream of the Red Chamber* is an utter tragedy. Cao Xueqin depicts many girls with excellent characteristics, but almost all of these girls end up dead or in unhappy marriages. Cao Xueqin's writing is more like a realistic portrayal of the tragic fate of women in old Chinese society [10]. In China at that time, women did not have the right to decide their own lives, poor families would sell their daughters for money, and rich families would use their daughters as a tool to promote family relations. Cao Xueqin wrote about women's inability to make decisions and the eternal tragedy of their fate. This practice is likewise an expression of women's rights. Directly confronting the sufferings of women and depicting them in their original image was rare in Chinese literature of the time.

Like Austen, Cao Xueqin had sympathy for the female figures he created. His sympathy is the same for all of them and does not vary depending on their characterization. Some of the female characters in *Dream of the Red Chamber* have flaws that are traditionally associated with women in China, and Cao Xueqin does not avoid writing about this. It is worth noting that Cao Xueqin creates both strengths and weaknesses for these female characters, and it is difficult for the reader to say that she is perfect or all flawed. Because of this, it is difficult for the reader to completely love or hate any one character. Faced with an old Chinese society that was full of negative comments about women, Cao Xueqin tried to convey the power of women through his works.

## 6. The Influence of Social Contexts on Feminist Narratives in the Two Works

There is a great difference between the cultural backgrounds of the East and the West. The reflection of the cultural differences in the works gives each of the two novels a distinctive character. Under this influence, the feminism expressed in the two works is also different. One of the most obvious differences is that the ending styles of the two novels are almost completely opposite. As mentioned before, Austen tries her best to give all the characters in *Pride and Prejudice* happy endings, while Cao Xueqin gives most of them tragic endings. In classical Chinese art theory, women generally appear as representatives of beauty, and this beauty is usually accompanied by tragedy. The beauty represented by the woman reaches its peak at the moment of her death. So even though the women in *Dream of the Red Chamber* end up in death, in the Chinese mindset, they are a symbol of beauty [11]. This is actually a prejudice against women in the old Chinese society and an act of objectification of women. Cao Xueqin as an author of his time was inevitably flawed in these ways.

The two productions also take different approaches to portraying female characters. *Dream of the Red Chamber* depicts the things that the female characters are able to do, including writing poetry, painting, and governing the household. *Pride and Prejudice* portrays more of the virtues that the female characters possess. This is because of the different prejudices against women in the East and West. People in Qing dynasty in China generally believed that women were inferior to men in many things and that they could not do as well as men, while British society in the 18th century believed that there were many personality flaws in women [12]. This might be the reasons why the two works chose different ways to combat with these misconceptions.

## 7. Summary

The *Dream of the Red Chamber* and *Pride and Prejudice*, as outstanding works of literature from the East and the West, each possesses special features that are worth studying. The feminism embodied in both works, though limited, still expressed a very avant-garde point of view at the time and became the forerunner of feminist literature.

The female characters portrayed in both works share many similarities in characters. For example, they both possess strengths such as kindness and intelligence, which allow them to overthrow the traditional concept of discrimination against women. They also have differences that make

them attractive and appealing to readers. Both works also use extensive marriage and love narratives to express feminism. *Pride and Prejudice* ends the story with the main characters happily married. This approach expresses Austen's hope for a happy life for women, but it also has some limitations. *Dream of the Red Chamber* depicts mostly tragic love, which is Cao Xueqin's true portrayal of women's tragic fate and an expression of feminism.

Both authors have commonalities and differences in their attitudes towards female characters. There is no doubt that they both have compassion for the female characters they create. Austen tends to give all of them a perfect ending. Cao Xueqin, as a male author, experienced the torment and destruction of women by the social background and embodied these tragedies in his works. Notably, these differences could be contributed to the social context of writing that creates differences in the representation of female consciousness in these two works.

There are still some flaws in this thesis due to various factors. Comparisons between novels and works from the same cultural context and time period remain worthy of study. Subsequent studies can start from there.

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