

Comparative analysis of *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma* from a Feminist Perspective

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Abstract:

The origin of feminism can be traced back to the early 19th century. Although it has a long history, it did not become widespread until the 20th century. Though feminism still confronts many obstacles, it has come a long way toward realizing gender equality today. Renowned British feminist novelist Jane Austen wrote novels in the late 18th and early 19th century. She was particularly skilled at depicting colorful and varied female characters in a culture where males predominated. The majority of the female characters she wrote about had different personalities and unusual perspectives on marriage. This article will compare the writing characteristics and female characters in two outstanding literary works, *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma*, to understand Jane Austen's mature views on love and marriage and her evolving understanding of the ideal heroine. It is also of great significance for studying the development of feminism and the awakening of modern women's consciousness.

Keywords: feminism; Views on marriage; ideal heroine

1. Introduction

The history of British literature saw the emergence of numerous female writers in the late 18th and early 19th century. These female writers promoted the rise and development of female consciousness in the patriarchal society of the day by utilizing their distinctive viewpoints and writing styles. Jane Austen, as a leader in the development of female consciousness, is known as the "Shakespeare of the novel world". She completed a total of six complete novels in her lifetime, in which vivid depictions of female characters pushed women who had long been marginalized and in a state of silence from behind the scenes to

the forefront[1]. From the early stage of *Pride and Prejudice* to the later *Emma*, Jane Austen portrayed female characters from the unique perspective of female writers, giving them their own independent personalities and unique life experiences. However, it is also evident from her earlier and later works that she progressively evolved from immaturity to maturity in her conception of the ideal female heroine, which further enhanced the connotation of her works. This essay will examine the history of feminism's evolution while examining the creative backgrounds, literary styles, resemblances and discrepancies in the representations of female characters, and shifts in the perception of the ideal female protagonist.

2. Organization of the Text

2.1 Background of the Creation of *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma*

2.1.1 Social background

In the late 18th and early 19th centuries in the European world, men were the dominant force in social life, “controlling the economic, political, and ideological spheres of society” [2], while women were only considered as accessories to men, with gentleness being seen as their most important quality [3-4], without the right to work and receive education. Thus, it is evident that patriarchy is mostly to blame for women’s subordinate status. Nonetheless, Britain was going through a significant social transformation at the same time. First, as the Industrial Revolution progressed, Britain’s capitalist economy grew and the social division of labor underwent substantial adjustments that improved women’s standing. The rise of the Renaissance and Enlightenment revolutions brought about a great deal of intellectual and cultural diversity, which encouraged women to pursue their own interests and ideas and hastened the emancipation of women’s thought. In this era, women gained intellectual liberation and independent economic status [5], and the Western feminist movement also ushered in the first wave with the theme of fighting for equal rights. This social movement crossed class and racial boundaries [6].

2.2 The similarities in the techniques used to shape female characters between the two novels

2.2.1 Comparison of Male and Female Characters

In these two novels, Jane Austen changed the traditional writing style of feminist writers and portrayed a large number of negative male characters, further highlighting the image of female characters.

In *Pride and Prejudice*, the female protagonist Elizabeth is an intelligent and ambitious woman. When faced with the proposal of Mr. Collins and Mr. Darcy, she does not change her initial thoughts due to their status and position. In her opinion, love is the prerequisite for marriage. So in the social context of that time, even though Elizabeth did not have the right to inherit property, she did not choose a comfortable life. She still firmly chose the life she wanted, and in this regard, her determination and courage had surpassed many men. For example, Mr. Darcy and Mr. Bingley have both lost their parents, and Mr. Bennet, as one of the few male characters in the book, does not have a very close relationship with his family. Instead of doing his father’s duty of carefully planning his daughters’

futures, he merely married them all off fast. He did not place much emphasis on his daughters’ education, as seen by the fact that he did not apply severe rules and punishment to his youngest daughter Lydia, which finally caused her to run away. Officer Wickham and other masculine characters are examples of two-faced characters. On the outside, he seems sophisticated and attractive, but on the inside, he is a conceited little man. He tricked Lydia into going with him on an errand that turned out badly for the whole Bennet family. In order to achieve his goals, he did not hesitate to blacken Mr. Darcy, and he fabricated that it was Mr. Darcy who caused him to suffer.

In *Emma*, the female protagonist is also a woman with her own ideas. She is smart and beautiful, and never places her happiness on marriage [7]. Although not perfect, she constantly changes herself as she grows up. Emma’s father, Mr. Woodhouse, was actually a less responsible father, and Emma lost her mother at a young age. Although Mr. Woodhouse appears to take great care of his youngest daughter on the surface, she has actually been a great failure in educating her daughter. Emma’s early personality was powerful and conceited because of his indulgence, which did not help her daughter develop. Another significant male character in the book is Reverend Mr. Elton, who despite his outward kindness is a hypocrite and self-centered individual. He sees marriage as a business deal, and the only thing he looks for in a potential mate is their family history. Consequently, because of her affluent family background, Emma has also come to be his target. Emma was originally fooled by his good looks, but she also had second thoughts about him after seeing that beneath his hideous exterior lay his horrible nature. So from a feminist perspective, Mr. Elton is actually a microcosm of those profit driven individuals in the patriarchal society of the 19th century [8].

2.3 Differences and Similarities of Female Characters in *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma*

2.3.1 Similarities in the character of the female protagonist

As representative works of feminism, the portrayal of the female lead in *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma* is the key to their success. Although the two female characters have different personalities, they share some similarities. Firstly, both have their own unique views on marriage. At the beginning of *Pride and Prejudice*, the author writes: “It is a true universal acknowledgement that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife.[9]” However, Elizabeth actually holds a completely opposite view. When she chose her husband, she always followed her own inner choices and never wavered due to external

persuasion and the other person's status. She refused Mr. Darcy's proposal because she thought marriage required equality and respect and because she had bias against him and thought they were unequal. She didn't accept Mr. Darcy's proposal until she had fully understood her own sentiments and had worked out her misunderstanding with him.

In *Emma*, the female protagonist also has a unique perspective on marriage. She believes that if she can't meet the one who truly suits her, she would prefer never get married for the rest of her life. Along with regularly attending different parties and social gatherings, Emma and her buddy Harriet enjoy reading and listening to music together. She feels that her spouse ought to be considerate of her interests. She thus acknowledged that she would like Mr. Knightley to respect her life and refrain from interfering excessively after accepting his proposal. He also thought that Mr. Knightley should share domestic duties after marriage rather than just expecting women to do them all. For today, fully understanding the different needs and challenges between men and women is the key to the transformation of feminist value research[10].

2.3.2 The Difference of Ideal Heroine

Elizabeth and Emma are both highly representative characters in Jane Austen's works, but the differences between the two characters actually reflect Jane Austen's gradual maturity in understanding the ideal female lead.

In *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth is a highly charismatic female character, even approaching perfection. Firstly, Elizabeth has wisdom and critical thinking. She loves reading, so she has a high level of cultural literacy, which also allows her to have her own thinking patterns. For example, she will not easily abide by her mother's arrangements for her marriage. While a few of her sisters aspire to marry wealthy individuals, she consistently maintains her own convictions. Elizabeth was also fearless and daring to question accepted norms. She worried about her sister Jane's health and walked three kilometers by herself to see to her after she became ill while playing at Mr. Bingley's estate. She didn't care whether her clothing were neat owing to the rocky travel, because she considered that meeting her sister was the most essential thing, and she also believed that ladies didn't need to preserve immaculate manners at all times[11]. From Elizabeth's many characteristics, it can be seen that she indeed possessed all the virtues of an ideal woman at that time, sometimes even making us feel unattainable.

Emma, on the other hand, is a growing female protagonist. The author, Jane Austen, once said, "Emma is a female protagonist whom no one but myself would particularly like." In the early days, due to her affluent family back-

ground, Emma developed traits of arrogance, selfishness, and power. She prevented Harriet from accepting Farmer Martin's proposal, believing that she had the right to interfere with others' lives and decisions. At the same time, she initially looked down upon lower class people such as Miss Bates, using wealth as the only criterion for measuring a person's goodness or badness, which reflected her early personality flaws. But with experiencing many changes in life and getting to know Mr. Knightley, she understood her own weaknesses, tried hard to correct them, and progressively matured. Emma therefore had a lot of flaws in her early years, but she always acknowledged them and worked to fix them, which was a major factor in her development. Emma is thus another incredibly endearing example of a woman.

3. Conclusion

In Jane Austen's writing career, she created female characters with vastly different personalities such as Elizabeth and Emma. The distinctions between these figures represented her growing awareness of female consciousness and her discontentment with the discrimination against women in society at the time. The integration of feminist ideas in his works posed a challenge to the male dominated society at that time, and also promoted women's pursuit of equal and free rights to a certain extent.

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