

The Development of Feminism Thoughts in the 19th Century's British Literature

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Abstract. In ancient times of Western society, men always held the dominating and central status, while women had to bear the discrimination and inequality coming from all aspects of life. They were regarded to be inferior to men both physically and mentally. Men also took priority over women in the course of the development of British literature for a long time. The first prosperous wave of literature containing feminism thoughts did not occur in British history until the 18-19 century, from which appeared the most eminent novelists, Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë, and Daphne du Maurier. All of these works changed the traditional male-centered creative mood and highlighted distinct feminist characteristics. This papers mainly focus on the development of feminism thoughts in 19century British literature and concentrates on the most typical three books as examples to illustrate it.

Keywords: English Literature, Feminism, Social Discrimination, Literary Prosperity.

1. Introduction

In ancient Western society, men were always dominant and central, so women had to suffer from inequality and discrimination from all aspects of life. Under this kind of thinking, they are regarded as physically and mentally inferior to men. In the development of English literature, the status of male superiority to female inferiority also has a long history. The first wave of literary prosperity that contained feminist ideas in British history did not appear until the 18th and 19th centuries. And played an enlightening role in women's rights competition in society. [1]

To explore the significance and author of these books in the development of female literary thought. This article focuses on the development of feminist ideas in English literature in the 19th century and uses the three most representative books as examples. To study the role of female literature in the competition for feminist rights.

2. Development of Female Consciousness based on "Pride and Prejudice"

2.1 Development from a Moral Perspective

Jane Austen is considered as the earliest novelist who initially conveyed strong female consciousness in writing, and her representative work "Pride and Prejudice" shows female character's intelligence, wit, and independence, whose characteristic had not been emphasized strongly by any other authors before. Austen's breakthrough in characterization can be generalized in two points. [2]

First is the weakening of men and strengthening of women in moral aspects, which contains the heavy contrast and the weaken or blank of some images. Firstly, through the depiction of Collins's flawed intellect and greed, and the morally impure officer Wickham, who is portrayed vividly as a liar and crafty man, forming a clear contrast to the smart Elizabeth and independent Lady Catherine morally. (Turnard 2015: 6) Secondly, father's image is always absent in the novel, which is also a deliberate plot to intensify the female's strengthened position in the novel, such as Darcy's and Bingley's father both died, Lady Catherine's husband also passed away, while Mr. Bennett is indifferent to his family, which can be observed form his attachment to the library. He just cared about his books and paid scant attention to the company from his wife or the marriage of his daughter. Therefore, the image of the only alive father seems not to exist, which meanwhile leads to another contrast, the indifferent Mr. Bennett and obliging Mrs. Bennett.

This example shows how Mrs. Bennett takes care of her daughter's marriage: When Jane received the invitation from Mrs. Bingley, who invited her to have dinner in Netherfield's. *Mrs. Bennet said: "You'd better ride over there, because it looks likely to rain, and then you'll have to stay the night."* The intention to denounce the moral of the male image and the absence of some male character served as a way to form a comparison between male and female, thus reflecting the author's feminist mind. [3].

2.2 The Development of Women's Rights from an Antagonistic Perspective

In the example of Elizabeth and Darcy, these points can be seen as both psychological and physical. In terms of psychological, at first Mr. Darcy was arrogant and conceited, he carried a prejudice towards the people whose social status is not as high as him. Even when he expressed his feeling to Elizabeth, he still did it offensively. Faced with the refusal coming naturally from Elizabeth, he was hurt and humiliated, which might be the first failure he had ever experienced in his life so far. This can be considered as the failure of Darcy psychologically. When Elizabeth was going on a trip with her aunt and uncle, she came across Darcy, this time, Mr. Darcy changes his previous shortcomings and is friendly to Elizabeth's relatives, which is the another both psychological and physical win of Elizabeth. Finally, it's Elizabeth's successful marriage with Mr. Darcy, which also can be interpreted as a victory of Elizabeth. When it comes to Charlotte and Collins, Charlotte is Elizabeth's best friend and she seems like an "Elizabeth" in the reality (because not all the woman can get an end like that) who is in plight but without the help of her Mr. Darcy. Charlotte Lucas is a quite knowledgeable, intelligent, and educated middle-class woman. Maybe it is the only one girl in the whole novel who can compare with Elizabeth in terms of thoughts, which could be the reason why she can become the best friend of Mr. Elizabeth. Here the example can well illustrate Charlotte's smartness.

"His long speeches and flattering compliments were transferred for the rest of the day to kind Charlotte Lucas, who took herself the trouble of listening to him". Even though Charlotte doesn't love Collins which makes Collins a poor rich man, she still wins Collins, by letting him trap in her mesh.

By making women triumph men again and again, whatever is from the plot, result, or their characteristic, the author is trying to emphasize that women can be better than men, women can also be the winner in a relationship and be emotionally or spiritually independent of men. In this way, the author expresses such feminist thoughts, but rather obscurely. Except, some conventional minds and customs still exist, which might due to the times that the author lived. At the age of Jane Austen's time, the economy of Britain developed at a fast speed, thanks to the Industrial Revolution (Wu Jingwen 2016 7-8) [4].

3. Evolution of Feminist Perspectives based on "Arrogance and Prejudice" to "Jane. Love"

3.1 Marriage Value Perspective Comparison

In pride and prejudice, the Bennet family, as well as the heroine Elizabeth, still practice the doctrine that woman must get married, better to a rich one, and in that novel, the woman still needs to depend on their husband without seeking their life values, such as find a job or pursue their dreams. Despite Elizabeth who is brave to speak out her opinions and refuse the proposal of Darcy at first, she still gives in under the pressure of marriage and to acquire affluent living and high social position through marriage. Maybe to some extent, the beauty and wits of Elizabeth are a means to attract a successful man so that she can get both love and fortune. While in Jane Eyre, Jane can stay with a man regardless of whether he is rich or poor, when she knows the truth that Rochester had married, she chooses to leave him at the expense of loneliness, poverty, weakness. However, after Rochester's Abby was burnt, he lost everything, Jane still chooses to accompany him, which reflects that their love is not established on any foundation related to money. Also, Jane has always depended on herself, since she was in her childhood, she tried her best to go through the adversity caused by her aunt Mrs. Reed, then she studies diligently and be the top students in her class in Lowood school. After that, she works

in Thornfield Manor as the private teacher for Adele and earn the living by herself, even after she falls in love with Rochester. From this point of view, Jane is more independent, because she does not depend on other men even family, she is defying all the vicious things and inequality surrounding by herself. (Zhou Weifei 2019: 139).

3.2 The Impact of the Contrast Between Men and Women

Secondly, the improvement can be found in their opposite appearance. When Austen is depicting Elizabeth, she uses words like beautiful, smart, etc. Also, Elizabeth is enjoying the affection coming from all kinds of men, which can show her outstanding appearance at the same time. However, from the beginning of *Jane Eyre*, we can feel that Jane is just a normal person, not beautiful, just ordinary, so the author always uses words like well-mannered and well-deported to demonstrate that Jane has conspicuous morals. Charlotte always compares Jane to her step-sister, Georgeanne to illustrate that Jane is an ordinary one and the author emphasizes it. Therefore, how Charlotte endows her protagonist is a defiance to the stereotype of the heroin in the traditional novel in the male-dominated world, the main female character must be beautiful as well as well-bred. [5].

3.3 Comparison of Changes based on Appearances

In terms of the way of showing the appearance of the main character, a woman, from the feminist view, Charlotte presents it in a more advanced way. Not only does it exaggerates the inside characteristic of Jane, but also indicates what makes a woman charming is not by her appearance but also her inner power.

4. Based on "Jane Love" to "Rebecca" Women's Perspective Development Research

From *Jane Eyre* to Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* development can be generalized in three points. Firstly, feminism is expressed more freely, radically, and without any shield. Secondly, a female's image is developed from not perfect, whatever is from the view of the physical or mental aspect, to perfect, even extreme. Thirdly, how the male image was placed in books.

4.1 Feminism is Expressed More Freely, Radically, and without any Shield

Firstly, Daphne did not take any shield to cover the feminism thoughts, compared to Charlotte. Jane's defiant spirit, to some extent, is from her miserable childhood, which is a result that she wants to prove herself, or show others that she has the power to do everything. This excuse seems to account well for Jane's feminism-like behavior and rebellion reflections, thus she does not make feminist thoughts so obvious. While Rebecca was born in a wealthy family, and she did not need to do extra work and she can just by all this advantage live a happy life. So, Rebecca's fight with men seems for no reason, just craved on her gene. Compared with Elizabeth in *Pride and Prejudice*, Rebecca is good-looking as well, but she does not expect a man to help her. By creating a character advocating feminism so crazily, this shows the author's more radical reflections of feminism.

4.2 Based on the Comparison Between the Perfect Perspective and the Male Perspective

Secondly, Rebecca is a much more perfect woman than both Jane and Elizabeth, she does not depend on others mentally and physically, and she has the aptitude to handle everything. In terms of her capability to handle things: *The beauty of Manderley that you see today, the Manderley that people talk about and photograph and paint, it's all due to her, to Rebecca.*

Also, Rebecca's personality is portrayed in a masculine way, which is an extreme way to shape this character. She is mad at riding horses, which is considered to be a male's sport in traditional eyes. But she can do it well, even better than a man. Here, 'Rebecca surpass man' is different from that in *Pride and prejudice*. In *Pride and Prejudice*, women gain victories against men that can main find an intellectual aspect. Moreover, what the women in *Pride and Prejudice* want is relationship or fortune, but not like Rebecca simply want to win them and use extreme way to do that.

She did what she liked, she lived as she liked. She had the strength of a little lion too. I remember her at sixteen getting up on one of her father's horses, a big brute of an animal too, that the groom said was too hot for her to ride. She stuck to him, all right. I can see her now, with her hair flying out behind her, slashing at him, drawing blood, digging the spurs into his side, and when she got off his back he was trembling all over, full of froth and blood. "That will teach him, won't it, Danny?" she said and walked off to wash her hands as cool as you please. And that's how she went at life when she grew up. I saw her, I was with her. She cared for nothing and no one. And then she was beaten in the end. But it wasn't a man, it wasn't a woman.

This quote from the book was spoken by the person most trusted by Rebecca, Mrs. Danvers, and Rebecca just likes what she describes, it was not a man, it was not a woman. The author is trying to create a powerful woman to illustrate that women can be strong and fierce. More importantly, the perfectness of Rebecca not only morally surpasses man, like that in *Pride and Prejudice*, but make men scared of her perfectness, and lets them hate her. This is what Maxime comments on Rebecca, and it also reflects that Maxime prefers the narrator.

I hated her, I tell you. Our marriage was a farce from the very first. She was vicious, damnable, rotten through and through. We never loved each other, never had one moment of happiness together. Rebecca was incapable of love, of tenderness, of decency. She was not even normal.'

4.3 Evolution from a Status Perspective

Thirdly, man is put on a rather not essential position. The male character, Maxime was played in the hand of Rebecca, she discards the truth that they are husband and wife, but considers it as a contract, as an eternal way to seek freedom. Her cousin Fall was one of the men who she sees as a partner just for fun, and she will tease them behind and look down upon them. What they mean to her is just as fun equipment. Additionally, Rebecca is the most central character that no man could stop mention or afraid of her. For example, Maxime killed Rebecca, and he did not want it to be found out by others, therefore, Rebecca cast a shadow on his entire life. Every detail in *Manderley* is arranged as what Rebecca said, every servant remembering her can keep talking about her. Even the narrator 'I', commits this lady into memory and keeps reminding the reader all the time. Every plot is related to Rebecca, and she never even occurs physically. [6]

5. Deeper Thinking about Feminism and how to Achieve Male Priority

Last but not least, the author shows deeper reflections on feminism, and how to realize the priority over man. Daphne depicts two main female characters in her book, who is the narrator of no name and Rebecca. Different from Charlotte, Daphne not only depicts some rebellious characteristics of Rebecca to show the power of women, but also portrays the mental state and reflections of the narrator, to show the image of a traditional woman at that time, or at least in a majority's mind. Such as, the narrator 'I', tends to be more sensitive about and dependent on Maxime, which would often occur in real life. However, 'I' actually not a production of concession to patriarchy. That it is, be weak and dependent as the narrator, females still can be the new Mrs de winter of *Manderley*, still can let the male depend on her for the rest of their life.

Rebecca was published in 1938, which is right in the period of the Second-wave feminism. (Alison Light 1984:7) Compared to the former one, the feminism movement of this period had more schools, but they concentrated more on sexual manipulation. Liberal feminism asserted that sex deserves approval. They supported that women can seek sexual satisfaction, and the chance is bigger for women to win when women have the same competitive opportunities, which is similar to the feelings the author would like to express in Rebecca. However, the fact that the author had a reflection on this perspective, and wrote it in her book does not mean that she agrees with it. Rebecca's death and the happiness and peace in mind that 'I' got form a contrast, which is the author would like to express, such an aggressive competitive attitude is not a good solution to seek equality. [7]

6. Conclusion

From *Pride and Prejudice*, *Jane Eyre* to *Rebecca*, we can witness that the feminism-like reflections have been developed from nip to blossom and even extreme. This advancement is due to mainly the social background. All in all, the trend in these three books can be concluded in five ways. First, women tend to be the winner in more and more aspects, which is from sentimental and intellectual to physical and knowledge to every aspect. Second, the great characteristic of women is emphasized in more and more way and women are increasingly independent. Third, men's image is weakening in more aspects. Fourth, the author's reflection is deeper and deeper, which is from a story-like view in *Pride and Prejudice*, as a beautiful woman is just in need of wealthy men, to an autobiography-like written of *Jane Eyre* revealing that women should be independent, to Daphne's reflections on the in which way for women is a more proper way to fight.

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