

Female Rebelliousness on the Economy and Gender Relations in the 19th Century British Literature: From Jane Austen to Charlotte Brontë

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ABSTRACT

The eighteenth and the nineteenth century witnessed serious gender inequalities in British society. Patriarchy gained dominance of everything in the fields of economy, politics and literature. At the end of the eighteenth century, female writers such as Jane Austen and Charlotte Brontë bravely broke the discourse confinement and revealed feminist consciousness through their works. This thesis is going to analyze the development of female rebelliousness regarding economic and gender relations in novels by Jane Austen and Charlotte Brontë.

Keywords: *Feminism; English Literature; Jane Austen; Charlotte Brontë*

1. INTRODUCTION

In the history of British feminist literature, the nineteenth century is a remarkable period. The reform in different aspects of British society challenged everything under the traditional model, while new ideology was germinating rapidly. Jane Austen(1775–1817) is one of the most representative authors among the cluster of the late eighteenth century and the early nineteenth century authors. With detailed description of the social reality and profound discussion about marriage in her works, Austen presented the awakening of feminist consciousness in the late nineteenth century. When it came to the Victorian period, Charlotte Brontë, another brilliant female writer who shocked the world with her powerful work *Jane Eyre*, addressed modern women's position in a male dominated society. Both Austen's and Brontë's works can be regarded as pivotal texts for feminism, their ahead-of-age feminist consciousness made influence on the development of theories and movements all over the world.

This thesis is aimed to discuss women's sense of rebelliousness and spiritual growth in 19th century English Literature by comparing the most significant novels of Jane Austen and Charlotte Brontë. The first part will illustrate the authors' feminist consciousness by analyzing two typical female characters in their novels. When it comes to the second part, there will be a discussion about the relationship between authors' life experience and their attitudes towards money. The romantic relationships in their novels will be investigated in part three.

2. THE GERMINATION OF FEMINIST CONSCIOUSNESS IN NOVELS

By the end of the eighteenth century, the British society was completely dominated by men. Patriarchy took control of everything not only in the field of economic and politics, but also in the literary world. In those days, the most significant life goal for women born in ordinary class or upper-middle class was to achieve a decent life by virtue of marriage and bonus from male families.

From the eighteenth century to the early nineteenth century, the mainstream of English literature was still dominated by the works which male writer created. At that time, the most popular fiction types were adventure fiction, historical fiction and realistic fiction. Such as Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones*, Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe* and so on. These novels are full of romanticism or realism, drawing a grand outlook of the world and showing critical spirit about social reality. However, almost all of them are centered on male characters, and the female images are very flat, either representing certain qualities and virtues or act as an accessory of male protagonist. For example, there are basically only two types of women images in *Tom Jones*: one is the embodiment of purity and virtue represented by Sophia; The other kind is the debauchery women with moral degeneration. Jane Austen changed the appearance of flat female characters in the history of literature, focused on the fate of women from upper-middle class and revealed gender inequality which was happened for a long time. In her work *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen revealed the inner world of women from complete female perspective. Elizabeth Bennet, the heroine of this novel, is a very special character compared with other female images in

previous works by Jane Austen and other authors. She is a woman with unique disposition who doesn't allow social conventions where she lives restrict her though and talents. Unlike her sister Jane, who has plaint temper and stunning appearance, Elizabeth is brilliant, independent, determined and quick-minded. "She told the story however with great spirit among her friends; for she had a lively, playful disposition, which delighted in anything ridiculous." [1] This quotation is about Elizabeth's reaction after hearing Mr. Darcy said that she is "tolerable but not handsome enough to tempt him". Obviously, she is confident enough to regard Mr. Darcy's offensive comment as a ridiculous joke and share it with others. The most precious feature is the decent combination of sense and sensibility in her character. Though few times misled by exteriors, her maturity and intellect are beyond her age. In nineteenth century Britain, women from upper-middle class were underestimated as superficial, indecisive, and fragile. Their nature were completely labeled and shaped by convention. Mary Wollstonecraft pointed out how social conditions turned women into a symbol of weakness:

"Women are told from their Infancy, and taught by the example of their mothers, that a little knowledge of human weakness, justly termed cunning, softness of temper, outward of obedience, and a scrupulous attention to a puerile kind of propriety, will obtain for them the protection of man....." [2]

Considering the social environment at that period, Elizabeth's characteristic is a strong rebellion against the stereotype. By shaping this charming character and arranging a romantic relationship between she and Mr. Darcy, Austen attempted to corroborate an concept that women likewise can be brilliant and rational. They are able to enchant their husband through talent and wisdom rather than appearance or submissiveness. She traced women's psychological activities and emotional choice in a particular way, that can be regarded as a challenge against the patriarchal domination in the field of British literature. In Austen's works, she praised women's own value from the perspective of a human in society rather than their domestic identities as wives and mothers. Overall, by demonstrating young ladies' yearning for autonomy in marriage, Austen reflected the rising awareness of feminist and rebellion in upper-middle class women.

Unlike Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë can truly be called a Victorian writer. When Brontë published her first novel, *Jane Eyre*, in 1847, enormous changes had already taken placed in all aspects of British society. The feminist literature was flourishing in Victorian era, more and more females dared to publish their penetrating comments in economy, politics and culture aspects. "By the nineteenth century there was a rich and clearly defined female literary subculture, a community in which women consciously read and related to each other's works." [3] Therefore the females tried to strive for the social status instead of gaining respect within the family. There are some social factors that influenced Charlotte Brontë's creation as followed: after Queen Victoria's coronation, many female scholars who have made outstanding achievements in the fields of sociology, political economy and women's status

have received great attention. Harriet Martineau, for example, openly rejected the common view in the literary world that social, economic and political non-fictions is dominated by men, while romance and family fictions are more suitable for female writers. She published a series of political and economic books and became the most famous female scholar of that period who broke away from gender restrictions. In addition, the Industrial Revolution brought both employment opportunities and more brutal repressive for women. Many women at the bottom of the society could join the working class like men and earn money through labor, but at the same time, they were severely exploited by the bourgeoisie. They faced many unequal restrictions, such as wage deduction or dismissal after pregnancy, and working up to 16 hours a day for very low wages. This series of cruel facts prompted women to devote themselves to the labor movements and fight for their own legitimate rights. In this case, Charlotte Brontë concentrated on the women suffering from difficult social life.

Female images in Brontë's work, as long as pursuing freedom of marriage and individual liberation, faced with a more realistic challenge: to survive in this cruel society on their own. Austen's novels reflect the struggle of upper-class women for equal family status against husbands, while Brontë's novels focus on how women from the bottom of society can get the same social status as men. What's more, Brontë's novels touched on the social reality of life, to discuss several problems which the bottom of the women most concerned about: how to earn money to support themselves? How to realize economic independence and personality independence? How to choose a soulmate with equality instead of a dominating husband?

In *Jane Eyre*, Brontë created one of the most classic female images in the history of literature. *Jane Eyre's* fate is very tragic, her parents died in her childhood; in the uncle's home she was abused by aunt and cousin for ten years; in the orphanage she suffered from the mental and physical torture; in *Thornfield Manorf* she found a job and fell in love, however, in the wedding she realized that her fiancé already had a wife. Jane has experienced lots of hardships, but she is not a sentimental and fragile woman, on the contrary, she is strong and optimistic, she has very tough personality and never succumbs to hardships. Jane has a strong sense of resistance and self-esteem consciousness. She is quite emotional, easy to be excited and irritable. When her self-esteem is violated by others, she always desperate to fight back. Faced with her cousin's abuse, she rushed to fight with him; in the face of her aunt's humiliating, she could reply with a malicious tongue, when being punished at the orphanage, she cried out excitedly: "I know I should think well of myself; but that is not enough: if others don't love me I would rather die than live - I cannot bear to be solitary and hated," [4] When she realized that Rochester had pretended to marry someone else just to confirm her affections, she yelled at him in anger: "I am not talking to you now through the medium of custom, conventionalities, nor even of mortal flesh - it is my spirit that addresses your spirit; just as if both had

passed through the grave, and we stood at God's feet, equal - as we are!" [5]

Jane persisted in the pursuit of dignity even in the most horrible environment, and finally she harvested happiness and love by virtue of her powerful independent spirit. In this novel, Brontë denies the gap between roles of both genders and gives women with more autonomy in social life. Through *Jane Eyre*, she declared to the people: All men are born equal, everyone has the right to choose their own lives. Women can choose their own living environment, and they can earn their own living through wisdom. Women can resist and escape when faced with disrespect and injustice, they can question men, challenge authority, and can also refuse inappropriate work, unequal relationships and interference. Compared with the middle and upper class women in Austen's works, women in Brontë's works experience more cruel and ruthless oppression and exploitation from the whole external patriarchal society. They are going through identity anxiety, but also have a stronger desire to break the shackles. They realize that an ideal husband can not change their social status of "the second sex". Second sex is a concept brought up by Simone de Beauvoir, suggesting that women are "defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential." [6] In *Jane Eyre*, Jane realized that all the qualities and features of women are defined by masculinity. She used to feel inferior and anxious, for her not being able to meet men's aesthetic standards for 'a perfect woman'. Facing the excessive control and pamper from Rochester, she learned that only through financial independence could she change her fate of being underestimated. So she tried so hard to get rid of such psychological constraints.

In a word, Austen pushed women to the center of the literary stage, broke the dominant position of male writers, and showed women's charming personality and wisdom, while Brontë took the lead in putting forward the issue of women's independent personality and emphasizing women's strong pursuit of their own value in accordance with the changes of the times. It can be seen that in these decades, the British feminist movements had made a significant breakthrough.

3. FEMINISM IN ECONOMIC CONSCIOUSNESS

In addition to the factors of the times, the two writers show different degrees of feminist thinking in their works, which is also related to their different class origins and growth experiences. Both of them aware the importance of money for women's independence: the basis of women's independence must be economic independence. But because of different life experiences, they have their own attitude towards money. This part will introduce the two writers' growth experiences and compare the similarities and differences on economic views between *Pride and Prejudice* and *Jane Eyre*.

Austen was born in a middle-class family, her father was the pastor of the Steventon area, her mother came from a wealthy family. Although her family was not fairly wealthy, Austen received good education and grew up in a good familial environment. She was versatile, especially in reading and writing. After the death of her father, Austen's family fell into poverty and relied on her brother Edward's annual financial support to solve the financial problem, which made Austen a comprehensive sense of money in domestic and social life. Like other middle-class girls of the time, Austen was expected to social at a certain age, go to balls, meet high-class society, and find an ideal husband. At the end of the 18th century, Britain was in the period of capitalist economic development, the aristocracy was gradually shaken, and the social status of emerging bourgeoisie improved a lot by virtue of wealth. Girls from middle-upper class, especially who had difficulty maintaining their genteel lifestyle, had to confront the cruel reality that "a genteel woman must either have money or marry money" [7] Though Austen detested the social atmosphere of money supremacy, as a woman who "lived at the bottom margin of gentility" [8], she had to face the influence of money on marriage and love. When she was young, she once fell in love with a poor Irish trainee lawyer called Tom, and the relationship finally ended because of cruel money problems. Austen, through the failed relationship an experience in dire straits, realized that real happiness of marriage requires both money and love.

The combination of Elizabeth and Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice* confirms Austen's hyper consciousness of money. Darcy comes from a noble family with rich assets and a luxurious manor. Elizabeth, although the family is not rich, but has a relatively well-known father. Elizabeth is a girl full of rebellious spirit and always fights to pursue equality and sincere love, so she turned down Collins's proposal. But it doesn't mean that she completely disregards money, in some cases, her judgment can be slightly affected by the power of money. The following quotation shows her reaction to seeing Darcy's magnificent manor:

"Elizabeth was delighted. She had never seen a place for which nature had done more, or where natural beauty had been so little counteracted by an awkward taste. They were all of them warm in their admiration; and at that moment she felt, that to be mistress of Pemberly might be something!" [9]

After visiting Darcy's luxurious manor, Elizabeth felt very astonished, in fact her hostile attitudes towards Darcy had been changed on the quiet. It's undoubt that Elizabeth was finally attracted by Darcy's genteel personality, but being mistress of Pemberly is also an appealing offer to a young girl. Their love story proved that happiness of marriage is actually determined by abundant money and prestigious social status.

Austen has a deep understanding of the importance of economic condition in family life, she also realized that it's women's ability to survive on their own instead of a rich husband that can truly enhance their vulnerable social status. But she still hold a negative attitude towards

dilemmas women faced with. She didn't explore other possible outlets for women so the heroines all became a part of the system which exploits their willingness and normal rights in a fairy tale way. In her novels, the way for women to get money is still nothing more than to marry a rich husband or inherit property, though Elizabeth has won the respect and love from Mr. Darcy, while as Mrs. Darcy, she has no choice but to rely on her husband completely in economy and even needs to count on his fortune to improve the economic condition of her parents. What's more, even if Miss Bingley's family is extremely wealthy, her background only qualifies her for a better husband. Whether they are rich or not, they all have to find a dominating husband to rely on. Women had a narrow way out and had no choice but to rely on patriarchy.

The heroines in Austen's books are in contradictory: on the one hand they all pursue personal independence, on the other hand they can't cast off the habit of relying on men. In *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Susan Gubar hold the view that Austen expressed her dissatisfaction of women's position in the patriarchal society by placing both women and novelist's limitations on herself with acquiescence, in a word, she considered that showing flaws in her writing was Austen's intention. However, this contradiction proves that feminist consciousness is still in its infancy during that period. Though Jane Austen had pioneering opinions on this issue, she didn't get rid of the idea that love and personality are appendages of property in her subconsciousness.

Charlotte Brontë had a more brutal upbringing than Austen. The character of Jane Eyre is basically based on herself. Brontë's family was very poor, and her mother died when Brontë was five. At the age of eight, she was sent to a boarding school for poor children by her father, where she witnessed starvation, abuse and even death. After leaving school, she and her sisters were guided by their rigorous father, but they still spent a carefree time by learning music, playing piano and writing. Unluckily, poor family circumstances can not enable her to enjoy the full play of their talents. Brontë went to school at 15-year-old, and later stayed in the school as a teacher. In order to earn more money, she went to rich family to work as a tutor, set up a school, published poetry and so on. It was not until 1847 that the publication of *Jane Eyre* brought her fame and status. Brontë has spent almost all her life trying to improve her living environment and social status through work, since she was at the bottom of the society when she was a teenager, she knew that it was very difficult for women to earn money through work at that time. Through *Jane Eyre*, she expressed the view that the most crucial part for women to achieve independence of personality is to achieve economic independence, without depending on anyone.

The stable relationship between Jane Eyre and Rochester is built on the basis of economic independence. From an early age, Jane realized the importance of having a fortune. She studied hard in a boarding school and became an assistant teacher with a salary of 15 pounds a year. Then she went to work as a tutor for 30 pounds a year. Although the salary is not a fortune, it is enough for her expenses.

This habit of self-reliance contributed to her independent personality and strong self-esteem. She is eager to earn money through labor to change her living environment. The 20,000 pounds left to her by her uncle was a dramatic turning point in her life, she spent it in the most appropriate way as well: she shared it with her cousins and brought the remaining money back to Rochester, who had nothing left after a fire, so that they could enjoy life together and live happily again. Brontë illustrated that only when women are completely economically independent, and fully grasp the initiative of their own life can they make their own choices and choose the way of their life without considering restraint from outside.

4. REPRESENTATION OF FEMINISM IN GENDER RELATIONSHIPS

Whether in *Pride and Prejudice* or in *Jane Eyre*, the dramatic change of gender relations can easily reflect authors' personal ideology about relationships. Elizabeth and Jane Eyre are both women with strong rebellious spirit, while the male characters always have some characteristics of the patriarchal society such as arrogance, contempt and paranoia. By analyzing the little psychological games, changes and conquest between men and women in novels, we can find that women who gradually pick up their self-consciousness also value their initiative in the relationship with their partners.

The transformation of the relationship between Elizabeth and Darcy shows an ideal sexual relationship which ordinary women yearned for at that time. When they just met, Mr. Darcy was very arrogant, and Elizabeth also formed a prejudice against him, but they finally resolved the contradiction after frustrations, and were deeply moved by each others' grace characters. Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy learned and improved themselves together in this relationship, which can be judged as the model of women's ideal sexual relationship in nineteenth century. But the mode of their relationship are still the traditional male-dominated mode which male is essential, powerful and predominant while female is incidental and resistless. For example, Elizabeth is in a passive position from beginning to the end, it was Mr. Darcy who took the lead to express his heart and push forward their relationship in many of the key nodes. Darcy proposed to Elizabeth twice in a row, while Elizabeth was in a relatively implicit silence because she did not want to easily admit her feelings for Darcy, so she hid her affection silently inside.

In their relations, Darcy also assumed more responsibilities. When Elizabeth faced with the scandal that her sister and Wickham eloped, Darcy ingeniously aided her by helping Wickham pay off his gambling debts and offering him a huge sum of money to let him marry Elizabeth's sister in a decent way. It was Darcy's actions that completely eliminated Elizabeth's prejudice against him. This heroic description of the man character, in fact, is not much different from the praise of the male images in some

contemporary literary works, reflecting that women at that time still had some romantic fantasies about love and marriage. In fact, women had already realized that they could also pursue their love independently, just as Elizabeth insisted on enjoying true love and rejected the proposal from Reverend Collins. But when they have to deal with relationships in real life, it's still chronic for them to take it for granted that men should undertake more social responsibilities while women deserve well protection.

The relationship between Jane Eyre and Rochester underwent a dramatic turn. Jane's departure and return is the two major turning point of their relationship. Jane left when she found Rochester had a mad wife. Later, after learning that Rochester had been disabled, she resolutely returned to him with her property and married him without any hesitation. In this process, the relationship between the two has experienced a psychological transformation from inequality to equality. Both of them kept some secretive emotions from each other at the very beginning, Jane was only a inferior tutor in Rochester's family, whether in economic or social status, the gap between the two was insurmountable. Although they shared fervent affection, Jane often went through a sense of shame and inferiority to be financial supported by others :

“The more he bought me, the more my cheek burned with a sense of annoyance and degradation.....'It would, indeed, be a relief,' I thought, 'if I had ever so small an in-dependency; I never can bear being dressed like a doll by Mr. Rochester, or sitting like a second Danae with the golden shower falling daily round me. I will write to Madeira the moment I get home, and tell my uncle John I am going to be married, and to whom: if I had but a prospect of one day bringing Mr. Rochester an accession of fortune, I could better endure to be kept by him now.” [10]

This quotation shows Jane's pain for accepting Rochester's gifts, she is not only reluctant to the luxurious manor and clothes, but also hoping Rochester can become as ordinary as her. Jane's awakening feminine consciousness makes her unwilling to depend on others in physical materials. As an independent woman, she has eagerness to prove her personal abilities and achieve equal status in her relationship with Rochester.

As a wealthy and distinguished man in most of his life, Rochester mastered the power of discourse at the first place. He made attempts to decide everything on behalf of Jane including not tell her that he was married. His arbitrariness is also reflected in several stuffs, such as in order to justify Jane's feelings, he deliberately snubbed Jane and pretended to marry other woman. But when Rochester was smashed into disability in the fire with all his property burned up, Jane returned to his side, moved by his sacrifices and decided to keep him company forever. The relationship between them has changed from controlling and dishonest to interdependent and inseparable. Jane has been playing the role of a savior thoroughly. The first time they met, she accidentally helped the fall of Rochester. After they falling in love, Rochester's life was delighted by Jane, his lonely life

became full of hope and beauty. He changed his irritable and indifferent temper for Jane , and became a kind and tender man. After the injury, Rochester became isolated and irritable again. However, Jane Eyre returned to his life during the darkest period, she helped him rebuild his life and rediscover the hope.

This novel subverts the traditional relationship between men and women, so that they are in an equal state, and women can even occupy the dominant position in a relationship and become the savior of men. However, there is much debate among critics about Rochester's being disabled. Richard Chase regarded it as a symbolic castration' [11], while Sandra M. Gilbert believed this helped Jane and Rochester “now that those disguises have been shed, now that they are equals, they can (though one is blind) see and speak even beyond the medium of the flesh.” [12] In the light of the relationship between the two before, this plot has a symbolic meaning for women who suffered a lot in the patriarchal society. Brontë liberated those repressed women by disintegrating physical and psychological dominance of men. When Jane was a tutor, she had a strong sense of inferiority because of the great disparity of status between her and Rochester. After Rochester lost his social function as a male, the differences between them are eliminated. Jane's sense of equality was actually gained by weakening Rochester's masculinity. The stable relationship they built up was on the premise that man is in an inferior position. If Rochester had not become a disabled, perhaps it would be a different story.

Actually, Rochester is not the only male character in the book whose masculinity has been dispelled. Many of Jane's male relatives have died and the rest of them all have obvious defects in their characters. For example, her cousin John Reed is spoiled, brutal and stupid, her other cousin, St.John, is perfect in various aspects except emotionally cold. Not to mention Mr.Brocklehurst, the greedy and savage headmaster she met in Lowood school. Brontë seemed to have a potential hostility and vindictiveness towards men. Through Jane Eyre, she destroyed the heroic imagination of men by showing women's incredible power to create, revolt and fight.

Austen presented the awakening of feminist consciousness. Though the self-reliant awareness in her works is imperfect, which is reflected in women's attachment to men for domestic gratification, her thought is still pioneering beyond her time. The rebelliousness is more obviously revealed in Brontë's works. She sublimated and transcended the feminist consciousness which Austen proposed and paid more attention to calling for personality independence.

5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Jane Austen and Charlotte Brontë all made significant contributions to the prosperity of feminine literature based on their life experience. As British women living between 18th and 19th centuries, they witnessed the revolutions in the whole society, they also brought the desire for change into creations. By comparing their novels,

it may be noticed that both women from reputed families like Elizabeth and those without backgrounds such as Jane Eyre were all longing for equality and freedom, they were egering to extricate themselves from patriarchy.

During the development of feminism literature in the 19th century, lots of females broke the discourse confinement bravely and highlighted their self-consciousness through different approaches. For example, Elizabeth Gaskell revealed women's ability and quality in the field of social politics through her novels. Caroline Norton urged the Marriage and Divorce Bill to abolish the unfair treatment to married women by writing protest letters. Austen and Brontë completed the construction of women's discourse power in the literary world in a plain, sincere and even naive way. They attracted large amount of readers and supporters, at the same time, inspired many women who need identity recognition. They laid a ideological foundation for Women's Liberation Movement in the 20th century and the rise of feminist literary criticism in academia.

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