



# The Development of Feminist Thought in Modern English Literature

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**Abstract.** The 19th century is the greatest period in the history of English literature, with many female writers and works on women. She shook the social and cultural tradition of modern Britain with her keen insight and unique perspective, combined with rational and critical thinking, and expressed her understanding and praise of women's wisdom and personality charm. Bronte sisters followed, created a lot of strong personality, advanced consciousness of the female image, produced a strong voice of female. By analyzing *Pride and Prejudice*, *Wuthering Heights* and *Jane Eyre*, three outstanding British female works of the 19th century, this paper discusses their similarities and differences. This paper discusses their similarities and differences in the purpose of creation, marriage view and female consciousness, thus revealing the development. This paper discusses their similarities and differences in the purpose of creation, marriage view and female consciousness, thus revealing the development and change of British feminist thought in the 19th century [1, 4].

**Keywords:** Feminism · English literature · thought · consciousness awakening

## 1 Introduction

The 19th century is the greatest period in the history of English literature, with many female writers and works on women. She shook the social and cultural tradition of modern Britain with her keen insight and unique perspective, combined with rational and critical thinking, and expressed her understanding and praise of women's wisdom and personality charm. Bronte sisters followed, created a lot of strong personality, advanced consciousness of the female image, produced a strong voice of female. By analyzing *Pride and Prejudice*, *Wuthering Heights* and *Jane Eyre*, three outstanding British female works of the 19th century, this paper discusses their similarities and differences. And discusses their similarities and differences in the purpose of creation, marriage view and female consciousness, thus revealing the development. This paper discusses their similarities and differences in the purpose of creation, marriage view and female consciousness, thus revealing the development and change of British feminist thought in the 19th century.

## 2 The Awakening and Development of Feminism

### 2.1 Jane Austen's Feminist Awakening

An important writer in the history of English literature, Jane Austen had a sensitive insight into reality and an original political vision, taking a serious interest in the problems of women in life and reflecting them in her works. She aspired to social equality with men, opposed patriarchy, and had her own views on love and society, trying to break out of the confines of conventional thinking. Jane Austen was an outstanding representative of feminism at the time and the first person to awaken the consciousness of women. She explored the question of human nature from the perspective of "man" herself. Her work focuses on the idea that women are fully equal to men as 'human beings'. She advocates gender equity and believes that women should enjoy the same rights as men. Women are not born with inferior intelligence and have the same ability to learn and make rational judgements as men. Even in her view, developed women were more capable of leadership, insight and judgement than men [2]. Jane Austen did not change the image of women as 'vases' in her novels, but rather portrayed them as wise, mature, and attractive like men. These images symbolize the sensitive and thoughtful mature woman, a unique individual who has evolved from incomplete to perfect. Elizabeth in *Pride and Prejudice* is just such a woman. Despite her lack of beauty, her temperament and behavior, she is independent and strong, thanks to her wit, intelligence and sense of humor. This portrayal succeeds in breaking the stereotype of women as being naturally less intelligent in society under traditional culture.

By viewing women's literature, which had been socially marginalized and dimes-powered in Britain, as a restricted narrative perspective within a zero-focus narrative horizon, Austen evokes a long-dormant sense of subjective independence in British women's literature, and thus brings forward the subjective consciousness of British women's literature by zero point five centuries [2].

### 2.2 The Development of Feminism in the Brontë Sisters

The appearance of *Jane Eyre* created a huge sensation in the English literary world of the time. *Jane Eyre* was a symbol of strong, self-reliant character and the embodiment of Charlotte's values. As a new image of womanhood, *Jane Eyre* revolutionized the previous image of the English woman as a dignified, elegant, gentle, and submissive woman. Despite being born into poverty, she fiercely opposed persecution and humiliation, and always asserted her independence. When *Wuthering Heights* came out, it immediately attracted mixed reviews. The awareness of the feminist view of family and marriage expressed by Emily Brontë in it quickly developed into a great masterpiece of English literature. Through her portrayal of the love and marriage of Catherine the Great and Small, Emily adopts the image of a madwoman who breaks with the traditional image of the domestic angel, demonstrating Emily's positive attitude towards feminism. A woman who fails to awaken her feminine will, to break through the shackles of traditional patriarchal politics, to have her feminine will awakened and set free, will never escape her oppression.

If Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* brought feminism to the center of British literature, the Brontë sisters' novels had an even greater impact on contemporary British literature, bringing feminist thinking to a climax. The Brontë sisters made the first reference to the question of women's independent personhood, and she illustrated that personality independence was based on individual economic self-reliance. She changed the focus of feminist culture from women's gender roles to women's independent personhood. This was a landmark advance in thinking.

Their novels penetrated the inner world of women, highlighting their beautiful qualities, announcing the true awakening of female consciousness and establishing the place of women writers in the history of English literature.

### **3 From Jane Austen to the Brontë Sisters - The Development of Feminism in English Literature**

#### **3.1 Purpose of Creation**

Writing originated in the eighteenth century, when it was also seen as a way for English women, especially middle-class women, to spend their time. Jane Austen, on the other hand, saw it as a good vehicle for expressing her views on various social issues. She reflected the problems of English society at the time, mainly through her depiction of family, marriage, love and village life. Austen's claims were in line with the mainstream of society at the time; she lacked a distinctive female emotional expression and overindulged in the customary means and forms of literary study. She simply wanted to tell her readers that women were unique and irreplaceable, because she could act as a perfect barrier and a beautiful sight in male society, and that her loveliness stemmed from a high degree of self-worth. Just as Elizabeth, the heroine of *Pride and Prejudice*, is portrayed.

The Brontë sisters, on the other hand, may have written more out of a desire to vent their feelings about the injustice done to women in a traditionally patriarchal society, and to express their rebellion against a traditionally malecentred society, or rather against traditional culture. What *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* show is that if one really wants to show the full grace and power of women in an unassuming woman, and for men to experience it, it is not from the woman's modesty but from the challenge and pressure on her personality [2].

The change in purpose from Jane Austen to the Brontë sisters shows a gradual shift in the portrayal of women in literature from male pleasing and subservient to male antagonists and even saviors. In contrast to Jane Austen's overly idealistic creations, the Brontë sisters' works are more realistic because of their experience of patriarchal oppression.

#### **3.2 Views on Marriage**

Jane Austen believed that women were as intelligent and rational as men and had as much power as men to choose their own happiness in marriage. She believed that marriage was linked to wealth and social status, but that it could not be based on wealth and

social status alone, and that a true marriage must be based on equality, mutual love, learning together and mutual understanding. She stressed the importance of affection in marriage, and that one should never marry without love. This was quite ahead of its time. The Brontë sisters saw the awakening of feminist consciousness as the basis and foundation for women's happiness in marriage and female freedom. For women, the main goal to pursue in life was marriage, but it did not have to come at the expense of their own conscious personality, because marital happiness was an entirely personal experience and did not depend on external things, such as money and family status.

Austen has continued the eighteenth-century concept of love, which she sees as a holy and beautiful emotion that manifests itself more in perfection, equality and harmony. For Brontë, emotion is a longing that comes from the depths of the human soul. But more often than not, it shows not joy and happiness, but rather a mental and spiritual torment and pain. In her eyes true love is not influenced by external conditions but is a spiritual and cultural exchange between two people who rise above money and status, reflecting a woman's emotional quest and the demands of life. The value of love itself does not lie in the outcome but in the process. If Austen's change from a concern for love to a concern for marriage reflects an awakening of feminist consciousness, the Brontë sisters return to a concern for love itself. But this is by no means a simple return; it is a sublimation. For the Brontë sisters, a woman's happiness does not lie in marriage, but in love. Thus, in her view of marriage and love, Austen is more concerned with harmony, while the Brontës give "love" and independence to the pursuit of life's values.

### 3.3 Female Consciousness

Jane Austen's sense of individuality is mainly expressed in the establishment of her human character. In her novels, she focuses on the individuality of women as full equals to men. In Austen's novels, women possess not only the basic qualities of truth, kindness, beauty, and tenderness required in a male-dominated society, but also rationality and resourcefulness. Elizabeth in *Pride and Prejudice* is the most prominent and personal character portrayed by Jane Austen. Although she is not the best person in terms of appearance, character and behavior, her wit, intelligence, and sense of humor imbue her with a certain irresistible personality. It can be said that Jane Austen's women characters are a comprehensive expression of the uniquely feminine beauty of feminism in their appearance, character, poise, arrogance, intelligence, rationality, sensibility and so on. What many classic works of English literature have, most notably, is the ability to go further into the deeper inner worlds of women in society, thus further reflecting the image of new-age feminism and further embodying the feminist ideas of self-respect, self-love and nobility embodied in feminism. As a novelist, she elevates the image of women to the position of the protagonist of the novel, developing the story from a woman's point of view and raising the consciousness of women. However, she does not emphasise the need for women to achieve the same social status as men. Her ideal heroine is intelligent and rational, but her intelligence and personality are only pawns to gain the desired destination. She does not strive for a social status equal to that of men. [4].

The Brontë sisters' sense of femininity differs from Austen's in that they deny the distinction between the roles of men and women in society and, as Jane Eyre says to Rochester, 'we are all fair in character'. The sense of equality is a major development in

the development of women's consciousness in English literature, moving it from valuing the characteristics of 'women' to valuing women as a 'person'. It also shifted from a focus on women's cultural upbringing and self-esteem to a greater emphasis on women's independence as human beings, and from an external sense of female social consciousness, for example, to an emphasis on the value of women's inner emotional values. The Brontë sisters' sense of femininity reveals the message: I am not your kind of woman, but I am not inferior because of it, I was born short and unattractive but independent and self-respecting, I am confident and beautiful because I am who I am. From the emphasis on female gender roles to the emphasis on the independent personality of women, the Brontë sisters significantly advanced the development of female consciousness in England after Austen. The madness of Catherine the Great and Small in *Wuthering Heights* is also a radical rewrite of the gentle portrayal of women's roles in previous novels. Instead, she is shown actively resisting social pressures and tenaciously asserting her unique social character as a feminist ideology, embodying a profound reflection on the various deeper relationships within the real world, between ideals and ideals, and between people. The portrayal of these feminist roles in English literature and the empowerment and pursuit of equality between men and women is another important advance in the understanding and theoretical practice of feminism in English literature, and places greater emphasis on the fundamental significance of women, their moral cultivation, dignity, sincerity, and personality [4].

## 4 Conclusion

In the modern English literature system, the development and evolution of female thought promoted the establishment of the independent personality of British women. In many British literature, or more for this aspect of the description, and this is feminist thoughts on English literature gradually important power and the core idea, and gradually become a global feminist thought and woman literature important turning point, in the UK to describe women's work, can more into a layer of declaration of the British social consciousness awakening of feminism in the thought, Moreover, the epoch-making proposition of independent personality of feminism can be put forward step by step, and whether there is a distinct independent female personality can be pointed out. In English literature works, a large number of feminist social propositions in British society can be deeply understood, which can further highlight the independent personality of social women with self-respect and self-love.[3].

The differences between Jane Austen and the Brontë sisters in terms of their creative aims, their views on marriage and their feminism are indicative of the evolution of feminism in English literature. Jane Austen opened the door to the subjective will of women, granting them affirmation and praise in terms of spirituality and charisma; the Brontë sisters raised the cry of women's autonomous personality, transforming women's dependence on men into men and women helping each other. From Jane Austen to the Brontë sisters, feminism gradually developed, not only fundamentally transforming society's attitude towards women, but also achieving the liberation of women's minds in reality, gradually establishing women's voice and self-worth, and thus gradually dissolving the traditional social culture dominated by men [5].

It is because often modern Britain emerged a large number of independent consciousness and thought of women writers, of the feminism in modern English literature so fast development, thereby giving impetus to the development of the whole of the British and even the world literature, bring attention to feminist thoughts can, promoted the women thought, the liberation of the body, for the later development of women played a vanguard role.

Generally speaking, the modern feminist ideas expressed in the English literature completely broke the original men superior patriarchal ideology, let has been sidelined with discrimination of women writers, promoted to the core of the literary world, let a female writer in the expression of self, fully show a woman as an independent personality of wisdom, courage, and personal charm. Based on their own experiences and feelings, British women writers in the 19th century set off the movement and trend of independence and awareness of women's rights in their literary works, promoted the development of women's movement, liberated the inherent feudal thought of women, and enabled women to express themselves better. It laid a solid foundation for the world feminist critical movement in the 20th century [5].

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