

The Enlightenment of Female Consciousness in Jane Austen's Works

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Abstract: Literature serves as a mirror to reflect different times. As an important female novelist in the 18th century England, Jane Austen presented the enlightenment of women's independent consciousness with her great works. This paper focuses on Jane Austen and her several important works, delving into her nuanced depiction of social status and rights of women in that era, and uncovering women's awakening consciousness through her delicate narratives. By combining with the historical background at that time, this paper aims to help readers explore the catalysts for the awakening of female consciousness.

Keywords: Jane Austen; Female Consciousness; 18th Century England; Significance.

1. Brief Introduction to Jane Austen and Her Works

Jane Austen (1775-1817), the last well-known British novelist of the 18th century and the first important female writer in the history of British literature, was renowned by her portrayal of women's consciousness and the focus on the women themselves. She was born in the Hampshire village of Steventon, where her father, the Reverend George Austen, served as a rector. And she was the seventh child in a family of eight, with six brothers and one sister. Despite never having attended a formal school, she received a thorough education from her scholarly father and began writing at an early age. Austen's life in the countryside, along with her interactions with local landlords and priests furnished a vibrant backdrop and stimulating materials for her writing. Consequently, there was almost not any mentioning of the major social conflicts in her novels, instead, a realistic portrayal of the marital and romantic entanglements between gentlemen and ladies from a woman's perspective was vividly presented.

Jane Austen, during her lifetime, wrote a total of six novels: *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), *Mansfield Park* (1814), *Emma* (1816), *Northanger Abbey* (1818), and *Persuasion* (1818).

Sense and Sensibility tells the story of the impoverished Dashwood sisters. The older sister Elinor is the epitome of "sense", approaches her relationship with Edward Ferrars with a level-headedness that ultimately leads to their union. The younger sister Marianne, embodying "sensibility", wears her heart on her sleeve, falling in love with the dashing John Willoughby, who abandons her for a wealthier woman. This heartbreak serves as a catalyst for Marianne's maturation, as she learns to temper her emotions with sense, eventually marrying the reliable Colonel Brandon. Marianne's transformation from sensibility to sense underscores Austen's advocacy for women's intellectual and emotional growth. When sense prevails, a woman gains self-awareness and autonomy, becoming less susceptible to others' opinions and thus, turns to be the master of her own destiny. This is a clear manifestation of Austen's female consciousness.

Pride and Prejudice primarily tells the tale of Elizabeth and Darcy. Darcy, a wealthy young man, comes off as indifferent and arrogant, while Elizabeth, initially looks down on Darcy's haughtiness. But later Elizabeth starts to take a second look at

Darcy and slowly realizes her judgment of him was far from the truth. Ultimately, they set aside their pride and prejudice, and find happiness in living together. Elizabeth, the most introspective and self-reliant character in Jane Austen's works, maintains a critical eye on the social prejudices towards her and her family, recognizing their folly and irrationality. Meanwhile, she begins to ponder society's fixation on wealth, status, and appearances, challenging these social norms. Consequently, she develops her own set of values, believing that marriage should be founded on genuine love and mutual respect, not simply on social status or money.

Austen's novels revolve around tales of love, each with its unique theme, yet they all converge on a similar idea-- the female lead is on a quest for marriage and love which is based on mutual respect. In addition, the novels also show the development and growth of female characters. It's pretty clear to see that Austen tries to highlight female consciousness. In a world where men are in a dominant position, Austen's heroines stand out as individuals with their own minds and spirits and gradually develop into remarkable women.

2. Status of Women in the 18th Century

2.1. Marriage based on Profit

In the 18th century England, the status of women was quite low. Whether in society or in literature, men were always in a dominant position, and women could only become men's subordinates. Women were often denied equal rights and the respect they deserved. At that time, women rarely had their own rights to make decisions. Before getting married, they were expected to follow their fathers' wishes. After getting married, they had to adhere to their husbands' arrangements and always obey their commands. Austen once wrote humorously in a letter to her friend: "Yesterday, Mrs. Hall gave birth to a stillborn baby a few weeks ahead of schedule out of fright. I think she must have looked at her husband accidentally." While this might be a kind of exaggeration, it could reflect to some degree women's depressing mood in the family. Their marriages were probably transactions for family benefit. Taking Mrs. Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice* as an example, she is very eager for her daughters to marry wealthy people, in order to reach a class above her own family. This social phenomenon of using marriage as a bargain was very

common at that time.

In the traditional marriage, women are not seen as independent or autonomous but merely as being wives, or accessories of others. The focus of many families' education for women isn't on fostering their personal growth or self-improvement, but rather on preparing them to attract a high-quality or wealthy partner in the future, thereby bringing honor to the family. Once this mission is achieved, women are expected to set aside their personal pursuits and dedicate their lives to their husbands, adhering to their wishes unconditionally and embodying traits of tenderness and affection to gain social approval.

2.2. Discrimination Against Female Writers

Back then, women who had access to education but were expected to stay at home found writing to be the best pastime. However, they often had to create in secret, tucked away in the corners of their homes, careful not to let their works be seen by others. Jane Austen, for instance, did her work on a small table in the family sitting room. When a visitor entered, she would throw a paper or a piece of sewing over her work, and she "modestly" refused to be known as the authors of her novels.

Publishing was a significant challenge for the women at her time. In that era, they weren't viewed as individuals in their own right but as extensions of their husbands. Their primary role was to help reflect their husbands' status and power, and society frowned upon their any deviation from this norm. Therefore, female writers seeking to publish their works while shielding themselves from the social disapproval and embarrassment often choose to remain anonymous or adopt male pen names. It was common for many female writers, like the Bronte sisters, to use male names as pen names to gain recognition. Similarly, most of Jane Austen's novels were published anonymously, with the exception of "Northanger Abbey" and "Persuasion" which were released under her real name by her brother after she passed away.

Furthermore, these female writers often had to concoct various excuses to get their work published, either claiming that writing was to help them alleviate financial struggles and stave off homelessness, or downplaying the significance of their writing and calling it just a temporary pastime. Yet, there were rarely few writers who refused to compromise or belittle themselves, like Mary Wollstonecraft, who often found themselves compelled to cease writing.

However, even as novice female writers employed diverse strategies to conceal their true identity, they struggled to find publishers for their works. Jane Austen, for instance, in her lifetime, had great trouble with the publishers. Her *Pride and Prejudice* went begging for publication for sixteen years; *Northanger Abbey* was sold in 1803 for a trivial sum to a publisher, who laid it aside and totally forgot it. Moreover, she reaped minimal benefits from her writing, and due to her anonymous publication, she didn't receive widespread recognition during her time.

This obviously reflects the challenges that female writers encountered during that era.

3. Female Consciousness in Jane Austen's Works

3.1. Female Perspectives

Jane Austen lived in that era which was not so friendly to female writers, and she was deeply aware of the oppression

and constraints faced by women when she witnessed the drawbacks leading to the inferiority of women. Therefore, she called for women's resistance against the male power from the bottom of her heart.

Throughout the history of British literature, it is not difficult to find that a group of male writers had held sway over the literary scene. Their narratives often painted a world where men were the central figures, and the plot was also centered around men's experiences. However, due to their perspectives different from women's, male writers had often depicted women in a skewed light, which had made a deep impression on Austen. In *Persuasion*, she once leveraged the voice of the female protagonist Anne to refute the discrimination against women in the literary world at that time. She pointed out sharply the disparity in educational opportunities between men and women, noting that men were afforded more learning, and thus "the pen is in their hands." She argued if we evaluated women based on the content of books written by men, we would inevitably draw flawed conclusions and form discriminatory opinions against women.

In this challenging time, Austen created her six classic works, each with female protagonist at its center, sharply revealing the phenomenon of male superiority and female inferiority in the British society from a female perspective, and advocating for the gender equality. In her six works, *Emma* is named after its leading lady, and the narrative is inherently intertwined with her destiny. *Sense and Sensibility* depicts the experience of two sisters. *Pride and Prejudice* describes the transformation of the five sisters from the Bennet family, with a particular focus on the emotional journey of Elizabeth. *Mansfield Park* follows tumultuous life of Fanny Price, and Austen's final work *Persuasion* is essentially centered on Anne Elliot.

3.2. Female Consciousness

Most of the female characters in Jane Austen's works have their own independent female consciousness. They no longer want to rely on others, on the contrary, they want to make their own voices heard. They actively challenged oppression on women in the society at that time, for instance, in *Pride and Prejudice*, the leading lady Elizabeth had her own unique view on marriage. She strongly disagreed with Mrs. Bennet's belief that marriage should be treated as transaction. Moreover, she had her own views on marriage and spouse selection, as she believed that a good spouse should align with her viewpoint of the world and her personality and possess noble personal characters. That's why only after Mr. Darcy revealed his true character and values to Elizabeth that she came to truly love him.

In addition, women were no longer defined solely by their sensibilities. The book "Sense and Sensibility" has vividly portrayed the process of women's consciousness transforming from sensibility to rationality. Through the character of Elinor, the reader witnessed the emergence of a new type of woman-intelligent, beautiful and rational. Furthermore, Elinor was very cautious about love and knew how to restrain her own emotions. Even when she had fallen in love with Edward, she kept her emotions in check due to the significant differences between them. When it came to Edward, she maintained a calm and rational attitude. She wanted to earn Edward's respect and desired a relationship based on equality. Her approach to love and marriage was a strong testament to her strong sense of self-worth and independent feminist consciousness. Following her father's passing away, she

rationally comforted her mother and sister, and tried her best to alleviate her mother's concerns and to secure a new home for them as soon as possible. By portraying Elinor as intelligent and rational, Austen suggests that women could embody both sensibility and rationality.

4. Factors Leading to of Women's Enlightenment

4.1. The Enlightenment Movement

The Enlightenment movement, which began in 18th-century England, found its subsequent center in France, spanning from the early 18th century up to the French Revolution. This movement was characterized by a profound ideological liberation against feudalism, fostering a lot of new concepts such as inherent human rights, opposition to ecclesiastical authority, and the promotion of rational thought, scientific inquiry, and democratic principles. Central to this movement was the advancement of humanism, emphasizing values of liberty, equality, and universal love. This played an essential role in dismantling the shackles of gender inequality and laid the groundwork for the feminist movement.

The feminist movement originated in the 18th century, primarily focusing on women's political rights, including the right to vote and hold office, as well as the pursuit of legal equality and the expansion of opportunities to be in employment and more access to good education to fulfill their life aspirations.

Although the feminist movement had not yet fully materialized in the 18th century, under the influence of Enlightenment, many women started to challenge male dominance and advocate for their own rights and freedom. This marked the nascent stages of feminist consciousness. Remarkable female writers like Jane Austen and Mary Wollstonecraft emerged during this period, with Wollstonecraft, in her book *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* arguing for increased educational opportunities for women to ensure their talents were fully realized and their social contributions maximized.

4.2. Industrial Revolution and Social Transformation

The Industrial Revolution paved the way for the awakening of women's consciousness. Firstly, driven by the Industrial Revolution, the social structure of Britain had undergone significant changes, enabling women to set out of the traditional roles in the family and pursue careers, and it laid the groundwork for women's economic independence, thereby women's status fundamentally improved. Initially, production was centered around the family unit, rendering women dependent and with low status. The Industrial Revolution, with its large-scale machine production, disrupted this family-centered economy and allowed women to step out of domestic confines and into the workforce as individuals. As they transitioned from the domestic sphere to the broader social arena, their perspectives were broadened, and they began to advocate for their own rights.

Furthermore, the Industrial Revolution led to an overall improvement in living standards, which made the education become more accessible. Some families, then with additional time and resources, could afford to provide their daughters with a more comprehensive education, including reading, writing, foreign languages and geography, in addition to the traditional subjects of dance, painting, music, and literature.

Although education for women was not always aimed at practical application, it did help women to some extent in acquiring more knowledge and broadening their horizons.

Additionally, the new printing techniques that emerged during the Industrial Revolution made books more affordable and accessible in large quantities, allowing more women to pursue the opportunity of learning and broaden their perspectives, which led to a surge in female authors who began to articulate their views from a distinctly female standpoint. Female readers, especially middle-class female readers like Jane Austen, who received home schooling but had access to their fathers' extensive libraries, could immerse themselves in diverse knowledge and develop into accomplished writers. The writings of these female authors highlighted the consciousness and rights of women, and their publications helped to spark a greater awakening of consciousness among women.

Finally, reforms in marriage and property laws meant women no longer solely depended on marriage, or money and so on for security, thus fostering a sense of independence and self-reliance among them.

5. Conclusion

The empowerment and liberation of women have always been key elements in the evaluation of a nation, a society, and culture, that is to say, the progress of a society can be accurately measured by the social status of women. Since the 18th century, western literature has seen a growing emergence of female authors who have made women characters their eternal focus. These writers have championed the cause of women, praising their rebellious spirit and their defiance against the societal norms that perpetuate male dominance and female subordination. They have been the pioneers of feminism and advocated for women's consciousness awakening in their era. Among these influential female writers, Jane Austen undoubtedly holds an important position in the history of British women's literature and feminist development. Austen's distinctiveness lies in her ability to transcend the gender inequalities of her time and focus her narratives on the experiences of women from the lower echelons of the society, particularly in matters of marriage and family. This unique approach has not only distinguished her but also has laid the groundwork for the evolution of women's literature in the subsequent generations.

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