

Analysis of Female Marriage in Jane Eyre from the Perspective of Existential Feminism

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Abstract: *Jane Eyre*, as a classic work in British literature, is a heartfelt ode to women's pursuit of independent personality and freedom. It is a popular novel written by female author Charlotte Bronte. Through the story of Jane Eyre, it profoundly expounds on feminist views on marriage, emphasizing the importance of equality, respect, love, and economic independence within marriage while criticizing the utilitarianism and male chauvinism prevalent in traditional views on marriage. At the same time, it also shows the awakening and growth process of female consciousness and provides useful inspiration and reference for contemporary women to pursue self-value and blessedness marriage. This paper analyzes the marriage view of the female characters in *Jane Eyre* from the perspective of Beauvoir's existential feminism theory. The research in this paper shows that this work broke the bondage and prejudice of the traditional female image at that time and created a new image and value pursuit for women.

Keywords: Charlotte Bronte, *Jane Eyre*, existential feminism theory, *The Second Sex*.

1. Introduction

Charlotte Bronte was a renowned writer in Victorian England. In the post-industrial era of Britain, women's status remained low, and they encountered numerous social prejudices and restrictions. Through her novel *Jane Eyre*, Bronte articulated women's quest for an independent spirit and their defiance against social injustice. At the same time, Bronte, a vanguard of feminism, depicted Jane Eyre's growth experience, shedding the constraints of traditional female roles, and revealed women's genuine aspiration to pursue equality, independence, and love despite their ongoing struggle and rebellion in a patriarchal society. The narrative also reflects their persistent pursuit of freedom, equality, and self-worth within marriage. As feminism increasingly found expression in literary works, *Jane Eyre*, penned by the female writer Charlotte Bronte, challenged the prevailing perceptions and entrenched notions of women's social status, and crafted a self-aware female character with the audacity to combat, seek equality, and assert self-worth for readers. This paper examines Jane Eyre's self-awareness through a feminist lens, thereby enhancing the interpretation and comprehension of Jane Eyre from a feminist literary perspective. Through *Jane Eyre*, Bronte conveyed a view of marriage that suggests only by maintaining independence can women secure a position in the patriarchal society and, consequently, achieve inner happiness and peace [1].

With the ongoing evolution of feminist theory, particularly the emergence of existential feminism, it offers a fresh perspective and profound insights for re-evaluating the female perspective on marriage in *Jane Eyre*. Currently, there is a substantial body of research on Jane Eyre's view of marriage, yet studies employing existential feminist theory are less common. Existential feminism, from a female standpoint, reconstructs the self-awareness that women ought to possess and advocates for women to exhibit the courage to voice their thoughts and focus on their own needs, thereby facilitating the gradual shift in women's self-perception from the inherent concept of "otherness" to "selfness" [2]. Drawing on the existential feminist theories of Simone de Beauvoir, this paper will use *Jane Eyre* as a case study to dissect the feminist narrative of marital views in English literature, and investigate how these narratives resist the constraints of traditional marital concepts through self-recognition and self-realization, ultimately attaining autonomy, self-realization, and creativity at societal, cultural, and personal levels. From an existential feminist viewpoint, the examination of the female perspective on marriage in *Jane Eyre* not only deepens the understanding of the spiritual core of women's self-awareness, self-transcendence, and pursuit of equality and freedom within the work but also supplies vital ideological resources and inspiration for contemporary women in their fight for equal rights. Concurrently, this analysis aids in reflecting on the gender disparities inherent in traditional marital concepts and fosters a modern society's renewed understanding and knowledge of marriage and family [3].

2. An Overview of Existential Feminist Theory

The term "feminism" first emerged in France at the end of the 19th century and was widely disseminated in other parts of Europe and America at the beginning of the 20th century. The historical backdrop of the Western women's liberation movement has imbued it with a distinct political hue and critical ethos. Consequently, while reflecting the cultural and academic essence, "feminism" also carries a strong political connotation. Simone de Beauvoir is among the significant French female scholars of the 20th century and a progenitor of the French feminist movement. In 1949, her seminal work, *The Second Sex*, was published, which solidified her standing in the realm of feminist critique [2]. The advent of *The Second Sex* contributed to the resurgence of the feminist movement. Indeed, it is indisputable that the majority of the feminist movement's leaders and scholars in the 1980s were influenced, to varying degrees, by Beauvoir [3].

In *The Second Sex*, de Beauvoir established the theoretical framework of existentialist feminism. Women have historically been marginalized by society and rendered absentees in historical narratives. Compared to men, women are perceived as the "other," lacking autonomy and independence. Regarding the genesis of women's "second sex" and "other" status, Beauvoir further elucidated that a woman's "other" status is inextricably linked to her overall "situation." In her book *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir introduced the dualistic concepts of "subject" and "other." She stated that "man is the subject, the absolute, and woman is the other." Men position themselves as the standard, the subject, and consequently perceive women as the "other" [2]. Beauvoir posits that women should remain perpetually vigilant, consistently assert their ownership over their family and life, and recognize that neither they nor their children are the property or appendage of men. Women should not compromise nor place themselves in a subordinate position, understanding that in the social structure and division of labor, both sexes are indispensable, irreplaceable, and possess equal rights [3]. Women are capable of engaging in work. In occupations on par with men, women can gradually recognize and affirm their identities. This confers confidence and enables them to progressively actualize their subjectivity. Secondly, women can become intellectuals and achieve self-existence through the proactive and positive pursuit of knowledge, rather than remaining passive and inert in their existence. Thirdly, women can propel society towards socialism. Beauvoir acknowledges that economic factors are a significant barrier to women's freedom. Only under socialist conditions, where material resources are

abundant, can women free themselves from economic constraints in the pursuit of self-realization. Lastly, women should reject the internalization of "otherness" and refuse to gauge themselves by the value standards of the ideal woman crafted by male society for its own gratification. Undoubtedly, once women assume the role of "the other," they become objects dominated by men [2].

From an existentialist standpoint, Beauvoir's feminist theory analyzes the inequality between men and women in modern society through a socio-historical lens, enumerates the moral conceptual factors and socio-historical root causes of gender inequality, and offers theoretical guidance for women's struggle for their rights and the realization of gender equality, as well as indicating the direction for women's further emancipation [3]. Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* was published in 1847 under the pen name Currer Bell, during a time when women were still oppressed, lacked rights, and were not respected by men. Although many view Charlotte Brontë as a feminist and *Jane Eyre* as a feminist novel, others argue that Brontë's primary intention was to highlight the social structure of the era. However, Jane is a woman who genuinely fights for her values; she is not a "machine" [4] and emphasizes that her actions are not dictated by convention but by her own free will. This represents an attempt by a woman to break the customs and conventions that society tries to impose upon her. Despite falling in love, Jane does not become lost in it; Brontë portrays the protagonist as an independent woman who will not sacrifice her morals and dignity for any man. Nothing can alter Jane's values, not even love, money, or status [5].

3. The Female Marriage View in *Jane Eyre* from the Perspective of Existentialist Feminism

Mason Bertha, one of the female characters in the novel, merits analysis for her perspective on marriage. As a sacrifice of her era, her experiences and encounters equally deserve compassion. It can be perceived from her actions that her inner pain was not understood by those around her, and she could only alleviate her inner hatred through frantic retaliation. In the novel, Mason Bertha is Rochester's former wife. This transactional marriage lacked any emotional foundation. Although Mason Bertha held the economic initiative, she was deprived of the right to express herself. In that society at that time, she had no choice regarding her marriage and future. Consequently, she became indulgent and dissolute, venting her human rights and desires as a woman by having affairs with other men. To a certain extent, this reflects her aspiration to break free from the shackles of "the Otherness" and acquire female autonomy and subjectivity.

In terms of background, Bertha was tall and wealthy, born in a British overseas colony; Jane Eyre was short and poor, born in Victorian England. Nevertheless, they share similarities. Both Bertha Mason and Jane Eyre were women oppressed under patriarchy, seeking freedom in seemingly opposing ways. Jane was raised under the care of others since childhood, receiving no respect from anyone and enduring the bullying of her aunt, cousin, and cousin sister silently. She was confined in the red room. Bertha, while imprisoned in a low and cramped small black room in Thornfield Hall for nearly a decade, became "the crazy woman in the attic." The similar experiences of Jane and Bertha being confined in closed rooms reflect "various metaphors of suffering in a cold or hot environment [6]," symbolizing the aphasia and oppression faced by women in a patriarchal society and their gradual descent into "the Otherness." Mason's brother did everything possible to facilitate Mason's marriage to Rochester. After Mason was imprisoned, Rochester almost controlled all of Mason's behaviors, making her an image of absolute loyalty. Grace Poole's son also participated in the supervision of Mason [6]. Male control constantly loomed over Mason's struggle, and the same was true for Jane Eyre. Even though she was deeply in love with Rochester, she was still controlled by him. Before falling in love with Rochester, Jane was often criticized and distrusted by him, making her eager to gain his approval. Later, she did not pursue Rochester's explanation regarding the room fire and helped Rochester take care of Mr. Mason, who was wounded by Bertha, without asking for reasons [7]. After accepting Rochester, she even thought, "My betrothed is becoming my entire world,

and more than that, almost my hope of entering heaven." "I no longer see God; I have made him my idol." [4] Evidently, Jane Eyre has not completely escaped the shackles of "the Otherness" ideology.

In *The Second Sex*, there is a statement that in love, if a woman cannot free herself from her dependence on one man, she is left in the position of the second sex [2]. Therefore, true love should be based on the mutual recognition of two free people; two people who remain true to themselves, where no one gives up transcendence and no one is harmed, and where together they show the world their value and purpose. Jane Eyre once said to Rochester: "If God had given me beauty and wealth, I would have made you feel as unable to leave me as I am unable to leave you now [4]." Jane Eyre's words indicate that she is still not completely free from the constraints of traditional thinking, and that she is being gazed at by men, which means that her self-consciousness is still not mature enough, and that she still puts herself in the position of the 'second sex'.

From an existential feminist perspective, although Jane Eyre desires and strives for equality and true love in marriage, there is still a part of her that is positioned as "otherness" based on her actual words and actions. In *The Second Sex*, a woman cannot rely on a romantic relationship with a man because "the love of blind adoration implies submission, and that love is destructive [2]." Upon learning that Rochester has a wife, Jane Eyre is acutely aware of what bigamy means and thus resolutely chooses to leave and assert her right to legal marriage. Staying may be a choice, but leaving is the best form of self-protection, and it symbolizes her determination to remove herself from the position of "otherness" and return to herself.

4. The Challenge to the Traditional Concept of Marriage and the Profound Reflection on the Fate of Women

Regarding the conservative yet progressive marital perspective evident in *Jane Eyre*, it can be seen as a product of its era. For a considerable period, women were typically viewed as adjuncts to men. During the Victorian era, they had a relatively low social status and were denied the right to marital freedom, playing the role of the oppressed in society. The marital perspective of that time was rather regressive, with a strong emphasis on social status. Stringent stipulations were imposed on women's family responsibilities. If women failed to adhere to the requirement of chastity, they would face not only social condemnation but also severe punishment from their husbands, leading to severe exploitation of women's marital perspectives [8]. Simultaneously, British society was undergoing significant transformation. From the late 18th century to the mid-19th century, it experienced unprecedented and vast changes. Amidst this vigorous era of transformation, the British public, while encountering various opportunities, also endured contradictions and anxiety. For British women in the early Victorian society, they not only had to confront the emotional structure pervading British society at that time—rife with contradictions and anxiety—but also had to endure the torment of a dual life—external compliance and internal passionate fantasies [9]. Under such anxious and tormenting social conditions, Charlotte Brontë successfully crafted the two female figures of Jane Eyre and Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre*. In that era of constricted thinking, advocating for gender equality and female independence was undoubtedly a pioneering movement of female ideological liberation. The brilliance of Jane Eyre and Bertha Mason influenced the women of that time, promoting feminism and facilitating the liberation of female thought. As a highly influential masterpiece, the feminist marital perspective in *Jane Eyre* calls for the liberation of women, the pursuit of autonomous and equal marriage, and the cultivation of independent and self-reliant souls.

From the author's perspective, Brontë's ability to create the character of Jane Eyre, who is deeply loved by a wide range of readers, is closely related to her own pursuit of an equal love and marital perspective. Both in the fictional character of Jane Eyre and in Brontë herself, equality and freedom were lifelong pursuits. What Jane Eyre encountered and her behavioral manifestations were essentially Brontë's resistance to the patriarchal society. In depicting the character of Jane Eyre,

Brontë made her a girl with an equal perspective on love. Even though Rochester's status and position were far superior to hers, Jane Eyre still expressed her own thoughts and bravely pursued her love. And when Rochester became physically disabled and financially strained, Jane Eyre was still able to follow her heart and be with Rochester. This equal perspective on love is precisely the concept of love held by the author Brontë.

It was precisely the era's background and the author's perspective on love and marriage that gave rise to Jane Eyre's three marital choices in the work. Whether in terms of economy, status, or other aspects, she made rational decisions and still maintained her piety towards love and marriage. If her rejections of Mr. Rochester's and Reverend St. John's proposals the first two times reflected her resistance to life and fate, then her final acceptance of Mr. Rochester was the embodiment of her marital perspective's value. In the novel, although Jane Eyre's image is not flawless, she firmly believed from beginning to end that economic independence was the pillar reflecting women's independent personality. Only on the basis of economic independence could women have their own personality and dignity. Therefore, she never gave up her job as a governess, which was the spiritual source of her independent personality [9]. Through her own experiences and exploration of the marital perspective, Jane Eyre demonstrated the autonomy of women's fate and set an indelible feminist spirit for countless women. She believed that women should not be bound by traditional concepts but should bravely pursue their own happiness and dreams. Her story has inspired countless women to break free from the shackles of family and society and bravely pursue their independence and freedom [10].

5. Conclusion

The paper, through the lens of Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist feminist theory, aims to encourage feminist scholars to reassess the historical dominance of male discourse in literary expression, to investigate the status of women within the history of British literature, and to trace the historical roots of female expression. It also seeks to provide women with a clearer understanding of the path towards achieving personal independence and emancipation. As a classic in British literature, *Jane Eyre* profoundly articulates a feminist perspective on marriage through its narrative, highlighting the importance of equality, respect, love, and economic autonomy within marital relationships, while critiquing the utilitarian and patriarchal elements inherent in traditional marriage ideals. Charlotte Brontë, through the story of Jane Eyre, offers a profound critique and subversion of conventional marriage views. She rejects the notion of marriage based on financial and social considerations, emphasizing instead the significance of love, equality, and respect. Such critique and subversion not only challenged the society of her time but also advocated for and promoted a feminist view of marriage. The study discusses how the portrayal of marriage for women in *Jane Eyre* reveals deep connotations of independence, equality, freedom, and the pursuit of genuine love from an existentialist feminist standpoint. These concepts not only sparked significant debate and interest in the society of that period but also offer vital insights and guidance for the marriage views and life values of contemporary women. The paper does not delve into the analysis of the marriage view in *Jane Eyre* from other theoretical perspectives, suggesting that this be left for future studies to explore more thoroughly.

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