

Fulfillment and Ruin: A Comparison of the Marriage Narratives of Jane Austen and Eileen Chang — Taking *Pride and Prejudice* and *Half a Lifelong Romance* as Examples

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Abstract. Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* and Eileen Chang's *Half a Lifelong Romance* both take marriage and love as their subject, yet lead to two entirely different endings — fulfillment and ruin. This paper explores this difference from the two dimensions of marital ending and the writing of violence, examines the causes in historical context and personal experience behind it, and summarizes it as a difference in the two writers' postures toward patriarchy. Austen domesticates violence, and by shaping rational female characters and reformable male images, fights for women's dignity and space of choice within the marriage system, attempting to improve the system in a mild way; Chang, by contrast, exposes patriarchy's objectification of women through extreme deprivation and betrayal, and reveals the collapse of the system with a calm narrative, carrying out a thorough deconstruction. The two together constitute the two basic paths of women's writing when facing patriarchal oppression, and also provide a reference for understanding the response strategies of women's literature under different historical and cultural conditions.

Keywords: Jane Austen, Eileen Chang, marriage narrative, patriarchy, women's writing

1. Introduction

Jane Austen and Eileen Chang lived in early 19th-century Britain and 20th-century China respectively; though in different times, they both unfold their narratives around women's marriage and love, examine social injustice with a female gaze, and explore women's way out in their respective eras. In the rising stage of feminism in their own countries, both writers, based on their own gendered experience, integrated their thinking about freedom and equality into their writing of women's conditions. Among their representative works, *Pride and Prejudice*, centered on the romance between Elizabeth and Darcy, presents a marital narrative arc from misunderstanding to reconciliation; *Half a Lifelong Romance*, centered on the romance between Gu Manzhen and Shen Shijun, writes instead a tragic trajectory from acquaintance to estrangement. The same subject of marriage and love leads, in the two writers' hands, to two entirely different endings — fulfillment and ruin — and the multiple causes behind them and the two writing postures they reflect are worth discussing.

2. Literature review

In Austen's narratives, women's marriages mostly lead to a relatively perfect ending. Elizabeth and Darcy meet at a ball, each rejects the other in their time together, yet finally move from misunderstanding to fulfillment. The "arrogance" Darcy first shows carries the superiority granted him by the aristocratic class and the patriarchal order, but he can take the initiative to correct himself after realizing his prejudice, and make up for his faults through concrete actions such as helping Lydia and improving his attitude toward the Bennet family. His superiority lies in his ability to break through existing prejudice, take responsibility, and provide Elizabeth with a happy marriage. In the end "her heart acknowledged this," and his actions turn Elizabeth's attitude around. *Half a Lifelong Romance*, however, opens in a small factory, where Gu Manzhen and Shen Shijun naturally grow close and fall in love. Yet the ending is that Manzhen is betrayed by her sister, raped and imprisoned by her brother-in-law Zhu Hongcai, and after escaping years later finds a deep estrangement already grown between herself and Shijun. Shen Shijun has personality traits and capacity for action entirely different from Darcy's; he can neither shake off the family's and society's arrangements for marriage nor resist the patriarchal order's oppression of women's fate, and finally can only yield before the rules, becoming a follower and subordinate of the patriarchal system. Therefore, even though he has feelings for Manzhen, he cannot give her a firm and stable promise. Manzhen's line at the end, "we can't go back," shows that under the confinement of patriarchy they cannot clear up misunderstandings or dissolve estrangement, and have long since lost the freedom to marry.

The difference between the two in narration is also reflected in the writing of violence. Chang feels violence with flesh and blood, letting Manzhen undergo a process of complete deprivation: the betrayal of kinship, the violation of the body, the deprivation of freedom; even after escape she remains trapped under patriarchal oppression and loses the right to choose in marriage. By contrast, the plot under Austen's pen seems much milder, but in fact the narration of violence is not absent — it is only that this violence is blended into daily life and seeped into social ideas, operating through intangible things such as the legal system and economic pressure. Mrs. Bennet's anxious urging of her daughters to marry stems from the fear, under the system of entailment, that the daughters will be homeless after their father's death. She is shaped into a somewhat vulgar and neurotic figure, whose lines are mostly exclamations or repetitions (such as "Oh, my nerves!" and "If only the girls could be married off! "); this emotional pressure is both a restraint on the daughters' freedom and a moral kidnapping of Mrs. Bennet herself. By contrast, Mr. Bennet appears decent and open-minded, as if the family duty of securing a living for the daughters naturally falls on his wife. Charlotte marries Collins for a house; a young woman persuades herself to accept a "stupid and dull" man merely because it is her only path to a stable life. On the surface this is her choice, but in fact she has to give up freedom for survival and has no right to choose. These violences never appear as extreme events; they are domesticated and comedic, so that readers barely feel their weight while reading, which exactly shows that they have imperceptibly seeped into life itself.

3. Causes in historical context and personal experience

3.1. Historical context

The differences in the social environments the two writers lived in shape, to a large extent, their different writing styles; combined with the historical background and personal experience, one can understand the difference in their entirely distinct narrative styles and views on marriage and love.

In late 18th-century Britain, women had no right of inheritance; the Bennet daughters would lose their dwelling and economic source after their father's death [1], which severely compressed women's right to exist. Therefore, in the middle-class society Elizabeth belongs to, the idea that "women need to depend on a marriage partner for survival" also existed; daughters from childhood had to learn some "shallow and useless ornaments" [2] to win men's favor, and once grown up would be repeatedly urged to marry and given spiritual pressure. These behaviors look normal and mild on the surface, but it is precisely this "normality" that hides their erosion of women's autonomous will. Nevertheless, the relatively stable social order gave her the condition to seek a way out within an institutional framework that, though flawed, could operate steadily. In addition, Austen in her life accepted a proposal and then withdrew, and had the experience of "refusing a rich man" [3]; having never married, she wrote Elizabeth's spirit of daring to refuse as in fact a projection of her own experience. She still held expectations of a happy marriage, believing that although marriage is constrained by economic conditions and class origin, reason could help women find a way out. Therefore, the women in her works rely on the moral maturity or resource provision of men in marriage to achieve class crossing — this is a male-dominated framework of redemption.

3.2. Personal experience

Eileen Chang, by contrast, faced a Shanghai of the 1940s that fell, was rebuilt, and fell again — the War of Resistance against Japan had just ended and the civil war broke out anew, and the whole city kept overturning repeatedly. In 1930 the Nationalist government promulgated the Family Section of the Civil Code, which formally recognized women's right to divorce and property, but under the pressure of the family, the economic dependence on patriarchy, and society's harsh public opinion toward women, these rights were nominal. According to Professor Wang Xinyu of China University of Political Science and Law, the principles of marital freedom and gender equality established by the Republican-era code were merely formal features of the modern evolution of marriage law, and were not reflected in judicial practice [4]. In personal experience, she was also imprisoned by her father and betrayed by marriage; according to Liu Chuane's *Biography of Eileen Chang*, when young Chang was imprisoned at home by her father for half a year because of a conflict with her stepmother, during which she contracted dysentery and her father barely inquired after her [5]. Having personally experienced the imprisonment of persons by the system, her attitude toward marriage and family carries a color of despair, believing it long since lost any room for improvement. In her essay "On Women" she states plainly that pleasing others with one's beautiful body is the oldest profession in the world. In her eyes, as long as women still have to exchange marriage for survival, they remain in a position of objectification, undergoing compromise and consumption of varying degrees.

4. Differences in writing posture

The differences in views on marriage and love and in the writing of violence described above can be attributed to the two writers' entirely different writing postures toward patriarchy. C. T. Hsia points out in *A History of Modern Chinese Fiction* that Chang's writing contains a "moral horror" — that is, it presents, with a calm mode of expression, the distortion of human nature under the crushing of the system [6]. The narrator gives no subjective judgment and does not hint that "justice will eventually arrive"; this calm narrative tone stands in sharp contrast with the grief and anger the plot brings the reader. In Chang's view, once the patriarchal system tears off its decent disguise, women's bodies become trade goods and reproductive tools — such a system needs to be destroyed. The

female images in her works undergo the most thorough violence and betrayal, and resist these "panics of survival" with a strong will and intense desire to live [7], declaring the invalidity of the order in a deafening way.

Austen uses a superficially restrained and neutral narrative voice to manipulate the characters' fate and the readers' judgment; this narration is called "ghostly impersonal" by Miller [8]. On the surface it submits to patriarchal culture, yet implants women's judgment and thinking in the deep layer. She acknowledges the existence of patriarchy and the oppression of women by the marriage system, but she attempts, by shaping rational female characters and male images capable of self-reflection and reasonable use of power, to reconcile the contradiction between personal emotion and social order, and to fight for women as much dignity and space of choice as possible within the system.

5. Conclusion

The fulfillment of *Pride and Prejudice* and the ruin of *Half a Lifelong Romance* differ because they are projections of their respective historical contexts and personal life experiences. The two writers have very different narrative differences and very different postures toward patriarchal oppression, yet whether improving or dismantling, they share the same basic writing logic when women face oppression, each in her own way asking how women settle themselves. The characters in their works, whether heading toward fulfillment or ruin, are always answering the same question in different ways — under the patriarchal system, how do women settle themselves. Austen chooses to fight for room for women in the cracks of the system, while Chang uses violence to intend the destruction of the system's unreasonable parts; these two postures are not a matter of higher or lower, but different wisdoms bred by historical conditions and personal vision, which together enrich the response strategies of women's literature and also provide a sharply contrasting reference for later generations to understand how women write themselves and imagine a way out under the heavy pressure of the system.

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