

An Analysis of Confined Nature of Women's Existence in Emma from Feminist Criticism

Juan Wang

Oxbridge College, Kunming University of Science and Technology, Kunming, China

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Abstract: Many critics argue the theme of Emma is the view of marriage of Austen in early 19th century. However, the confined nature of women's existence is another theme of this novel. This thesis mainly focuses on the analysis of confined nature of women's existence from Feminism. In this paper, the main daily activities of the famine characters will be analyzed from feminist criticism. In this way, we can have an objective and all round understanding of this image under the male centered society.

1. Introduction

Emma is considered as Austen's best and most representative novel. It is also her longest novel, and by many accounts, her most difficult. *Emma* describes the process of heroine from love to marriage and the process of her self-development, so that many people argue the theme of the novel is the view of marriage of Austen in her time. However, the confined nature of women's existence is another theme of this novel.

In *Emma*, limited and claustrophobic scope of action gives us a strong sense of the confined nature of a woman's existence in early 19th century rural England. The writer depicts in the book many pastimes, such as social visits, charity visits, music, parties, but they seem relatively trivial, at times even monotonous.

This thesis mainly focuses on the analysis of confined nature of women's existence which is another theme of this novel from Feminism. In this paper, the main daily activities of the famine characters will be analyzed from feminism criticism. In this way, we can have an objective and all round understanding of this image under the male centered society.

2. Literature Review

Emma is considered as Austen's representative and most difficult novel so that many critics comment the theme of *Emma*.

Some show their views about marriage from feminism. Female self-consciousness is the key to interpretation of women's works. The novel Emma, written by the nineteenth century writer Jane Austen, appeals to the equal rights between men and woman, and advocates love marriage; meanwhile, she regards the marriage as the honorable way out for women, and considers the family to be the best stage for them. Compared with the strong and complete female self-consciousness of feminists, Emma's one is weak and has class limit.^[1]

Emma is structured around a number of marriages recently consummated or anticipated, and, in each case, the match solidifies the participant's social status. In Austen's time, social status was determined by a combination of family background, reputation, and wealth. Marriage offers women a chance to exert their power, if only for a brief time, and to affect their own destinies without adopting the labors or efforts of the working class. So marriage was one of the main ways in which one could raise one's social status.^[2]

Marriage is based on the true love between man and woman, but economic background and social status are also important material elements.^[3]

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on the analysis of confined nature of women's existence from Feminism.

3. Feminist Criticism

Feminism incorporates both a doctrine of equal rights for women and an ideology of transformation aiming to create a world for women beyond simple social equality. In general, feminism is the ideology of women's liberation based on the belief that women suffer injustice because of their sex. Under this broad umbrella various feminism offer differing analyses of the causes, or agents, of female oppression. Definitions of feminism by feminist tend to be shaped by their training, ideology or race. For example, Marxist and Socialist feminists stress the interaction within feminism of class with gender and focus on social distinctions between men and women.^[4]

In 1949, Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* says: "The quarrel will go on as long as men and women fail to recognise each other as equals." "We have seen why men enslaved women in the first place; the devaluation of femininity has been a necessary step in human evolution, but it might have led to collaboration between the two sexes; oppression is to be explained by the tendency of the existent to flee from himself by means of identification with the other, whom he oppresses to that end. In each individual man that tendency exists today; and the vast majority yield to it."^[5]

4. An Analysis Confined Nature of women's Existence from Feminist Criticism

4.1 Limited Scope of Selection of women's Existence under the Male Centered Society

In *Emma*, the author describes limited scope of woman's existence in early 19th century rural England. The main female characters, such as Emma, Harriet, Jane, Mrs. Weston, Miss Bates and Mrs. Elton, have no job because women are forbidden coming into public field in that time. Jane compares the governess profession to the slave trade, so she makes it clear that the life of a working woman is in no way preferable to the idleness of a woman of fortune. They do nothing all day, but social visits, parties, charity visits, riddles, and playing piano. These pastimes seem relatively trivial, at times even monotonous.

Social visits are the main events of their lives, which take place during the characters pay to each other in the limited social circle, such as Emma's home, Harriet's school, Miss Bates' house and Mrs. Weston's home.

Parties are organized more formal than visits around social conventions. There are six important parties in the novel: the Christmas Eve party at Randalls, the dinner party at the Coles', the dinner party given for Mrs. Elton, the dance at the Crown Inn, the morning party at Donwell Abbey, and the picnic at Box Hill. Each occasion provides the opportunity for social intrigue and misunderstandings, and for vanities to be satisfied and connections formed. Parties also give characters the chance to observe other people's interactions. Parties are microcosms of the social interactions that make up the novel as a whole.

Charity visits are also Emma's activities in her life. "Though now the middle of December, there had yet been no weather to prevent the young ladies from tolerably regular exercise; and on the morrow, Emma had a charitable visit to pay to a poor sick family who lived a little way out of Highbury."^{[6][p.62]} But these activities are only done by Emma because her family is rich. Other women cannot select these activities because of their lack of fortune, such as Jane.

Playing piano is a daily activity, but it is selected by well-educated woman, such as Emma and Jane. Jane is good at playing piano and she communicates with Frank by playing piano. In a few parties, Jane and Frank sing together before the piano, which imply their love. After their engagement is canceled, Jane says to the piano: "You and I must part. You will have no business here."^{[6][p.288]} Playing piano is connection of love of Frank and Jane.

Sharing riddles was a common genteel pastime in the early nineteenth century, and the riddle in Chapter 9 serves as an important metaphor for the social interactions that define the novel as a whole. "In this age of literature, such collections on a very grand scale are not uncommon. Miss Nash, head-teacher at Mrs. Goddard's, had written out at least three hundred; and Harriet, who had

taken the first hint of it from her, hoped, with Miss Woodhouse's help, to get a great many more."^{[6][p.51]} This activity is selected by Harriet.

The scope of selection of women's existence in early 19th century rural England is limited, even if Emma possesses a great deal of rich and intelligence. Although her aspirates to be active and do good thing in the world is noble, the confined, limited scope of selection of Emma's existence makes her a sympathetic character. The limitation of the other poor women's existence is imaginable.

4.2 The Existence of women's Space is Needed by Men under the Male Centered Society

The existence of women's space is needed by men under the male centered society. These activities are advocated by men.

A woman as a good wife and good mother is needed by man. In early 19th century, the most agreeable female image should be the "Angel in the house", which means women should be feminine, loyal, virtuous and pure. They were subject to man and needed the protection of man. For women, their husbands and family mean the whole thing in their life and they had no voice in the family. Isabella is the only mother focused on in the story, and her portrayal suggests that a mother's life offers a woman little use of her intellect. Emma says to Mr. Knightley: "I am very much mistaken if your sex in general would not think such beauty, and such temper, the highest claim a woman could possess."^{[6][p.46]}

The men permit the existence of visit because men want to seek for opportunities to communicate with women. Frank's frequent visits to Hartfield show his relationship with Emma to be close, though in hindsight we recognize that Frank also continually finds excuses to visit Jane. Mr. Knightley's constant presence at Hartfield indicates his affection and regard for Emma.

Similarly, the men permit the existence of parties because men want to seek for opportunities to observe women. For example, Knightley observes Emma and Frank also observes Jane in party.

Mrs. Bates and Miss Bates are invited by Mr. Woodhouse and they play card, because Mr. Woodhouse wants to get rid of aloneness.

Therefore, women are always placed on the subordinate status under the male centered society. As Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* says: "We have seen why men enslaved women in the first place; the devaluation of femininity has been a necessary step in human evolution, but it might have led to collaboration between the two sexes; oppression is to be explained by the tendency of the existent to flee from himself by means of identification with the other, whom he oppresses to that end. In each individual man that tendency exists today; and the vast majority yield to it."^[5]

5. Conclusion

In *Emma*, the confined nature of women's existence is another important theme of this novel. Austen describes limited and claustrophobic scope of women's existence in early 19th century rural England. Because women are forbidden coming into public field in that time, space of women's existence not only has limited scope of selection under the male centered society, such as social visits, charity visits, music, parties, but also the existence of women's space is needed by men under the male centered society.

Of course, economic element of women is an important reason of women's subordinate status. As long as women have independent economic condition, women can gain true liberation.

From this paper, it tells that in the male centered society, women should be self-respectful, self-confident, self-reliant and self-developed; otherwise women would be in the subordinate status forever, or even suffer from self-deconstruction.

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