

# An Analysis of Female Images in British and American Literature

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**Abstract:** In the long history of world literature, numerous typical female images have emerged in the literary works of various nationalities. The female images and their spirit in these literary works have influenced generations of readers. Different people have different habits, customs, spiritual beliefs, and social order requirements, which affect authors' creations, so in different national culture background, there are often great differences between British and American literature and Chinese literature in shaping women's images. These distinctive female images reflect the mainstream social consciousness, values and moral concepts of the national culture at that time as well as the author's reflection on the social situation. This paper aims at analyzing the female images and social problems in the British and American literature.

**Key words:** English and American literature; literary creation; female characters; image features

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## 1. The Creation Course of Female Characters in British and American Literary Works

The creation of various British and American literary works can be divided into three major periods: the Renaissance period, the Romantic period and the Realistic period. In these three different historical periods, political, economic, social, scientific and technological conditions have changed to a great extent, and the literature in these three periods has also experienced a great degree of development. The characteristics of female images in literary works of the three different historical periods reflect the social development of that time to a great extent.

### 1.1 Female images during the Renaissance Period

Humanism thought had a profound influence in the Renaissance Period. The ideological liberation movement of this period improved the low social status of women to a great extent and promoted the awakening of female consciousness in the society. During this period, the situation where many women had been oppressed and exploited for a long time was changed, which gave birth to the yearning and hope for freedom of most women in society. During this period, the status of women received more attention, and the number of literary works with female themes gradually increased. In previous literary works, most female characters were weak, helpless, and lack of fighting spirit and self-awareness. While during Renaissance Period, most of the female characters changed from weak and helpless to new images full of fighting spirit and free consciousness in the works of various authors.

### 1.2 Female images during the Romantic Period

Bourgeois Enlightenment Thought played an important role in the literary creation of the Romantic Period. Literature in this period was more closely combined with the current situation of social development. Compared with the overly

idealized new female images in the Renaissance, women in this period had more real social atmosphere. For example, when the female characters in *Pride and Prejudice* were faced with the dilemma of free marriage and property inheritance, their reactions were closely combined with the social environment at that time. Therefore, even though Elizabeth was a new female representative with a high sense of autonomy, she still had to yield to the real society.

### 1.3 Female images during the Realistic Period

With the rapid development of the material conditions in western society, politics, economy, society, science and technology, culture and other conditions have been greatly improved, so people began to pay more attention to social problems, especially the class issues. Meanwhile, women's self-development needs have also got a bigger degree of satisfaction due to the improvement of the social conditions. Most of the literary works of this period had the purpose of criticizing reality, which had promoted the female spirit to a large extent. Most of the female characters had a high sense of independence. For example, in *Jane Eyre*, although the heroine Jane Eyre does not have good conditions in her appearance, she always insists on her dream in her heart and realizes her female value with her own will and efforts.

## 2. The Characteristics of Female Characters in English and American Literature

### 2.1 Spirit of resistance

In a variety of female-themed British and American literary works, women's resistance to the common fate is often the focus of shaping, and the characteristics of female images are mostly reflected in this resistance process. Regardless of body level or ideological level, most female characters in British and American literature are tough, tenacious and indomitable, daring to break free from confinement and boldly pursue freedom. For example, in *The Hunger Games*, the character Katniss not only dares to resist, but also uses strategies and combines courage and wisdom to successfully resist and save her loved ones when facing the crisis scene where her loved ones are trapped.

### 2.2 Self-consciousness

In addition to the spirit of resistance, the awakening of self-consciousness is also an important feature of female images in British and American literature. In these literary works, the road of resistance of female characters is always accompanied by the awakening of their self-consciousness, and with the deepening of self-consciousness, they constantly optimize their resistance behavior. In British and American literature, the female characters often lose their mind at the first moment of fate crisis when in the face of all kinds of life changes and sudden accidents, but they are able to see the direction in the fog, gradually realize their demand, then realize the self-value, reverse the crisis situation, and finally become representatives of the new female image in the society.

### 2.3 Sense of independence

The realization of self-consciousness is always inseparable from individual independence. Whether in spirit or material, a person who always relies on others is unable to achieve self-breakthrough. Female characters in British and American literature generally have a strong sense of independence, through which the characters express a strong desire for a gender equal society. In the process of character creation, British and American literary works have endowed the female characters with strong independent ability, whether describing their thought and spirit, or describing their forms and behaviors. For example, *Divergent* endows female heroes with the same clothes, skin color, spirit and resistance as men in terms of their appearance.

### 2.4 Epochal character

As art originates from life, the creation of literary works is always inseparable from the constraints of social development conditions at that time, and the female images in British and American literary works are the same. Female characters in different works may face similar crises, but they have completely different fates in works of different periods.

Such different fates are destined results of the social development at that time. Such as the the submission and resistance of Elizabeth in *Pride and Prejudice* and Jane Eyre in *Jane Eyre*, which are both representatives of strong self-consciousness of the new female images, but due to different time background, Elizabeth has to compromise because of economic reasons, while Jane Eyre benefits from the progress of the social conditions and her brave dream became possible.

### **3. The Differences of Female Images Between Chinese Literature and British and American Literature**

#### 3.1 Differences in women's views on marriage

Compared with British and American literary works, women in Chinese literary works mostly hold a conservative attitude towards love and marriage. For a long time, under the influence of Chinese ideas of "propriety, justice, integrity and shame", women in Chinese literary works are often in a passive position when facing love and marriage, with no voice and lack of courage to break the convention. For a long time, the shackles of "the command of parents, the words of a match-maker" have suppressed women's yearning for free marriage, and women usually lose the right of independent choice when facing marriage. Even under the feudal ethical system, women generally lack the consciousness of freedom of marriage and love. Therefore, in the pursuit of free marriage, Chinese literature usually has a certain tragic color. In literary works, when it comes to the description of the freedom of marriage and love, women usually face many difficulties. For example, in the *Romance of the Western Chamber*, Cui Yingying and Zhang Sheng fall in love. Although they love each other, they can only achieve a happy ending by relying on a matchmaker under the feudal ritual system.

In British and American literature, women have strong resistance in pursuing freedom of love and marriage. They are passionate and direct in expressing and pursuing love, and have the courage to resist all kinds of people and things that hinder their freedom. Even in the face of men, they can insist on their independent self, refuse to rely on others spiritually and materially, and are more willing to control the initiative of happiness by themselves. For example, in Shakespeare's plays, even in the midst of suffering, the female characters still maintain their independence, face up to suffering and gain love through overcoming difficulties.

#### 3.2 The differences between women in the pursuit of personality

Chinese culture has a long history of thousands of years. Influenced by it, most oriental females leave the impression of gentleness, dignity and elegance. Especially in ancient Chinese literary works, being virtuous and well-educated are the universal female image characteristics. Even in modern literary works influenced by new ideas, such dignified, virtuous, gentle and elegant female images are not a few, such as Rui Yu in *Family*, Su Fang in *Peking Man*, Jiang Shuzhen in *The Rich Man's Sons and Daughters*, who still maintain the characteristics of female images under the ancient traditional thoughts. These ladies are far away from social troubles all the year round. They only strive for the goal of being a "good wife and good mother" and lack independent personality.

However, the female images in British and American literature have more profound personality needs. Although the status of women in early British and American countries was low, and they lacked the pursuit consciousness of independent personality, with the surging social trend of thought, the female consciousness began to awaken, and the female images in literary works gradually became strong, brave and independent. Women resist bravely in difficulties and hardships and get rid of the shackles of men, which is closely in line with the context of social development. For example, the creation of female characters in *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent* shows that they have the same material and spiritual abilities as men, and their independence, resistance, autonomy and other characteristics constantly inspire them to pursue stronger selves.

#### **4. Conclusion**

British and American literary works have a wide influence, and the independent and tenacious female images created in their works play an important role in promoting the awakening of female consciousness. Although the world is in a new period of development in the 21st century and the status of women has significantly improved, there are still many countries and regions where the status of women is still low. The depiction of female self-improvement in British and American literary works is of great significance to inspire modern women to fight bravely.

The heroic images of women in British and American literary works can help women break through the current ideological confinement, improve the current living environment and promote independence and self realization. Today is an era of great changes. Promoting women to develop themselves independently will help women create a better life relying on their own strength, and will also help the whole era concentrate more energy to realize the long-term progress of mankind.

#### **Conflicts of Interest**

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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