

New Paragon of Morality: An Analysis of Pamela from the Perspective of Social Identity

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Abstract: Pamela, or Virtue rewarded, written by Samuel Richardson in 1740, narrates a story of how a maid became a member of the nobility owing to her virtue. Based on the social identity theory, the paper looks into the social identity construction of the heroine to study her representativeness of new English gentlemen in the social context of the eighteenth-century Britain.

1. Introduction

Samuel Richardson, one of the most celebrated novelists in the 18th century, wrote the well-received fiction *Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded*. This fiction is recognized as one of the sources of modern fiction because its emotional flow of sentimentalism and social revelation of realism are perfectly intermingled with each other. The story goes like this: Pamela, the heroine, was a charming maid who was at first harassed and forced to be the mistress of her young master Mr. B. Despite Mr. B's coercion and bribery, but she stuck to her virtue and integrity. Eventually, Pamela's noble character touched Mr. B, thus he mended his ways and married her beyond social barriers. Technically speaking, it is an epistolary novel, which was a new kind of novel writing style prevailing in Britain in the 18th century. With this epistolary conversational writing, the author delivered the heroine's intricate experience and emotion by letters, successfully making readers engaged and enlightened.

So far, there have been essays analyzing Pamela in different dimensions. The critics' studies mainly develop from the perspectives of its narrative skills, psychological analysis, feminism, and religious attitudes. Among them, the most systematic study focuses on its epistolary writing styles with critical theories like Pamela's didactic purposes. Besides, the work's social significance is also paid special attention to, such as the topics related to the bourgeois ideal of a new gentleman. Resorting to the ex-achievements about Pamela, however, it can be seen that little is done in Pamela's identity construction in social psychological analysis, by which means we can discover the inextricable connection between Pamela's transition from a low middle class into the upper class and the social changes in the real world. Therefore, this paper aims to take *Pamela* as an analyzing text to reexamine the identity construction in Pamela from this new perspective in the hope of finding its historical connotation and social value.

2. Theoretical Foundation by Social Identity Theory

Henri Tajfel was a Polish-born British social psychologist, notable in Europe for his contribution in establishing a European style of social psychology. Tajfel and his student John Turner formulated the social identity theory in the 1970s to 1980s. In their view, social identity is “part of the individuals’ self-concept which derives from their knowledge of their membership of a social group together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership.”(Tajfel, 70) To simply put it, it is about predicted inter-group behaviors, the stability, and cohesion gained from certain groups of people, and the social value internalized during the interaction with the social world and self-cognition.

Tajfel and Turner proposed that there are three mental processes involved in identifying oneself in his group from other groups, during which process people may experience three stages: social categorization, social comparison, and social distinctiveness. “Social categorization was a process of bringing together social objects or events in groups which are equivalent concerning an individual action, intentions, attitudes and systems of beliefs.”(Tajfel 69) That is, if a person was psychologically recognized as a member of certain groups or classes, he/she must bear a certain standard to their mind to determine the division between ingroup and outgroup. (McLeod, S. A. 2019) As for social comparison, based on social categorization, people will make the comparison of ingroup’s power, reputation, social status of their own to that of outgroups. When comparing, people tend to enlarge the difference and keep a distance from outgroup people. Finally, the third stage, social distinctiveness, is “the process in which individuals use their group identity and group affiliation as the source of their self-esteem“(Chen Zhixia, 2016: 26) That is, individuals are often to meet the needs of self-esteem through highlighting their certain advantages.

Based on Tajfel’s theory of social identity, the thesis argues that Pamela, who changes her role from a maid to a prestigious lady, is a new moral paragon that integrates the virtue of the rising bourgeoisie and the spirit of the aristocracy.

2.1 Pamela’s Original Social Identity

As mentioned above, an individual strives to achieve positive self-definition, which is a result based on comparisons between advantages of the in-group and those of out-groups (Graham M. Vaughan, n.d). At first, Pamela had a clear social identity. She was firmly aware of her social status as a humble maid and she was proud of the merits of the poor. And her awareness was especially distinct when there was a value-conflict between her and her master Mr. B, who was a prestigious rich.

Class origin sets the line for Pamela’s social categorization and comparison. Pamela was from a poor family, and had been sent to serve in Mr. B’s family since she was 12 years old. The first time Mr. B had a clash with Pamela when he kissed her, Pamela said, “You have taught me to forget myself and what belongs to me, and have lessened the distance that fortune has made between us, by demeaning yourself, to be so free to a poor servant.”(Richardson 10) Pamela was aware of their distance due to their gap in wealth, family background and the existing master-servant relationship. Therefore, when she was seduced by her master, she experienced extreme fear, and at the same time, had a strong sense of the repulsion towards outgroup, the rich. Moreover, she practiced her in-group norms. For instance, when she decided to go back home, she changed her silk night-gown and silk petticoats to old silk gown and a linsey-woolsey petticoat. It can be seen that Pamela hoped to fit in her original social environment and be recognized by her neighbors through dressing identification even she was away from her group for long. Later, Pamela’s social distinctiveness can be found in her letters. After Pamela discovered Mr. B’s wicked thoughts and dishonorable deeds, she showed an inclination of seeking self-esteem by belittling the upper class. For one thing, she stressed virtue

and goodness of the poor repeatedly and strengthened her sense of belonging by praying and praising her puritan beliefs. For another, she began to reflect and evaluate the upper class more passively, even being exaggerated to some extent. This is her indignant remark, “O how poor and mean must these actions be, and how little must they make the best of gentlemen look, when they offer such things as are unworthy of themselves, and put it into the power of her inferiors to be greater than they!” (ibid: 10) Thus, it can be concluded that Pamela underwent all three stages, which proved her solid social identity. More specifically, this is also the reason that Pamela felt hard to accept Mr. B’ wooing.

2.2 Pamela’s Identity Reconstruction

Tajfel believes that social identity is not purely established by social behaviors, but one’s internal struggle. For the heroine’s identity reconstruction, both of the self-cognition and the social acceptance come into play. For Pamela, her courage to overcome social class gap was largely stimulated by Mr. B. Many a time Mr. B sang praise of Pamela’s pure mind, superior wisdom, and her graceful breeding, all the value standards beyond her birth. It was his patient encouragement that convinced her to be a qualified noblewoman.

In addition, Pamela won the approval of the most public. As she always behaved prudently, men esteemed her and showed her great respect as if she were a gentlewoman. Thanks to her beauty and merit, she not only developed good relationships with her neighbors, but also won the acknowledgment from ladies and gentlemen who were Mr. B’s companions. Yet the most significant acknowledgement, and also the biggest obstacle for Pamela to fit in the new group after her engagement was her consideration of her poor birth and fortune unmatched to that of Mr. B’s. And this conflict was irritated by Lady Davers, Mr. B’s arrogant sister. Even if Pamela was lucky enough to avoid the ridicule and rude jests of Mr. B’s equals, she could not get away from the disdain and indignation of Lady Davers, who was a noblewoman with all the typical shortcomings: arrogant, self-conceit, capricious. Lady Davers looked down upon Pamela and reckoned her an audacious maid, and she was extremely mad at Pamela when she caught the ring on Pamela’s finger. In the heroine’s letters, Lady Davers kept insulting Pamela with words and oppressed her with all kinds of serving orders. Though helpless, Pamela was aware of being nominally Mr. B’s wife and had to behave according to her position. Hence, even though she felt inferior to Lady Davers, she tried to protect her dignity. When Lady Davers commanded Pamela to serve her a drink, Pamela replied, “if, said I, to cater your ladyship at table, or even kneel at your feet, was required of me, I would most gladly to do it, were I only the person you think me; but, if it be to triumph over one who has received honors, that she thinks require her to act another part, not to be utterly unworthy of them, I must say, I cannot do it.”(ibid:249) Pamela’s resistance actually suggested that she was adapting herself to the new identity and acting in accordance to her status. Luckily, Lady Davers was later touched by Pamela’s story and accepted her into their family, which signified a vital stage for Pamela’s new social categorization. Furthermore, Pamela became familiar with the norms in this ingroup slowly, which can be observed in her change of dressing and behavioral habits. She was glad to follow a long list of Mr. B’s orders, and paid visits to the neighborhood, sat in fine carriage, and wore the highest-priced clothes even if dressing luxuriantly was not her will. She understood that Mr. B’s fortune and status required a great deal of these.

3. Pamela as a New Paragon of Morality

Overall, Pamela’s identity construction was realized through internal and external social identity. Yet Pamela didn’t experience the process of social distinctiveness; she still bore her self-abasement in front of her “husband“, a term she would rather replace with “master“, and there was low opinion

she shewed of herself everywhere. She claimed that she was so oppressed by his favors and the sense of obligation she lied under. There was always a kind of authority to command, which reminded of her unworthiness, thus the only thing she could do was to be herself.

However, we shouldn't rush to remark that she failed her identity construction, as her social status had laid a solid foundation. In fact, there were some new elements in her social identity that made her different from traditional cases of mobility of the social ladder. From the perspective of the novel, this character created by the author had a strong social implication of the 18th century social reconstruction. At that time, the first step for the bourgeois to break down ideological barriers and bloodlines of the aristocracy, was to create a new gentlemanly ideal that put less emphasis on birth but upbringing, manners and character also became important factors. As a result, the image of Pamela appeared, a perfect ideal for both bourgeois and aristocrats: she had the decency, self-control and self-help of the middle-class and grace as well as gentleness of traditional noble spirits. (Zhang Li 2015)

For one thing, she served as a moral model of Puritan middle class as well as the gentry, highlighting the moral principles intermingled with the hue of Christian beliefs, that is, to resist temptation and stand the racket. In the 18th century, the development of the commercial economy brought about all kinds of immortality and vices to the upper class, and with that came with criticism on corruption of manners. This was reflected in a series of conflicts between Pamela and Mr. B centering on their attitude towards the illegitimate mistress-keeping relationship. According to some scholars, the moral puritanism collapsed in 1660 accompanied with the secularization of society, so British high society was very flabby about sexual taboos. At that time, the most prominent ethical issue was raising mistresses, which was especially typical in the upper class in London, where it was regarded as the most fashionable thing to keep a mistress in place of the legitimate spouse. (Jiang Defu, Li Lian 2017). In the meantime, the emergence of middle class, represented by Pamela, came to response to this criticism and changed the ways in which virtue was publicly identified. In David Hume and Smith's point of view, people's appropriate self-love can be called virtue, among which the most important is discretion or prudence, which is addressed by Smith in "A person's proper concern for his or her health, wealth, position, and reputation". (Su Guang-en 2019). Generally speaking, there was a calling for the construction of virtue already distorted by social transformation, when Pamela, on behalf of a new moral model integrating the virtue of the middle class and the spirit of the gentry, thus emerged.

On the other hand, as Christopher Flint noted, Pamela was "embodied a bourgeois class that was consolidating its power, challenging aristocratic institutions of control, and transforming cultural as well as economic means of production." (Christopher Flint 1989) Pamela with new identity, started to use her value to contribute to the less-advantaged groups, which signaled her arousal of independent responsibilities and advocates. For instance, She asked her parents a list of the honest and worthy poor so that she could help them with her money, and she showed great sympathy and strong desire to raise Mr.B's child just like what her past lady had done to the young Pamela. She would like to cultivate the kindness, and provide people with the noble mind. Through her actions we can capture the traces of reality. Some scholars pointed out that people entered the middle class through apprenticeships, which served as a bridge between different classes before the establishment of a standardized talent selection system in British society. Through apprenticeships, people from poor families, as well as the middle and lower classes, became business owners and even gentlemen, and they were playing an increasingly important role in social development. (Shu Xiaoyun 2004) In this trend, the rising class developed its own ideology and the moral principles, hoping for a profound reorganization of social life. In the end, the author took advantage of Pamela's letters and said, "All that I value myself upon is, that God has raised me to a condition to be useful, in my generation, to better persons than myself. This is my pride: And I hope this will be

all my pride.”(Richardson 324) Obviously, being one of the rising middle class members, the author wanted the rich who rise from the low class to a higher class to learn from Pamela her diffusive charity to the poor instead of being arrogant, and her sex follow her virtuous instructions and family employment. He went on his preaching on the new moral paradigm through Pamela’s case, meanwhile, that the power of Providence can obviate or relieve any danger or distress which will turn those seemingly grievous things to its own glory, and the reward of pure innocence deserves.

4. Conclusion

Through this analysis of Pamela’s reconstruction of social identity, we get the hang of how a maid of poor birth rises to the upper class through her virtue and social recognition. Above all, we learn how Pamela as a moral paragon conveyed a new connotation to the traditional ideal of gentlemen, constructing a moral paradigm that integrated the virtue of the rising bourgeoisie and the spirit of the aristocracy in the context of the 18th century’s social upheavals. Not only did *Pamela* influence the 18th century’s social consciousness, but also left its legacy to the modern society, offering us a lens to look innovatively into the British society in the 18th century.

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