



The Emancipated Woman in Charlotte Bronte's Jane Eyre

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“Before we women can write declared Virginia Woolf, we must ‘Kill’ the ‘angel’ in the house.

“Going back to the nineteenth century, the role of an angel corresponded to the ‘Pedestal’ or ‘Pinnacle’ Theory as the Women’s Suffrage Journal called it. Whereby women were to abstain from all practical activity be removed from all industrial occupations and be excluded from every kind of political activity in order that she might the better wear an aspect remote enough to seem worthy of worship.² Matthew Arnold wrote of *Villette* in 1853. “Her mind contains nothing but hunger, rebellion, and rage.” This censure against Bronte, her ‘anti-Christian’ refusal to accept the forms, customs, and standards of society is the very basis of considering it a feminist tract. As Currer Bell, which was her pen name, her voice speaks for the nineteenth-century women, for their ‘rage, rebellion and repression.’

Published in 1847, *Jane Eyre* achieved the most immediate influence, as Bronte was able to project with frankness and ardor women in conflict with their natural desires and their social condition. It emerges as a feminist tract, not solely due to its absorption with feminine problems, but because in rebelling against the patriarchal world, it attempts to create a world of equal relationships. It is a study of self-individuation, self-realization, and the process of the heroine coming into being. Charlotte Bronte’s *Jane Eyre* takes us back to Charlotte the woman, undaunted, indefatigable, constantly fighting against male domination in her novels.

By the very act of writing in the 1840s, she had entered the domain of the male sphere and by doing so she was challenging the traditional female role of home and hearth. Only the strongest female authors could resist the tyranny of romantic conventions.³

Jane’s growth emotional, psychological, intellectual, and moral: her awareness of her own faculties and the ultimate realization of the self are actuated by various phases. The challenging circumstances bring out her inner strength. Her childhood is marked by oppression at Gateshead, and adolescence at Lowood teaches her humility: Thornfield

projects finer feelings of warmth and passion; Marsh End brings her suffering Ferndean finally brings her happiness in the form of marriage.

Bronte strips Jane of any status and position, making her an orphan child, who carves out a path for herself in her life. Dependent on the Reed household for her upbringing, she remains an outcast in the family. Shunned by her cousins and hated by her aunt, as a child she begins her rebellion with the world at large. John Reed bullies her, she retaliates by calling him “a murderer, a slave driver, a Roman Emperor.” Her experience in the dark room where she is imprisoned is a reflection of the larger world which denies freedom to her. She musters enough courage to defy Mrs. Reed “You have punished me unjustly. You are deceitful.... I am glad you are no relation of mine.”(chapter 4)

Although Jane suffers, she is soon made free of familial ties. As a free being, with an independent will, she gets a chance to push her studies at Lowood. At Lowood, Brocklehurst presents the picture of a bombastic sham, of power and authority, of the hypocrisy of Victorian ‘Institutionalized religion’ which believed in starvation, submission, and penitence for poor girls. The picture is one of the clergy daughters’ school at Cowan Bridge where Charlotte and Emily Joined their elder sisters Maria and Elizabeth. “The fees were low, the food unattractive and the discipline harsh.” “When Charlotte recorded her memories of the school in the Lowood of *Jane Eyre* she was unaware of exaggerating.”⁴

At Lowood Jane Learns to school herself, to discipline her passionate nature. Miss Temple and Helen Burns are the major influences in her life. Miss Temple’s goodness and generosity instill confidence in her. Helen shows her the path of resignation. But soon Jane’s passionate nature asserts itself and she yearns for “true liberty”. Once again, she sets out for an independent life. The need for a vocation, for an independent living, were some of the strong urges in Charlotte Bronte’s life. Her expression of this urge in her novels; made her a leading feminist in the nineteenth century. Geoffrey Tillotson points this out in

View of Victorian Literature. It was her own experience and observation rather than the novels of George Sand that made Charlotte an avowed feminist a generation before the word appeared in English. It is her chief contribution to the public thought of her time.⁵

Jane speaks her mind passionately.

Women are supposed to be very calm generally, but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties and a field for their efforts as much as their brothers do, they suffer from too rigid a constraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer; and it is narrow minded in their more privileged fellow-creatures to say that they ought to confirm themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings. (Chap XII)⁶

Hence she comes to Thornfield as a governess to Adele. One cannot ignore the significance of the journeys in the novel which are patriarchal in their movements. From Gateshead she moves to Lowood; from a life of tyranny to a life of independence. Her movement from Gateshead to Lowood and from Thornfield to Morton, are testing grounds for her individual assertion. Here she is left with her own resources, bereft of status and money, to fend for herself. She is 'Plain Jane; to be estimated for her innate virtues, not to be judged by womanly beauty. Hence Rochester too, the master of Thornfield is not 'handsome' he is the Byronic Hero, not to be loved for his 'Male handsomeness'

Thornfield brings Jane fine visions of 'Domestic Eden'. Passions are aroused and Jane starts loving her master with a passionate zeal. Rochester is also emotionally and intellectually drawn to her. He feels in Jane a fierce combination of passion and reason. Jane ruminates, "I like you more than I can say, but I will not sink into a bathos of sentiment, and with this needle of repartee, I will keep you from its gulf too." (Chap XXIV)

She refuses costly presents from Rochester. These riches, she feels would mar her inner beauty. She is quick-witted and ready to defy Rochester, whenever his male ego tries to dominate her. Jane is neither masochistic in her submissive endurance like 'Caroline in *Shirley* nor does she seem too self-righteous like Lucy Snowe in *Villette*. She is also not beset by violent passions of love and hate like Catherine in Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*. David Cecil sums up her charm. Childish naivete, rigid Puritanism, fiery passion, these would seem incongruous elements indeed and it is their union that gives Charlotte Bronte its peculiar charm.

The master-slave relationship between Jane and Rochester is one of status and money but the real relationship can find its fulfillment when Rochester also realizes his dependence on Jane as Jane is supported by Rochester for her means of livelihood. Hence in their first encounter, Rochester is handicapped by his horse and has to lean on Jane's arm for support. She further rescues him from being burnt alive in bed by Bertha. The famous 'Gypsy Scene'

reveals Jane's control of emotions. There are sexual overtones that she deftly side-tracks. She is able to see through Rochester's mask, while the other ladies are beguiled by him.

Miss Ingram is what Jane has to fight against in Victorian society; beauty, money, and status. She is a threat to their love also highlighting the dissolute side of Rochester's nature as Bertha is a living example of Rochester's past and 'Adele' is the natural daughter of his dissipated youth. But the real threat to their love comes on the day of their marriage in the form of Bertha Charlotte's sympathy may have been with Rochester for being duped into a marriage with an insane wife. As the younger son in a Victorian family, he is disinherited from his father's property and hence seeks his fortune by marrying a Creole girl from West Indies. But this marriage is devoid of love and feeling on the part of Rochester and he brings a mad wife from India at once 'intemperate and unchaste' whom he locks in the attic at Thornfield. She hovers as an evil spirit in the mansion of Thornfield. 'Whether beast or human being, one could not at first sight tell. Her 'low hollow laugh' and her 'uncanny appearance' give the novel a Gothic appearance. Bertha may be a "menacing figure" but is also a living example of Rochester's past, of his moral lapses and weakness. She cannot be dismissed. This is made clear by Jane when she refuses to stay at Thornfield any longer.

Rochester's hidden past is a shocking betrayal of faith and the sanctity of marriage laws for Jane. She cannot accept him as he is at present, a man of guile and deceit. He had to be chastened and Jane has to listen to her voice of conscience. She refuses to remain with him as his mistress and flees 'temptation'. She wanders homeless, forgoes her name and even her self-respect in search of a new home. She has to begin anew having repudiated the unequal charade of marriage proposed by Rochester.

At Marsh End, She meets Diana, Mary and St John Rivers (the good angels). They befriend her and she regains her confidence. St. John Rivers is a viable solution to Rochester's immoral life, who offers her marriage and who is the polar opposite of Rochester. But Jane feels she would be "as his wife, at his side always restrained and always checked, forced to keep the fire of my nature continually low, this would be unendurable. (XXXIV)

She refuses the offer of marriage to John Rivers realizing that his rigidity and staunchness in religious matters was akin to Brocklehurst and Eliza which was devoid of human warmth and compassion. She is saved from a trying situation when she hears a telepathic call from Rochester and immediately rushes to him for help. Thornfield is demolished in a fire set by Bertha and in trying to save his wife, Rochester has lost his eyesight. He is now humbled, ready to be accepted by Jane. Rochester's excesses have to be removed in some way to make him a balanced personality like Jane. Richard Chase remarks somewhat

disparagingly, "A relatively mild and ordinary marriage is made after the spirit of the masculine universe is controlled or extinguished."⁸ But love can only be realized on equal terms. Hence Jane even becomes his equal in status by acquiring inheritance and money from her uncle in Madeira. She is once again a free woman who proposes marriage to Rochester at Ferndean and her pilgrimage finds its consummation in the union of 'real' minds.

The novel ends with a promise of happy life for Jane, but not for Bertha. Bertha lurks on the periphery in *Jane Eyre* and is made the center in Jean Rhys's acclaimed novel *Wide Sargasso sea* (P.1966). Bertha's figure held a great fascination for this well-known feminist writer from the West Indies. She felt that injustice had been done to Bertha's character and hence she made out a case for her by presenting her as a young passionate Creole girl, beautiful and sensitive, made mad by the repressions of the patriarchal world surrounding her. The beastly groveling creature of *Jane Eyre* becomes a part of the exotic and lushful islands of Jamaica and is wrenched away from her surroundings by the powerful figure of Rochester to be locked away in the attic at Thornfield. Racial injustice in the novel signifies the imperialist aspect of the man-woman relationship merely touched upon in *Jane Eyre*. If Rochester could not marry Jane due to the difficulty of marriage and divorce laws in the nineteenth century (in *Jane Eyre*) Antoinette (in *Wide Sargasso Sea*) could also not free herself from Rochester when their marriage proved to be a failure. In the absence of 'property rights,' she had to be financially dependent on Rochester which made it possible for him to make her an emotional wreck, to imprison her, and force her to spend her life in total darkness. The master-slave relationship takes on a literal meaning and the dark room where Jane is trapped at Gateshead by John becomes the attic at Thornfield where both Antoinette and Bertha are imprisoned. One could even say that Bertha is the secret self of Jane, the veiled sexual self which remained unprojected in Victorian sensitivity. She could be seen as the 'dark double' of Jane as has been pointed out by Gilbert and Gubar in their famous book entitled *Mad Woman in the Attic*. Similar dual

personalities could be traced in Thackeray's vanity fair in the figure of Becky and Amelia and Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*, in the characterization of Sue and Arabella.

Issues dealing with madness, neurosis, and schizophrenia have interested feminist writers like Rhys and Perkins Gilman (*The yellow wallpaper*). Bronte's text thus provides the groundwork for twentieth-century writers and critics alike. Ironically though Bronte could find an escape into wholeness for her heroine in the nineteenth century, Rhys writing in the twentieth century could not. She could only find an escape for Antoinette in her madness and death.

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- [2] Loyd, Fernando *New women in the late Victorian Novel* L Pennsylvania State university Press 1977
- [3] Foster, Sheila *Victorian Women's fiction marriage freedom and the Individual* (London and sydney; (room Helm Ltd: 1985)P3
- [4] Britannica Encyclopedia (Macro)
- [5] Tillotson, Geoffery *A view of Victorian Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978) P199
- [6] Brente, Charlotte *Jane Eyre* (first Pul. 1847), ed. Used New York; Washington Square Press, Inc. 1964. Chapter XII
- [7] Cecily David. *Early Victorian Novelists* (Penguin ed. 1948) P105
- [8] Richard Chase, *The Brontes, or Myth Domestical forms of modern fiction* ed. William van o' care (Midland Book ed, Bloomington, 1959) P110