

Debunking Patriarchy: A Feminist Critique of Jane Eyre by Charlotte Bronte

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Abstract

Charlotte Bronte (1816-1855), a renowned Victorian woman writer, is best known for the novel *Jane Eyre* (1847), which portrays the struggles of the protagonist Jane Eyre for becoming a successful and self-reliant woman in a male dominated society. In this novel, the writer focuses on class conflict, women's identity crisis and inequality of sexes, and thus tries to establish equal rights for both male and female by portraying the brave character Jane Eyre who is not like other traditional women of Victorian age because she has tried to be a successful woman in life fighting with her ill fate and social taboos of patriarchal society throughout her journey of life. This paper, using feminist lens, tries to explore the obstacles of women to become successful and self-reliant in a male dominated society by focusing on Charlotte Bronte's female protagonist Jane Eyre who, as we know, is the representative of Victorian women.

Keywords: Male domination, Struggles, Identity Crisis, Equality, Self-reliance.

Introduction

The development of truly feminist thoughts, a thirst for building the equal rights and individual identity for women is reflected in *Jane Eyre*. Bronte develops the physical and psychological development of the protagonist from the very beginning to the end. The novel starts with an orphan girl of ten years having no family, identity, education, wealth and power. Then after the physical, psychological, and educational growth of the character, Bronte presents us a complete female character with individual identity. In her struggles, she is alone. She herself had to fight against her so called relatives, the society under male dominance and so called traditional rituals of her contemporary era. A critic Dinda Aswandara Raharjani in the article titled "The Oppressions towards Jane in Victorian Society and her Responses Portrayed in Bronte's *Jane Eyre*: A Feminism Study" says:

Bronte successfully presents an independent woman struggling for her life within patriarchal system at that time in the Victorian era through her invented character, Jane Eyre. Jane as the main character is an orphan suffering from discrimination and oppression in her childhood to adulthood. Throughout the novel, Jane experiences bad treatments and she struggles to be an independent woman in order to gain happiness in her life. Her struggles were not easy as she lived in a patriarchal system in which men dominated over women (Raharjani, 2013)

Reasons of Writing the Article

Obviously, there are a good number of researches available so far on Charlotte Bronte's works, but the

exploration of the predicaments of women to become successful and self-reliant in a male dominated society in the Victorian age has not got much critical attention. The present paper is written to fill up the Research Gap, which shows how Charlotte Bronte's female protagonist Jane Eyre has been successful and self-reliant woman in a male dominated society fighting alone and facing many predicaments successfully portrayed in the novel *Jane Eyre*.

Scope of the Research

There has been much scope for the other scholars and critics to enrich our research and contribute to the field of feminist literature going through the research work on the novel of Charlotte Bronte as we have focused only on the things related to the exploration of the predicaments of women to become successful and self-reliant in a male oriented society in the Victorian age reflected in the novel *Jane Eyre*. This research will help the other people and the researchers who like to explore the ways of being a successful and self-reliant woman in the patriarchal society fighting alone and depending on own talent, courage and belief in the Victorian era or even in every age.

Research Methodology and Techniques

The proposed research work is critical in nature and so I have to depend on literary and critical theories for textual analysis and interpretations. The related theories for my study may possibly be the focuses on like feminism, deconstruction, capitalism, and identity.

Limitation of the Study

While conducting the study on *Debunking Patriarchy: A Feminist Critique of Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Bronte, we have had many challenges as this research work is not limitation free. As the research work is based on feminism theories, we are expecting some relevant and available sources in library, and other online platforms like Google and various online Journals but we finding poor online references and a few number of research works on Charlotte Bronte's writings and books in library on this topic.

Theoretical Framework

Feminism is a widely discussed discourse that generally addresses the nature of gender discrimination, power relation, gender politics and sexuality, and at the same time aims at establishing equal rights for both men and women. From the time immemorial, women are undermined, neglected and maltreated in the male oriented society. In this connection, Simone de Beauvoir, a French social theorist, in her monumental work *The Second Sex* regards women as "the Other" in patriarchy and asserts "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (Beauvoir, 1973). Similarly Henrik Ibsen, a feminist writer and critic, in the note to *A Doll's House* proclaims "[a] woman cannot be herself in the society of the present day, which is an exclusively masculine society, with laws framed by men and with a judicial system that judges feminine, from a masculine point of view" (Mayer, 1971). The feminist thinkers aim at ensuring women's social, political, economic and psychological emancipation from the patriarchal mechanism. Thus Simone de Beauvoir asserts elsewhere "[o]ur societies are patriarchal and a woman must break the bounds in order to be herself as human being" (Beauvoir, 1973). Charlotte Bronte, if we regard her a social realist, advocates for the subjugated, marginalized and oppressed women of the Victorian era. Charlotte, in fact, focuses on the development of women's image and education, and wishes to reform the social prejudices in the novel *Jane Eyre*.

Miserable Childhood of Jane Eyre

Jane had to struggle a lot in her childhood. As an orphan girl, Jane was not getting proper caring in her Aunt's house rather she was suffering from mental and physical torture. Mrs. Reed and John used to torture her physically and mentally. As Jane Eyre says:

John had not much affection for his mother and sister, and an antipathy to me. He bullied and punished me....every nerve I had feared him, and every morsel of flesh on my bones shrunk when he came near.... and Mrs. Reed was blind and deaf on the subject; she never saw him strike or heard him abuse me; (Bronte, 1847).

Jane was all the time afraid of John because he continuously tortured her without any reason. It is John Reed who is Jane's evil young master every now and then who would mercilessly bully her and harass her physically and psychologically. For instance, once John struck Jane on the head by throwing a book. As a reaction to this torture, Jane stroke John. That is why Mrs. Reed, John's mother, gave Jane rigorous punishment by keeping her locked in the "red room". (The "red room" is a room in the Reed family in which Mrs. Reed's husband died). As Mrs. Reed says:

"Take her away to the red-room, and lock her in there. Four hands were immediately laid me, and I was borne up stairs" (Bronte, 1847).

When Jane was not tolerating the mental agony and physical assault in the red room, she wants to escape from such kind of torture as Jane Eyre says:

"Oh aunt, have pity! Forgive me! I cannot endure it -let me be punished some other way! I shall be killed if" (Bronte, 1847).

Jane was not considered a relative, rather treated less than a servant in her aunt's house at Gateshead. In a conversation with a maid named Bessie in Gateshead she comments on Jane that she was less than a servant. As Jane talks with Bessie in the conversation:

'Master! How is he my master? Am I a servant?' 'No; you are less than a servant, for you do nothing for your keep. There, sit down, and think over your wickedness' (Bronte, 1847).

The condition of Jane in Gateshead can be defined from Bessie's speech. It is Bessie who is the maid at Gateshead. She is very kind to Jane as manifested in the following speech of Bessie:

"You ought to be aware, Miss, that you are under obligations to Mrs. Reed: she keeps you: if she were to turn you off, you would have to go to the poor house" (Bronte, 1847).

Education changes Jane's luck

In a male dominated society, a woman is the victim of social taboo as Virginia Woolf, a feminist critic and writer, portrays Judith, who is the victim of social taboo, in *A Room of One's Own*. Women are treated as objects of beauty and love in a male dominated society and it is their only duty to do all household affairs like cooking, washing, ironing, producing and rearing children and serving the male counterparts. Woolf advocates that in the patriarchal society, women are not allowed to go to school, rather female education is thought to be a waste of time and money. That is why Judith, Shakespeare's extraordinarily gifted sister remained at home while Shakespeare was achieving a lot roaming in the outside world. To learn how to cook, to prepare foods, to love and nurture children was thought to be a part of female education. As such Judith, who was willing to have education like her brother, was not fortunate to be educated; she was forced to live at home while her brother was learning Latin and many other things. As Virginia Woolf claims in *A Room of One's Own*: "But she was not sent to school. She had no chance of learning grammar and logic, let alone of reading Horace and Virgil" (Woolf, 1998).

But Charlotte Bronte destabilizes patriarchal ideology through the portrayal of Jane Eyre who unlike Judith is highly enthusiastic for having education so as to become a self-reliant woman. Finding her latent talent Mr. Lloyd, the Reeds' apothecary to whom Jane reveals her mental condition at Gateshead Hall, suggests Mrs. Reed that Jane ought to be sent to school. Before leaving Reeds' house, Jane has expressed her feelings about Mrs. Reeds which are reflected in the following extract:

I am glad you are not related to mine. I will never call you aunt again as long as I live. I will never come to visit you when I am grown up; and if anyone asks me how I liked you, and how you treated me, I will say the very thought of you makes me sick, and that you treated me with miserable cruelty (Bronte, 1847).

Jane leaves Gateshead Hall and reaches Lowood School with a new hope. She thinks that she has escaped from the cruel Reeds family members. But she meets with another cruel person Mr. Brocklehurst here in Lowood. Though Mr. Brocklehurst is the headmaster of Lowood School, he is a cruel man. At Lowood, Jane meets with a young girl named Helen Burns who is strong in mind and helps Jane during her good time in her school. Actually before coming to Lowood, Mrs. Reed warns Mr. Brocklehurst that Jane is not a good girl and he promises to inform her future teachers:

"Not you. You told Mr. Brocklehurst I had a bad character, a deceitful disposition; and I'll let everybody at Lowood know what you are, and what you have done" (Bronte, 1847).

Once, Jane has lost her friend Helen in Lowood when she has been affected by a severe disease typhus epidemic. The school condition is very bad and the students are suffering because of cold rooms, poor meals, and thin clothing. Many students fall ill due to typhus epidemic. Once Helen has died of consumption in her friend Jane's arms. Mr. Brocklehurst has left the school because of the epidemic and then Jane's mental development has started to increase dramatically and as such her teacher Mrs. Temple once says:

"Love your enemies; bless them that curse you; do good to them that hate you and despitefully use you" (Bronte, 1847).

This speech influences her and she has spent eight more years at Lowood, six years as a student and two years as a teacher. It is education which gives Jane Eyre the golden opportunity to fulfill her dream for being an independent woman.

Flattery of Jane's Lover

Jane Eyre has spent the most splendid part of her life in the Thornfield as portrayed in the novel. Her sudden meeting with Rochester and falling in love with him reflects the feminist attitudes in Jane and her new thoughts. Jane Eyre loves Rochester very much although Rochester's status and wealth make him superior to Jane. Jane never thinks herself lower than Rochester, notwithstanding her profession as a simple family teacher. The Jane-Rochester relationship is not well-matched on various grounds, for Rochester, who is twenty years older than Jane, has had wide experience in life and business. Rochester is a rich and sophisticated businessman, on the other hand Jane is a simple orphan girl. The disparity in status that was a main obstacle to the way of their successful love relationship is articulated through Jane's words to Rochester:

I do not think, sir, you have any right to command me, merely because you are older than I, or because you have seen more of the world than I have; your claim to superiority depends on the use you have made of your time and experience (Bronte, 1847).

However, Rochester who feels Jane from the core of his heart is touched by Jane's purity of heart. Besides, he considers Jane as the spiritual life partner whom he always yearns for. Gradually they fall in love and decide to get married. But at the auspicious moment of their marriage, Jane comes to know that Rochester has been married to another woman. The cruel truth of Rochester's past life comes to Jane as a bolt from the blue and she falls in a dilemma whether to stay with Rochester or to leave him forever. Jane expresses her pain and sad feelings to Rochester that though she is not rich and solvent financially and not much beautiful physically, yet still she has a beautiful heart. Jane Eyre rightly says:

Do you think, because I am poor, obscure, plain, and little, I am soulless and heartless? You think wrong! — I have as much soul as you — and full as much heart! And if God had gifted me with some beauty and much wealth, I should have made it as hard for you to leave me, as it is now for me to leave you (Bronte, 1847).

Jane also says:

"I am not a bird; and no net ensnares me: I am a free human being with an independent will; which I now exert to leave you I will never again come to your side; I am torn away now, and cannot return" (Bronte, 1847).

Jane has fostered a deep feeling for Rochester, she cannot compromise with any patriarchal traditions so far as her marriage is concerned. She is such a brave woman who is well conscious of her self-reliance and self-assertion. Hence she boldly expresses to Rochester:

I care for myself. The more solitary, the more friendless, the more unstained I am, the more I will respect myself. I will keep the law given by God, sanctioned by man. I will hold to the principles received by men when I was sane, and not mad as I am now, laws and principles are not for the times when there is no temptation, they are for such moments as this when body and soul rise in mutiny against their rigor, stringent are they, inviolate they shall be (Bronte, 1847).

Jane meets her good fortune

After her return from Thornfield to Moor House, Jane becomes again homeless with no possession, and as such she feels alienated from her world. Then Jane finds her cousins Mary, Diana and St. John in Moor House. Moor house has played an important role in her life because her life is changed overnight here. Firstly, she finds her fellow relatives here who seem very careful to her in a true sense not like the Reeds family where she only finds pain and sufferings. Secondly, she has had a job as a teacher in a charity school in Marton through her cousin John. This job has increased her confidence and self-esteem. Finally, she has got the information of her uncle John Eyre who has died but left a large amount of about 20,000 pounds for her. Here she gets her identity, wealth and inspiration for the next step to her life. In the Moor House, her cousin St. John has felt an attachment to Jane and offered Jane to be his wife and moved to India to serve as a missionary there. And also he has instigated Jane to accept the marriage proposal, but Jane has realized that such a loveless match will not make her happy because St. John bears the opposite disposition of Rochester in various ways. John, as Jane felt, is a cold and emotionless personality who will suppress her freedom and personality. Hence Jane Eyre says: "I could no longer talk or laugh freely when he was by; because tiresomely importunate instinct reminded me that vivacity (at least in me) was distasteful to him" (Bronte, 1847).

But St. John is trying to convince Jane Eyre with sweet-quoted words such as "God and nature intended you as a missionary's wife" (Bronte, 1847). However, Jane has decided to move to India to work as a missionary but not as his wife because she has realized that John does not have deep and sincere love

towards her, and their relationship may send her to a premature death. Jane is now in a dilemma whether to accept John or return to Rochester. In the meantime Jane is rescued by Rochester's sudden call and ultimately she has returned to Rochester at Thornfield.

At the end of the novel, when Jane is reunited to Rochester, she becomes financially solvent as she has already inherited a handsome amount of money from her uncle John Eyre. Jane's magnanimity finds its expression at her reunion with Rochester because Rochester is now a helpless person who has become blind and lost his wife in a fire accident. So Jane says:

I find you lonely, I will be your companion, to read to you, to walk with you, to sit with you, to wait on you, to be eyes and hands to you. Cease to look so melancholy, my dear master; you shall not be left desolate, so long as I live (Bronte, 1847).

Now it is apparent that Jane Eyre is a unique accomplished lady in the Victorian era who feels that true love lies in the unification of two souls. As such she decides to marry Rochester who has already lost his sight and all his possessions. In fact, Jane Eyre in this novel represents the most assertive Victorian woman who tries to establish self-respect and independence because without self-esteem and self-assertion women emancipation from the cocoon of patriarchy, in the real sense of the term, is not possible. Jane and Rochester finally get married because right now both of them are equal in social status as she says, "Reader, I married him." (Bronte 514). If we analyze her speech, we can see a feminist point of view as she has not said that Rochester married her but she married him. At the end of the novel, we find Jane a complete woman with identity, equality and self-esteem. A critic Haiyan Gao points out in the article titled "Reflection on Feminism in *Jane Eyre*":

Bronte has created Jane Eyre as a special image out of ordinary. Jane has become the maker of her own life, and dares to raise her own voice. She always overcomes the pressure of life, and tries to attain her self-dignity by perseverance, resilience and wonderful individualism. She is never defeated on her way. Albeit Jane is a little figure, she possesses a broad soul. She seeks true love and is loyal and dedicated to her beloved man. Her humanity, tolerance, talent and independence touch the heart of the hero. And ultimately, she has been able to win a perfect love (Gao, 2013).

Jane represents the model of a woman that breaks the gender roles of a male dominated society in the Victorian Era. Jane who challenges the gender expectations refuses the marriage proposal from Rochester at first and then from St. John and finally accepts Rochester as life partner only when she is a self-reliant, self-respected, self-educated and self-decisive woman rare in a Victorian patriarchal society. Through the development of the character Jane, Bronte gives us a role model of an independent and self-assertive woman. As a critic Angela Andersson said in the article entitled "Identity and Independence in *Jane Eyre*":

Jane Eyre can be found as an unconventional woman of the Victorian era, she is emotional, passionate and strong willed to fight exploitation and injustice. At that time, passion and a hot temper in a woman were not considered appropriate, and had to be repressed. This work is deemed as a journey of Jane Eyre seeking her true self. Jane fights the patriarchal traditions and is always on her quest for self-identity and independence. Moreover, she remains true to herself by putting herself first and caring for her own wellbeing, even though she is yearning for love and kinship (Andersson, 2011).

Conclusion

At the end, it goes without saying that the protagonist Jane Eyre is truly a successful self-reliant woman who gains victory by fighting alone but moves bravely against all obstacles and defeats the

contemporary traditional patriarchal male dominance of the Victorian period. She started her journey from her childhood and after many stages of her physical, educational and psychological development, she at last confirms her victory by establishing her own identity in the society. So, it is clear that Jane Eyre struggles for her existence and education throughout her whole life facing all pervasive patriarchal ideologies in the Victorian era. It is to note that same scenario is also noticeable in Eastern world as reflected in Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's *Sultana's Dream* where she says: "She circulated an order that all the women in her country should be educated." (Hossain 7). At the end of the novel, we can find Jane Eyre, an idol of a complete woman who has self-identity, strong personality, dignity and honor in Victorian society. Thus Charlotte Bronte through the character portrayal of Jane Eyre dismantles patriarchal perceptions about women, and sings of equality for both man and woman in all spheres of life. The long cherished success of Jane Eyre will inspire the women of modern days to be established in various sectors of the present world and will also help the researchers to find out the way-out of the success of a woman in male dominated society.

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