

## A FEMINIST PORTRAIT OF JANE EYRE

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In the present paper the feminist ideas in the novel *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë are traced. The feminist viewpoint is formed as we trace the struggles and misfortunes of Jane Eyre in a largely male-dominated 19<sup>th</sup> century England. Jane's interaction with the various male characters – John, Mr. Brocklehurst, Mr. Rochester and St John Rivers is outlined. On the basis of these conclusions we are able to evaluate Charlotte Brontë's achievement in the depiction of Jane Eyre. Gender dynamics is discussed. A special emphasis is put on the fact that Jane Eyre is one in a line of heroines who work.

Jane Eyre manages to find her place in a society ruled by men owing to her stamina, dignity and hard work.

**Key words:** *feminism, gender, patriarchy, self-realization, work*

*Jane Eyre* was the second novel written by Charlotte Brontë and the first one to be published in 1847. It has been considered the author's most famous work which still enjoys wide critical interest, especially among feminist critics.

The present study forms its feminist viewpoint by tracing Jane Eyre's gradual breaking up of patriarchal barriers. Thus, it outlines the development of her character and outlook on life. Although it was written in 19<sup>th</sup> century England, Jane Eyre treated feminist issues in a way that was very advanced for its time. The depiction of the main heroine showed an aspiration to freedom and independence. All patriarchal limits which marginalized the public role of the woman and subjected her to the will of man were successfully rejected in the construction of Jane Eyre's feminist identity.

Jane Eyre's first clash with men is in childhood. The main heroine is an orphan. She lives with her aunt Mrs. Reed and her cousins. The child is a subject to bullying by her cousin John, Mrs. Reed's son. He reminds the girl of her inferiority in the family hierarchy. The boy teases her by throwing a heavy book in her direction. Boys were used to have their own way in Victorian times. They were brought up as different from girls. The sense of superiority in boys was instilled since an early age due to their

gender only. Mrs Reed spoils her only son John. He always imposes his will through violence. This line of behaviour continues even when he becomes an adult.

Jane, however, does not react in the conventional way by crying or trying to suppress her anger. From the very beginning the main heroine is portrayed as a rebel, not passive to attacks. She sticks to that course till the end of the novel. The child Jane Eyre shows the first signs of protest and strong resistance to male domination. Although she is a young girl, Jane already knows that her role is to fight oppression and establish her position as a free individual.

Jane meets a second male patriarch later in her life – The Reverend William Wilson. He is another abuser of women and misogynist. The critics Gilbert and Gubar offer an interesting interpretation of him:

As many readers have noticed, this personification of the Victorian superego is like St. John Rivers, his counterpart in the last third of the book – consistently described in phallic terms: he is “a black pillar” with a grim face at the top ... like “a carved mask”, “almost as if he were a funeral and oddly Freudian piece of furniture.

(Gilbert & Gubar 2000: 343, 344)

The idea that Mr. Brocklehurst is an embodiment of the phallus is quite a new and challenging one. This male organ is in psychoanalytic terms the instrument which only men have and women lack. Men use their biological difference as the only available argument to rule over women both in the private and the public sphere.

Mr Brocklehurst is a typical Victorian man – cruel and despotic. His subjection of women is a form of establishment of the power of one gender over the other. From the very beginning they enter his institution, girls are brought up to be in inferior position. They are treated as servants with no rights, almost like slaves. The beautiful long hair of girls is cut in order to annihilate gender differences, and to turn them into unfeminine, “sexless” beings. Even minor acts are punished severely to cause fear, and demand obedience. All these acts confirm the position of young girls as a secondary gender.

Jane Eyre’s spirit could not be broken at Lowood, too. She is not afraid to fight and oppose the ruling order, despite the threat of punishment. Jane defends her rights of equality even as a young girl.

Jane Eyre stays at Lowood till she comes out of age. Then she starts looking for a job. Charlotte Brontë stresses the importance of having an

occupation for women. Work gives meaning to the main heroine's life, and thus helps her escape from the patriarchal chains.

The special social construct – the governess is present in all novels by Charlotte Brontë. This occupation was an emblematic symbol of the patriarchal educational system. The intellectual and professional development of women was limited on purpose through the narrow education they received. After the acquisition of mainly basic knowledge skills at Victorian boarding schools for girls, they were prepared to become housewives, and, thus, mere appendages to men. That is why the writer made the governess Jane Eyre the main heroine of her novel.

The governess and the teacher are the only professions which are allowed to unmarried women in Victorian times. They have no rights of any possessions. Women and all their belongings become their husband's "property" as soon as they get married. There is no other alternative. The image of the governess embodies inapplicable intellect and social contradictions. She is more intelligent than her master-employer, yet, as far as her social position is concerned – she is at the bottom level together with his servants. Her hard and underestimated labour is often compared to slavery in Charlotte Brontë's novels. The governess is made to bear the superior, condescending and disrespectful attitude of her rich masters and their spoilt children whom she had to bring up, take care of and educate. The writer's contribution to **The Woman Question** is the idea that women should receive education, and be given a chance to work, so that they could achieve self-realization. The author's standpoint is rather for gradual changes, not for a sudden reform, and only when women are really ready for them (Bjork 1974: 38).

The feminist critic Harriet Bjork sums up Brontë's position on the condition of women.

For all her interest in the "scientific" style and attitudes of certain reformers in her day, Charlotte Brontë is, of course, primarily important as an emotional persuader.

(Bjork 1974: 38)

Charlotte Brontë's views were in tune with another defendant of women's rights – Mary Wollstonecraft. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman with Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects* (1792) Mary Wollstonecraft stated that:

Contending for the rights of woman, my main argument is built on this simple principle, that if she be not prepared by education to become the companion of man, she will stop the progress of knowledge and virtue.

(Wollstonecraft, quoted in Bjork 1974: 37)

To put it in a nutshell, Charlotte Brontë is in favour of both the intellectual and the professional development of the woman. In the author's opinion this leads to the woman's realization in a sphere different from marriage and family life. That was why Brontë grants almost all her women an occupation of some kind before finally "rewarding" them with marriage. Jane Eyre is not an exception to the rule.

Jane meets the third and most important patriarch in her life – Mr. Edward Rochester at his estate - Thornfield. The main heroine works as a governess there, and he is her master. Mr Rochester possesses money and power. He had intimate relations with various women in the past. Jane Eyre took care of his illegitimate daughter Adele. Mr Rochester grew accustomed to the subordination of women on the basis of his gender.

Mr. Rochester was based on Charlotte Brontë's teacher and beloved – Mr. Heger. However, the main character is not a direct representation of the Belgian "master". Rochester is cruel, bossy and fierce, whereas Mr. Heger is mild, calm and peaceful. Yet, like the Brussels teacher, all the male characters are above the main heroine as far as social status is concerned. Thus, due to their experience, they guide her and, in general, "master" her way in life. In return, the heroine looks up to them with admiration and respect.

Although Jane loves and respects Mr Rochester, and to her he is an authoritative figure, she adheres to her moral principles, and refuses to become his mistress. The main heroine is entirely independent, despite being a woman from the 19th century. Although she is penniless, she has a strong sense of respect for herself. She does not give in to the advances of a powerful male, and her body and soul could not be bought at the price of her dignity.

The relations between Jane Eyre and Mr. Rochester could be described as a clash of genders. On one side is he – in the position of power, and on the other side – she, in an inferior position. Yet, the main heroine challenges traditional relations between women and men. She has the energy and the will to struggle with the subjected position of women in society. Jane is like a modern feminist in the sense that she tries to choose her fate alone, rather than let someone else do it for her. Rochester's decision to make Jane his lover is due to all men's desire to trap women. As a result women long to escape their imposed "prisons".

Jane Eyre's love declaration is revolutionary in the context of the Victorian Age. Her aspiration for equality with Rochester is unacceptable, and even judged as scandalous by patriarchal society.

The heroine's aspiration to freedom is compared by the feminist critic Ellen Moers to that of the "caged bird" and its wish to fly away:

In Brontë's work, both aspirations – to female freedom and moral freedom – are served by the bird metaphor, free flying.

(Eagleton 1996: 294)

The very speech where Jane Eyre tries to assert her right to be free is one of the strongest in the novel, and points out to Charlotte Brontë's feminist ideas. Jane Eyre's refusal to accept the stagnation and boredom of a passive existence is voiced in her classic declaration in Chapter 12 of the book. The main heroine tries to preserve her independence by guarding her moral principles. She rejects the traditional opinion that the place of the woman is in the kitchen. The main heroine declares that women feel the same need to apply their abilities in the professions as much as men do:

It is in vain to say human beings ought to be satisfied with tranquility; they must have action; and they will make it if they cannot find it. Women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel: they need exercise for their efforts as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a restraint, 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 confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings, to playing on the piano and embroidering bags. It is thoughtless to condemn them, or laugh at them, if they seek to do more or learn more than custom has pronounced necessary for their sex.

(Brontë 1994: 111)

Mr. Rochester tries to make Jane a non-entity like his previous mistresses. His misconception is that she was another in a line of "angels in the house", named after the title of Coventry Patmore's poem from 1885. This term has often been used by feminist critics to describe the position of women in the 19th century as passive, almost lifeless beings, who had no life of their own, but totally depended on male control of their destiny. Women were victims to men's stereotypes of their gender roles as housewives. Men's confinement of women hindered their creative

development in areas outside the home. All the other women characters in the novel conformed to the traditional roles tailored for them by men.

Jane Eyre meets the final patriarch - the clergyman St John Rivers. The main heroine is offered a loveless marriage to him. She denies such a union without feeling. St John as his name suggests, appears to be another false "saint" for Jane, and another misogynist. He wants to be a master of her soul, and to make her devote her life to religious faith. St John persecutes his own big ambition of ruling the Indians under the disguise of a missionary who preached a false, cold, inhumane version of the Christian religion. He wants to subject and control Jane, and to put her at his mercy on a par with the colonized races. The Christian Jane Eyre bravely opposes this religious hypocrisy. The main heroine's free spirit does not submit to any kind of male exploitation.

St. John Rivers personifies the fact that religion was another form of subjecting women and establishing power. The dangers for women's free expression lurked everywhere – politics, religion and the family. Women like Jane Eyre needed stamina and a will to fight the existing order to preserve their identity as an equal gender.

Jane Eyre could not allow to be ruled by men. She subverts their domineering position. The main heroine always speaks and acts as a strong individual. That is how she manages both to find her deserved place in society and to gain men's respect.

Jane's decision not to follow St. John Rivers in his religious undertaking could be observed as the establishment of independence and self-confidence on her part.

If the two male patriarchs – Edward Rochester and St. John Rivers were compared, similarities could be discovered. Although St. John Rivers is cold and Rochester fiery, they are both passionate in their purpose – Rochester – to impose his will, and, in his turn, St. John – to devote himself and attract other people to religion. Jane Eyre meets the two opposites, so that she could increase her understanding of man's nature. She discovers her true self and her life goals through her relations with the male characters. Jane Eyre wants to love and be loved, but only as an equal, so that she could be happy and realize her self-fulfillment. She does not want to make a compromise with her conscience, and always lives according to her principles. In this way, she conforms to her own belief of what is right or wrong, and is content with the results.

Jane Eyre declines St John Rivers's proposal, but agrees to marry Mr. Rochester. This is a union of independent individuals. True equality is achieved in the end. Jane is ready to marry Rochester despite his physical

injuries because she loved his soul. He is not as powerful as before, yet still the same man. He is himself again, without any disguises, and his heart belongs only to Jane. Their new home – Ferndean – is an isolated place in the forest, which fact pointed out that such a marriage could not be accepted by society. Jane and Rochester's union is too forward for their time. Charlotte Brontë appears to be unable to offer an alternative society to the one she lived in. Yet, it gives her credit that the novel has an optimistic ending.

The critic Kate Millett shares the view that Jane and Rochester's marriage appears to be a compromise on the surface, yet, she discovers deeper important issues underneath. Charlotte Brontë, Millett argues, responds "deviously" to the public

and private censorship exerted by male-dominated society, pretending to compromise and appeasing convention by concluding her novels with marriages. But her critique of the typologies (beautiful/plain; virgin/whore) through which men seek to depict and construct women is apparent in her novels.

(Lodge 2009: 68)

The feminist critic Patricia Beer also stresses the fact that this is a marriage of independent individuals:

Now she is rich; she has proved she can live alone and keep sane and useful, which is more than he was able to do; and events have justified her earlier decision. And, above all, she is sighted. Rochester is not allowed to see until her equality has been established and then it is only a partial restoration.

(Beer 1974:104)

Jane and Rochester's children also offer a ray of hope for the future. As the critic Miriam Alott observes: "The children of the union with Rochester are strong, healthy and attractive, being the children of love..." (Gibson 1989: 79).

To cap it all, the critic Bettina Knapp concludes that: "*Jane Eyre* (1847) is a feminist novel par excellence" (Knapp 1991: 144).

It has been observed that a way out of the status quo of the governess is not pointed out in the novel *Jane Eyre*. No ideas for institutional changes in the patriarchal education are discussed. Yet, *Jane Eyre* manifests the intellectual abilities of the woman to work and ensure her independent existence.

*Jane Eyre* is a novel that displays many traces of feminist protest. Since childhood up to adulthood Jane proves to be a rebel against the constrictions of the traditional patriarchal role of the woman, very much like a modern feminist. It has always been a struggle for women to find their deserved position in society, but with a strong will and a spirit, there is hope to make this world a place of freedom and equality for all.

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