



## Jane Eyre: A Feministic Reading

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### Keywords :

Charlotte Bronte in *Jane Eyre* creates not only a romantic tale of passion and thrill but one of the most unforgettable heroines of all times called Jane. The true purpose of the novel is forwarded by Charlotte in foreword to the second edition. She writes:

Conventionality is not morality. Self-righteousness is not religion. To attack the first is not to assail the last. To pluck the mask from the face of Pharisee is not to lift an impious hand to the Crown of Thorns.

These things and deeds are diametrically opposed: they are as distinct as is vice from virtue. Men too often confound them; they should not be confounded: appearance should not be substituted for the world redeeming creed of Christ. There is –I speak it- a difference; and it is a good, and not a bad action to mark broadly and clearly the separation between them.

The importance of this foreword is many-folded. Few women writers took trouble of writing those days because of their minimal readership. It was the era when the representative poet of Victorian age few years later wrote:

Man for the field and woman for the hearth:  
Man for the sword and for the needle she:  
Man with the head and woman with the heart:  
Man to command and woman to obey. "The Princess"

In *Jane Eyre* Charlotte Bronte's romantic individualism and rebellion of feeling are directed to underlying social and economic critique of bourgeois patriarchal authority. She presents her heroine with all the inner attributes to make her place felt to male counterparts. Margaret Gabor feels that though Jane grows and matures but she remains a relatively stable young feminist. In the very opening few chapters Jane takes a stand for herself and presents her ego, pride and revolutionary spirit. During her fight with John Reeds, she feels that only option to secure rights is to show offence all the way.

Though women had been writing feminist texts since the late 18th century, an actual feminist movement did not form in Britain until the late 19th century under leaders such as Emily Pankhurst and Millicent Fawcett. Charlotte Bronte published *Jane Eyre* just when First Wave Feminism was beginning to develop, with writers such as Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Louisa May Alcott, Emily Dickinson and Emily Bronte proving their worth as writers and incorporating feminist ideals into their work. (Steelye 12-13). *Jane Eyre* was one of many post-Civil War novels "aimed at young female readers in which an adolescent woman attempts to gain maturity and ascendancy over the terms of her world" (Steelye 13).

As for characterisation is concerned there are only five male characters in contrast to showers of female characters. However, their power is boundless than all the female characters. The power alters from character to character. Jane fights against all odds and that too being simple, orphan and poor. The immediate origin of Jane's cruelty is John Reed, a school boy of fifteen –four years older and large and stout for his age. He expresses his basis of contempt to Jane as:

You are a dependent, mama says; you have no money; your father left you none; you ought to beg, and not to live here with gentleman's children like us, and eat the same meals we do, and wear clothes at our mama's expense. Now, I'll teach you to rummage my book shelves: for they are mine; the entire house belongs to me, or will do in few years. Go and stand by the door, out of the way of the mirror and the windows. (p 11)

Jane also refuses to give in to a man's patriarchal attempts by refusing St. John's demand that she marry him for reasons with which she does not agree. After all, St. John admits he does not love her and then uses his religious views as an excuse to goad her into marrying him. In fact, he even attempts to make her feel guilty by saying that God would not be pleased with two people living together with "a divided allegiance: it must be entire" (357). By making this claim, however, he seems to be implying that God would only be happy if St. John had full and complete ownership of Jane. Though Jane is tempted, she does not give in because she realizes that in order to please him:

I felt daily more and more that I must disown half my nature, stifle my faculties, wrest my tastes from their original bent, force myself to the adoption of pursuits for which I had no natural vocation... it racked me hourly to aspire to the standard he uplifted. (326).

In other words, it pained her to realize that her marriage might be based on a lifestyle for which she had no desire and a partnership void of true love. Charlotte Bronte did not take to the streets with her feminist ideals, but she expressed her view of women equality almost subconsciously, through word and deed. She lived in a "world that measured the likelihood of her success by the degree of her marriageability," which would have included her familial connections and economic status. (Moglene 484). Jane does not allow her goals to rest solely upon marrying which was the order of the day. Rochester's betrayal throws her into the depths of despair, but she tells St. John expressly that she could be perfectly happy as a simple teacher with her own school and a few pupils.

The desire for independence has been apparent since Jane's early childhood experiences at Gateshead where she is sub-

ject to the cruelty of Aunt Reed. This woman bestows the young girl no love and wishes to have ultimate authority over her mind and spirit, similar to St. John's intentions. Her punishment of locking Jane in the Red Room nurtures a central characteristic in the young girl: the desire to survive with dignity. Jane declares to Aunt Reed that this "violent" action is an injustice and that she cannot live in this unloving environment. At the end of her discourse, she feels her soul begin "to expand, to exult, with the strangest sense of freedom, of triumph, I ever felt... as if an invisible bond had burst and that I had struggled out into unhopd-for liberty" (31). This is the beginning of a spirit that Jane carries forward into her future relationships with men, beginning with the detestable Mr. Brocklehurst.

There are showers of examples which show the feministic bent of Jane's mind, though two of Jane's actions are the most explicit in proving her role as a feminist. The first is her attitude toward Mr. Rochester's attempts to lavish her with jewels and expensive garments for her wedding. In fact, she says that "the more he bought me, the more my cheek burned with a sense of annoyance and degradation" (Bronte 236). Her unwillingness to be objectified is the strongest indication that she does not define herself by two of the "marriageability" components previously discussed: economic status and beauty. The second action is Jane's leaving of Mr. Rochester, which exhibits her courage and will power. By such action, she both defies the Victorian expectation of submitting to a man's will (i.e., acting as Rochester's mistress) and shows that she can break from the emotional power that Rochester possesses upon her. Though it is hard for her to leave, she nevertheless draws up the courage to leave a life of security, promise and love for the unknown, refusing to let this man maintain his grip on her heart. In addition, her refusal to become a mistress shows that she has maintained a certain dignity, refusing to give in to her physical and emotional desires that would be seen as uncouth by society. The readers may argue that Jane eventually "gives in" to her emotions when she returns to Mr. Rochester. This return, however, was not done in the spirit of surrender, but due to the realization that even if she returns to Rochester, his love will free her, not imprison her as will St. John's. Notably, she only returns after she has received a large inheritance from her uncle. Because she is now established as Mr. Rochester's social equal, her return is not out of neediness or greed. After all, she returns of her own free choice and because of her belief that she can "become a wife without sacrificing a grain of her Jane Eyre-ity" (Rich 474).

John Reed's status as a sole heir to Gateshead provides him an absolute power to harass his dependent orphan female cousin. Jane is helpless against the silent complicity of the house hold. Each female in Gateshead "did not like offend their young master by taking my (Jane's) part against him" (p5). Unwittingly Jane tells him: "you are like a murderer... a slave driver...like the roman emperors..." (p.11). Through Jane's misfortunes and sufferings at Gateshead, Charlotte presents a solid affair "of the actual world". In the first interview with Naomi Brocklehurst, Charlotte not only puts female existence on question but also makes readers conscious about the dualistic characters of the self imposed moralists whom she condemns even in the foreword to second edition of the novel. Asked whether she is a good child, Jane finds it possible to respond. Brocklehurst reminds her that naughty children are apt to die and go to hell. Jane turns self conscious about her own survival and declares "I must keep in good health and not die." (p.38) Jane's commitment to life is so strong that we are likely to suggest that she takes the challenge of survival, establishment and rank in her mild hands but achieves the result enormously. Jane's clarity about equality and inequality between herself and Rochester has several aspects. In their first meeting, on the Icy-Millcote road and later in the library at Thornfield, they recognize each other's physical and psychological similarities; neither is conventionally attractive nor socially graceful. Rochester claims advantage because of wilder social experiences. Jane, however, displays courage, pride

and ability by saying: "your claim to superiority depends on the use you have made of your time and experience"(p.164)

In the emotionally charged scene between Jane and Rochester before the marriage Jane maintains that her self-respect and identity are most lovable to her. She rejects the offer of Rochester to remain in Thornfieldhall, despite Rochester marriage to someone else.

Do you think, because I am poor, obscure, plain, and little, I am soulless and heartless? ... 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. I am not talking to you now through the medium of custom, conventionalities, nor even of mortal flesh: "it is my spirit that addresses your spirit; just as if both had passed through the grave, and we stood at god's feet, equal as we are!(p.250)

The last line of this Jane's fury too has multi-meanings. It answers not to the queries of self-imposed morals of the foreword, but also to patriarchal institutions. It provides the often quoted-line to feminists that women are one-half of the sky. They are born equal. Jane in order to prove that she is a rock amid tempests refuses to live with Rochester under the same roof only because her self-esteem couldn't allow her to do it. She takes on the unknown path and literally succumbs before she was saved by turns of fate in the form of her cousins. While Jane is often inspired by women who share her views, two women contrast sharply with Jane, which emphasizes both her free-thinking tendencies and her role as a woman unconstrained by societal demands. Blanche Ingram and Bessie are two female characters in the novel who have given in to those demands. Blanche Ingram is probably the best example of a woman who does not fall under the category of "feminist," due to her misplaced self-worth. Blanche is not deeply in love with Rochester, yet she wishes to marry him because of his wealth. As Jane attests, Blanche "cannot truly like him, or not like him with true affection. If she did, she need not coin her smiles so lavishly, flash her glances so unremittingly, manufacture airs so elaborate, graces so multitudinous" (Bronte 164). These actions, along with her fancy garments and constant obsession with her appearance, show that Blanche places her self-worth on two components of "marriageability": her physical beauty and the social status that she has the potential to obtain. This stands in sharp contrast to Jane, who prides herself on being independent from a man and not defining herself by the riches Mr. Rochester offers her.

Jane gets a rich legacy from her uncle in Madeira which in turn makes possible her reunion with Rochester and also redefines her relationship in patriarchal structures. "An independent woman now", Jane proceeds to lay her terms before male dominated society. She finds mockery in other women's independence, be it Eliza's, Georgia's or her cousins. She had refused to be Rochester's mistress then St. John's mistress of Indian schools; now she becomes her own mistress and proposes Rochester in a ground style:

If you won't let me live with you, I can build a house of my own close up to your door... I will be your neighbor, your nurse, your house-keeper. I shall be your companion...you shall not be left desolate, so long as I live. (p.556)

The novel gives voice to the marginalized class and gender, grinded into the exploitative feudalistic structure of the society. Altick argues:

By the beginning of the nineteenth century, the powerful concept of 'refinement' prescribed that all women outside the working class abstain from gainful employment except in cases of extreme necessity. It was such case that resulted in a few Victorian becoming professional writers.

In fact, Jane's relationship with Mr. Rochester is a constant struggle for her to maintain her own individual identity (Ea-

gleton 493-494). In other words, she plays the role of servant yet makes it perfectly clear to him that she does not consider herself below him in terms of spiritual qualities. She insists to him that she is more than her social status, saying: "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 222). When Mr. Rochester refers to her as his equal and likeness, it appears that Jane has made headway in asserting her equality with the master. In some respects, Jane finds herself almost superior to Mr. Rochester morally, for Rochester's sin of keeping Bertha Mason a secret gives rise to questions about the quality of his character. Jane is comparatively moral, as evidence by her refusal to become nothing more

than his mistress. Rochester's dilapidated state at the end of the novel not only displays the deterioration of his physical body, but perhaps is also a symbol of the weakening of his soul. Here it seems that he is now truly equal, or even less equal to Jane, who has developed her soul to its potential by finally discovering how to balance her independence with passion. After this journey of self-discovery, she can finally "rehumanise" him following his moral transgressions. (Eagleton 493-496).

In short, *Jane Eyre* is a novel that far ahead of her time to raise the question pertaining to gender and class oppression. A strong call for the social reforms, *Jane Eyre* can be considered as a fictional version of J.S mills seminal work *The Subjection of Women* (1869).

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