IJCRT.ORG ISSN : 2320-2882

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

Reality And Quest For Identity In *Jane Eyre* Through The Lens Of Feminism: A Study

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Abstract: Charlotte Bronte's renowned novel, *Jane Eyre* deals with the social inequities common in the 19th Victorian England, particularly regarding gender, class, and morality. The depiction of the character Jane Eyre from the Victorian period starkly contrasts with the male-dominated culture and moral hypocrisy of the time. Jane Eyre, the protagonist, is an ardently independent woman who confronts the inflexible class structure in her quest for genuine love, self-development, and equality. Due to her status as an orphan, lacking both family and social standing, Jane is regarded with disdain by those around her. As a courageous lady, she advocates for her convictions and is not afraid to distinguish herself for her passion. So, the novel *Jane Eyre* explores feminist themes and offers a genuine critique of the societal inequities in 19th century England. This paper examines Jane's feminist development in the context of her persistent struggle for identity, independence, equality, and self-respect.

Key Terms: Feminism, Patriarchy, Victorian Morality, Gender Inequality, Class, 'Angel in the House'

1. INTRODUCTION

Feminist literary criticism, which was originated during the 1960s women's movement, has subsequently developed into several subfields. A belief in the actuality of women's subjugation is a prevalent theme throughout various interpretations of feminist movement. The movement primarily concentrates on literary representations of women. Feminists should perceive feminist criticism not as apart from the movement's primary objectives, but as an influential instrument for transforming individuals' daily attitude and behaviours. According to feminist thoughts, all individuals should have the right to vote irrespective of their gender. All feminist theories commence with the assertion that women are oppressed, discriminated and exist within a hierarchical society. The subjugation of women is ubiquitous and relentless. Women encounter historical and cultural inequities relative to men not only in the political, economic, cultural, intellectual, knowledge, conceptual, and ethical domains. This discrepancy permeates the domestic realm of the household. Patriarchal feminism is neither universal nor static, as it is a construct shaped by cultural and societal factors. Historically and culturally, men have predominantly occupied positions of power as rulers and oppressors. Despite their individuality, women are often marginalized due to oppression or gender bias.

Jane Eyre, written by Charlotte Bronte, was first published in 1847 under the pseudo name of Currer Bell. Subsequent sequels and third editions were produced in reaction to the novel's extraordinary success upon its release. Over 150 years post-publication, the work is largely regarded as a masterpiece of English literature in the realm of feminism. It holds a prominent position in the Western literary canon regarding popularity, admiration, and discourse. Some critics have overviewed *Jane Eyre* to a cult figure within the field of women's studies. During the Victorian period, women in literature are frequently portrayed as fragile, naive, and submissive domestic entities, lacking agency or fortitude of character. The

appearance of women, their attire, and their social status significantly influence their perception. Thus, the submissive status of women in the Victorian period is apparent everywhere. The character of Jane Eyre represents Charlotte Bronte's method of undermining the Victorian archetype of this ideal woman. As Jane moves from Gateshead Hall to Moor House, she is shown as a determined, autonomous, nonconformist, and rebellious young woman who is all for a quest for identity in life. Jane Eyre, our protagonist, is bereaved and endures hardship and stern realities from her childhood onwards. She cultivates resilience and strives for her survival. Her understanding of life is influenced by the setting of her formative years. Her life experiences cultivate her into a self-assured young woman possessing commendable ideals and extensive knowledge. Hence, Jane Eyre is an unparalleled figure in one word. Fearless in advocating for herself, she perseveres autonomously. She is intelligent, industrious, and resilient, consistently maintaining her dignity even in adverse circumstances. She exhibits courage in confronting challenges. Jane Eyre possesses a substantial heart for an individual of her diminutive stature. Through her audacious and unwavering disobedience and pursuit, Jane Eyre ultimately achieves the respect, autonomy, equality, authentic love and finally an identity. She has consistently sought all in the name of feminist ideals. In a patriarchal society, every woman, such as Jane, must surmount oppression (at Gateshead), deprivation (at Lowood), insanity (at Thornfield), and desolation (at Marsh End).

2. LIFE AT GATESHEAD HALL

Charlotte Bronte immediately expresses her dissatisfaction in her portrayal of Jane, revealing that Jane experiences homesickness and loneliness during her childhood. This little girl exhibits both independence and defiance. Visitors to Gateshead Hall readily remark that she is not Reed. Despite, Jane's uncle Mr. Reed at his deathbed requests to regard Jane as her own kid, Mrs. Reed excludes her from all family activities. Jane is subjected to harassment even by her older cousin, John Reed who asserts dominance over the household and claims ownership of all its contents. He reprimands her and casts her to the ground, causing suffering and fury. She replies, "*You are like a murderer—you are like a slave-driver—you are like the Roman emperors!"* (Bronte, 12). This is how Jane is reacting to John's physical attack on her. Jane here responds to John's behavior by comparing him to three figures that embody violence, oppression and injustice. Ultimately, she recognizes the necessity to combat her fate and articulate her emotions. As a punishment, Jane is confined to the infamous Red Room overnight by her angry aunt. Mrs. Reed says *"Take her away to the red-room, and lock her in there"* (Bronte, 13). The Victorian society used to repress women and restrict them like this way through both physical and mental tortures. Jane, like other women, faces the grim alternatives of starvation or mental instability. Jane confronts her anxieties over solitude and her superstitions. She faces her subconscious demons of fury and hatred as well. Following the Red Room night, Jane experiences empowerment and acquires the guts to express her thoughts.

3. LIFE AT LOWOOD SCHOOL

To get rid of Jane, Mrs. Reed sends her in an orphanage. During Mr. Brocklehurst's visit to Mrs. Reed, Jane is referred to by her aunt as a "liar girl". The punch inflicts injury on Jane and provokes her anger. She possesses the confidence to confront Mrs. Reed on her falsehoods, stating, *"I am glad you are no relation of mine: I will never call you aunt again as long as I live. I will never come to see 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, 52). Lowood, the orphanage school, is a nightmare despite its benevolence. Jane's audacity and bravery in expressing her viewpoint are demonstrated here in this stage of her life. Lowood is less oppressive than Gateshead; nonetheless, Jane remains constrained. Mr. Brocklehurst embodies the "Victorian super-ego", representing a significant phallic symbol. He administers Lowood institution, a girls' school funded by donations. Mr. Brocklehurst suppresses the school's female educators and students by constraining their individuality and imposing a social hierarchy. Religious organisations frequently intimidate defiant women with the prospect of damnation. Mrs. Reed characterises Jane's assertion regarding the avoidance of damnation-*"I must keep in good health and not die"* (Bronte, 46). The quotation asserts that Jane possesses autonomy. By challenging patriarchal norms, she recognizes that mere being is her salvation from damnation. Although the majority of the women at Lowood institution perish, Jane endures. Mr. Brocklehurst compels Jane to stand on a stool before the class and instructs her classmates to shun her due to her alleged dishonesty. This novel critiques the Victorian notion that corporeal punishment can purify the soul by empathizing with the rebellious youngster. Helen Burns, Jane's mate, is unable to compel Jane to comply following their friendship. Miss Scatcherd's

admonition on Helen's impoliteness and unkempt nails unsettles her. Helen Burns is a confidant, in contrast to Jane. She withstands life's injustices and yearns for the equity of heaven. Helen possesses Jane's unwavering adoration; nonetheless, Jane struggles to comprehend how Helen manages the criticism from her lecturers. Jane says, *"And if I were in your place I should dislike her; I should resist her. If she struck me with that rod, I should get it from her hand; I should break it under her nose"* (Bronte, 82). Upon witnessing Helen being reprimanded for failing to wash her hands due to the chilly water, Jane becomes incensed and defiant. Helen implores Jane to relinquish the past, overlook previous grievances, and concentrate on the present. Helen nurtures, counsels, nourishes, and embraces Jane in a maternal manner. Helen is unsuitable for Jane as she solely desires to die and attain paradise. Helen behaves angelically at home. Extreme portrayals of "angel" and "monster" that male authors have constructed for women writers require scrutiny, integration, and transcendence; these dichotomies inhibit female creativity. Following Helen's demise, Jane may ultimately liberate herself from the masculine vision of the ideal woman and the "angel-in-the-house" archetype, signifying the departure of the "angel." Another perspective is that the novelist seeks to evade the archetype of the housewife angel. Bronte's mockery of Mr. Brocklehurst's Christian doctrinal instruction, which Little Jane vehemently opposes, revolves around "original sin". Jane experiences profound frustration when her cherished teacher leaves Lowood to marry and fails to adjust. She challenges the authorities by posting advertisements for a governess and withdraws from school to work at Thornfield.

4. LIFE AT THORNFIELD HALL

After Miss Temple's departure, Jane's internal agitation emerged, and she longs to explore the world beyond Lowood. Upon completing her college education, Jane dedicates two years to teaching at Lowood. As Miss Temple departs, Jane finds herself left in my natural element, beginning to feel the stirring of old emotions, leaving with her "the serene atmosphere". But at Thornfield, Jane experiences restlessness prior to Mr. Rochester's arrival due to a lack of intellectual engagement. Women are expected to exhibit composure, while they experience emotions akin to those of men. They require a domain to engage in and develop their abilities, akin to their counterparts. They experience excessive constraint and stagnation, akin to men. It is myopic of their more fortunate counterparts to assert that women should be confined to making puddings, knitting socks, playing the piano, and embroidering. Women desire a feminist utopian depiction of gender roles during the patriarchal Victorian era. The feminist insurrection of Jane Eyre is perceived by Victorian critics as "irreligious discontent with the social hierarchy" due to her calls for liberty and equality. The quotation reflects the author's feminist convictions and her protagonist's desire for a more unfettered existence. Jane experiences a reduction in her anxiousness at the entrance of the Master of Thornfield. Mr. Rochester, the nefarious prince from Jane's fairy tale, evokes the essence of Byron. He makes a spectacular entrance in the novel. The rider appears mounted on a colossal horse. Rochester embodies patriarchal authority. Due to his deficiency in the strength characteristic of a Byronic hero, Rochester requires Jane's assistance following his injury sustained from a horse fall. Furthermore, he will exhibit increased vulnerability towards his covertly deranged spouse. Jane experiences a compelling attraction to the Master of Thornfield following their encounter, resulting in profound feelings of allure and influence. At times, Jane perceives him more as a relative than a master. Her formerly limited destiny expands; the voids in her life are filled; her physical health enhances; she gains muscle and power; and she stops mourning for her relatives. Evening dialogues with Rochester fulfill a previously unmet need in Jane's life. Jane and Rochester possess intellectual parity; yet, they endure several injustices. The power imbalance complicates Jane's connection with Rochester. A pronounced power disparity exists between Jane and Rochester due to his twenty-year seniority, more life experience, privileged upbringing, riches, and his status as her master. During their nocturnal discussions, Jane confronts Rochester, asserting, *"I don't think, sir, you have a 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, 204). So, Jane is exhibiting her authority and refraining from pursuing his friendship independently. They embody a master-employee dynamic. In their conversations, Jane contests Rochester's authority, even his assertions of superior age and expertise. Rochester, possessing two decades of experience and remarkable strength, seems to embody the archetype of a "father-man". To mitigate her fatherless upbringing, Jane's subconscious mind may pursue a paternal archetype. Rochester undermines Jane's self-esteem by disseminating tales of his impending marriage to Blanche Ingram. Jane recognizes that society and men prioritize attractive women over those deemed unattractive, and Blanche exemplifies this trait. Beauty is prioritized over intelligence, since women are perceived as objects of admiration rather than subjects of comprehension. Rochester attempts to exploit Jane by proposing marriage, despite his existing marital status, which precludes him from

remarrying. On the eve of her wedding, Jane reconciles with her social standing and acknowledges her financial dependence on Rochester. Rochester highlights that a "sultan" might bestow upon a slave his gold and gems. Jane, fearing dependency and subjugation, declines a comfortable existence as Rochester's mistress following the dissolution of their marriage. Jane is resolutely autonomous and will not lower herself to anyone's degree of disrespect. At Thornfield, Jane's initial insanity in the Red Room reemerges through Bertha Mason, the malevolent woman who is Rochester's deranged, estranged spouse. The female archetype of the angel-in-the-house is exemplified by her. In Thornfield's attic, Jane's "hunger, rebellion, and rage"—her irrationality—converge with Bertha's rationale; Bertha, a Creole, is an outcast ostracized by society. Miss Temple assists Jane, who represents Bertha, in managing her own irrationality and anger during her time at Lowood. Bertha's presence obstructs Jane and Rochester's marriage, symbolizing Jane's repressed wrath and ultimately contributing to her sorrow. Upon Jane's departure from Thornfield, where she discovers the affection of relatives, stability, community, and self-realization she had long sought, the demon-woman relinquishes her to liberate Jane.

5. LIFE AT MARSH END

After hours of searching for sustenance, Jane implores for remnants as she leaves Thornfield in search of job. She experiences a pressure on her fragile pride. She arrives at Moor House after three days of extreme destitution, in a state of terror and disarray. The Rivers Diana and Mary attentively care for her. She becomes increasingly resilient over time. She conceals her background and identity. She identifies herself as Jane Eliot. St. John Rivers, along with Diana and Mary, persist in providing her with joy and secure work for Jane. Jane believes he is genuinely pious. His fervent church talks irritate her. His aspiration for the establishment of a modest girls' school in the village has been communicated to her. Upon maturation, Jane resolves to pursue a career in education. Despite Rochester's dreams persistently tormenting her, she is relishing her new existence. Unexpectedly, Jane receives $20,000 from her uncle. Upon discovering that St. John, Diana, and Mary are her first cousins, she allocates her inheritance into four equal shares. Although it may be lawful, it can never be justly mine, she states, rejecting John Rivers' proposal to join him as a missionary in India. Furthermore, he intends to marry her. Jane observes the valiant woman who adores Rochester and rejects St. John once again. She states, “I scorn your idea of love.” She indeed disapproves of St. John's insincere attitude and proposition. St. John Rivers manipulates her. She is compliant and follows all his directives. He proposes her, but she rejects him. Against all odds, she advocates for herself.

6. LIFE AT FERNDEAN MANOR

Jane gets her uncle's fortune and embarks on an independent life following the Rivers tragedy. She senses her emotions intensifying upon hearing the fierce cry of Rochester's grief. She prepares for her return to Thornfield. Upon her return to Thornfield, she is confronted with the dismay of discovering it transformed into a "blackened ruin". The fire and Bertha's demise are both disclosed to her. Jane has a blend of compassion and embarrassment upon initially seeing Rochester, a transformed individual bearing both visible and concealed wounds. She has returned; nevertheless, he still unable to accept it. Whenever he dreams of her, he disregards it as merely a dream. He presents another of his concepts to her. She readily agrees to meet him. Jane is now certain that this is both legal and appealing. In this instance, Jane demonstrates her maturity and self-control; she is neither a defiant individual nor submissive to Rochester, in contrast to her current state. Finally, she gains the identity of Rochester's spouse at Ferndean Manor and quest for identity if fulfilled.

7. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the narrative of *Jane Eyre* illustrates that even within a patriarchal society; Jane remains authentic and she pursues self-dependence and self-realization. She undergoes personal maturation overnight as a result of her harrowing experience in the Red Room. Having encountered genuine dread, she is now emboldened to confront patriarchal society. Miss Temple instructs her in the regulation of her anger. The demise of Helen and Bertha liberates Jane from the patriarchal construct of womanhood, which represents both the devil and the angel-in-the-house archetypes. In her pursuit of liberation from patriarchal

society, and identity as an independent, Jane confronts and overcomes the following obstacles: madness in the Red Room and Thornfield; deprivation at Lowood and throughout her journey to Marsh End; and subjugation by the Reed family and Mr. Brocklehurst. Last but not the least, Marsh End marks the border where Jane's pursuit of autonomy and identity merges in her life.

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