



## SUBVERSION OF FEMININE IDENTITY WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO CHARLOTTE BRONTE'S JANE EYRE: A BRIEF ANALYSIS

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### Abstract

This paper is an attempt to understand a multi-layered ideology 'feminism' and how it can be considered as a social theory and political movement which is primarily appraised and incentivized by the women. This article also throws light upon Charlotte Bronte's **Jane Eyre**, where the central character Jane finds freedom and happiness by reconciling successfully the dualities of spirit and flesh, reason and emotion, reason and faith and secular love by which she finds emotional satisfaction without losing her identity.

"Feminism" was considered to be a unique concept which got spread initially in as far back as the eighteenth century and became widely known only in the twentieth century giving rise to economic, sociological and political forces that effected naturally far reaching changes in the conventional structure of the society, which the literary writers started reflecting in their works. The so-called writings lay emphasis on the issues and problems of women and the female voice of their rights and rightful place in society. Truly speaking, the Pre-Industrial Revolution Period, according to Theodor Gottliet, "not simply neglected woman but deliberately suppressed her regarding all her rights as a human being and her voice was considered at all, not only in public and family life but also regarding all her rights as a human being and her voice was considered at all, not only in public and family life but also regarding her own personal life" (Richard 30). This was historically known all over the world especially in Europe. The conditions prevailing in Europe no longer treated woman as an equal partner for man. On the other hand, "woman were coddled into lazyness and educated to be ignorant" (Hippel 30).

Generally speaking, woman has been reacting rather consistently and even sharply against all sorts of oppression and suppression levelled against them. The curious minds of the writers and thinkers of the Eighteenth Century Intellectual Enlightenment sharply focussed on the various issues, especially the nature, role and plight of women. In this respect, the Intellectual Enlightenment became primarily responsible for the genesis of feminism, in spite of this subject being focussed upon in the later ages/periods. The philosophical thinkers like Hippel were strong in their view stating that "there is no fundamental difference between a woman's and a man's abilities", and Hippel did a lot to the growth of feminism in Germany. The French Revolution was another important force in the development of Feminism. For women played a significant role in the bread-riots and street battles of the Revolution for winning success in capturing political power from the hands of kings by masses in France.

Mary Woolstancraft, through her work namely **A Vindication of the Rights of Women** (1792), did solely inspire equal educational opportunities for women by challenging man's age old belief that only man is capable of reasoning and intellectual abilities. By arguing that as women are kept in unnatural subjugation, they appear to be incapable of reasoning and when given the chance of education, woman would, no doubt, realises and release her innate abilities and become wise like man and would rather become "truly useful member of society" (P 13). Another notable force responsible for the growth of feminism is the Religious Revival, Protestantism considering woman's individuality as man's for campaigning for woman's rights in the Nineteenth century. Till date 18<sup>th</sup> century and even in the early Nineteenth century, women, politically, economically and socially, lacked all freedom. Economically and educationally prevented from holding positions and professions, and they had only "dependent status" like children (P 23) and even the right to education was denied to women. Only the industrial Revolution and Mill's essay on "The Subjection of Women" and other events there upon paved the way for the rise of women's emancipation from all shackles in the nineteenth century. The woman's efforts to flight for rights were greatly influenced by Stuart Mill's publication of his essay namely "The Subjection of Women" which focused on the feminist issues longing for liberal individualism. Mill advocated rather strongly individual liberty to men, especially to women enabling them to raise their voice against the subjection of women for "the very subjection of women impedes the very progress of the human race" says John Stuart Mill who suggested strongly self-will, self-control and self-development for women, instead of yielding themselves to the control of other equals.

Feminism began to grow out of this situation and it "became necessary for the Government to reconsider its policy in favor of the women's rights" (Alray 60). Feminism then demanded formal and legal equality for the free and unhindered development of the feminine personality, aiming at replacement of restrictive laws by self-restraints and demanded woman's emancipation from all unwanted ties as an integral factor in the progress of a society. It was clearly advocated in such a way



to bring home the point that “feminism which basically means the doctrine of equal rights of women based on the equality of sexes, did not direct its fight only for economic security, but was closely interwoven with the changing political situation shifting balance of social forces in every stage of its development”(P 27) Feminism moved the woman’s function from bringing up children to educating men to higher civilization in the contemporary society, thereby making them possess the spirit of self-restraint, self-sacrifice, fidelity, purity, mothering, nursing, teaching, counseling, sense of individual liberty etc., besides being a fundamental aspects/features of the Victorian Ideology. The presentation of woman in literature was the result of this kind of change taking place in the society, especially in the feminine social set up. The consistent theme in the novels till the Victorian age as to what an ideal woman should be was replaced by the new concept of the heroine and the notable writers who contributed towards the new image of woman are the Bronte sisters, Mrs. Gaskell, Thackeray, George Eliot, Dickens etc., They all joined hands in exposing the strength of ‘independent single woman’, ‘fallen women’, ‘aspiring women’ and so on. The insight and critical power of such novelists formed the basis for literary feminism of the 1880’s and 1890’s.

Writers like the Bronte sisters used their personal experiences and conflicts to articulate the frustration, dilemmas, loneliness, of the self-supporting, intelligent, woman for artistic and literary expression in their works and writers like Charlotte Bronte rose to eminence as writers with rebellious cry for feminist ideology and women’s rights for equality and freedom of thought expression and execution. The writings of women writers challenged the concept of the male characters in this novel. Traditionally, the hero has to be a male and heroism was a male and heroism was a male phenomena. Women writers began to give heroic roles to female characters. Instead of the hero doing great acts of heroism and the heroine assisting him in his actions, the female characters were presented almost as heroes setting out on the path of self-discovery, quest for identity, achievement of goals, attainment of vision and so on. The heroines were pictured as the heroic persons undergoing psychological and spiritual attainment in their journey from rags to riches, search for familial identity, risking change and challenges, exhibiting new strength, initiating a new path of self-discovery, aiming at wisdom and independent action and other ingredients of heroic life, with the sole intention of exposing the hypocrisy and injustice done in treating women in the male-dominated society.

Literary survey of the periods prior to the Victorian period presented a woman as passive, submissive and obedient to the whims of man and woman-the heroine as primary character and woman-the heroine as the secondary character. But the Victorian period saw the remarking of woman’s image on a high pedestal in fiction due to the cultural upheaval characterizing the period. Writers like Bronte sisters, Thackeray, George Eliot started exhibiting a good deal of feminine consciousness projected in their novels. They were continuous in “Challenging their society’s ideologies ... about female desires and goals” (Foster 8). Women novelists did not even enjoy full equality in the composition of literary pieces like the male authors. When Charlotte Bronte appeared on the literary scene, the trend got changed paving the way for women writers to exhibit their talents for raising their voice of freedom, equality, integrity and public exposure through delineation of female characters in their novels.

The Bronte sisters, no doubt, occupied some significant status as writers in the field of British Fiction. Scott’s historical novels and the poetic creations of Byron influenced the Bronte’s. The aspects of exile, violence and romantic love in the life of Byron not only impressed them but also inspired them to pour out their ideas in their works in favor of feminine issues. A concern for the plight of women, formation of good family, maintaining of good family ties seemed to be the subject matter of the Bronte sisters’ novels –in **Agnus Grey**, **Jane Eyre**, **Shirley**, **Villette** and **The Professor**. As novelist they broke through their isolation to a contact with the outside world and their novels have ample experience of the contemporary problems women face in the society. One effect of isolation upon their works was an individual and original response to their experience. Their individual approach to life enabled them to see familiar and commonplace things as something new and strange.

Charlotte Bronte’s and her sister’s experience as spinsters, together with the inner conflict she experienced between what she saw as her domestic duty and desire to do something else made them write uniquely, making them understand and articulate the frustrations of their contemporaries. In the words of Shirley Foster;

“More boldly than most of her follow-novelists, freed from restricting images and assumptions. Her challenge is especially effective because she formulates it from within a conventional framework, arguing for new approaches to women’s traditional needs. Inspired by her own awareness of the dichotomies of female experience, she is openly ambivalent about such needs. Like so many mid-Victorian women, Bronte experienced the sense of a divided self” (P 71).



Charlotte Bronte was able to create a range of woman characters whose experience and consciousness in many ways typify the dilemmas of her age. Strong, independent minded women like Shirley, self-supporting but intensely lonely women like Jane Eyre and Lucy Snowe, dependent, protected, yet intelligent and frustrated women like Caroline Helstone are vividly portrayed by Charlette Bronte with her great artistic skill in her novels.

Charlette Bronte's very first published novel is Jane Eyre which was regarded by some as a protest against social conventionalism and inequalities and a political order. Though the novel challenges the contemporary attitude, its opposition occurs in the context of two basic assumptions namely, a belief in the primary of love, and a conviction that the institution of marriage provides the only means of true emotional fulfillment for women. In her assessment of Bronte's achievement, Margaret Cliphant commenting on this says that the heroines of Charlette Bronte, like herself demand a share in "the natural openings of life" (P 24) and want to have their hands on the reins of common life for building up the world so as to link the generations with one another in their sequence. In her opinion, "marriage was the only state which procured this" (P 47). In **Jane Eyre**, Charlotte Bronte translated her firm belief in a woman's "self-sacrificing love and disinterested devotion in artistic terms" (P 278).

Truly speaking, **Jane Eyre** is primarily a novel of the inner life of woman's world, love-story, a Cinderella Fable, a Blue-beard mystery, an autobiography from a forlorn childhood to a happy marriage. This novel makes its appeal first and last to "the unchanging human heart". (Tillotson 286) it may be termed as a text to declare female emancipation and a rebellious and unorthodox spirit of the society. The influence of **Jane Eyre**, both social and literary, also proves its importance in its own time. On the lower level, it started a base for plain heroines and ugly masterful heroes. On the higher level, it affected the autobiographical children in Dickens's later novels and soothed the path for Mrs. Gaskell, Trollope and George Eliot. Bronte made the most daring effort to explore the labyrinth of a woman's soul.

Charlotte Bronte took a vow in her life to create a heroine plain, simple and yet interesting and attractive. Her creation of Jane Eyre is a proof of challenging heroine In **Jane Eyre**. C. H. Lewis, talking of Jane Eyre, comments thus:

"She is not pretty, she is not extraordinarily clever,  
Yet you admire, you love her- love her  
for the strong will, honest mind, loving heart  
and peculiar but fascinating person" (P 63)

All critics agree that **Jane Eyre** is depicted with poetic intensity.

The Quakerish governess plays a vital role in the novel. Besides the melo- dramatic plot, the inner story of the novel is the story of the heroine, Jane Eyre, the sad tale of the little orphan's long struggle to attain independence, love, admiration, respect and regards without forfeiting her principles. The novel presents conflicts between a woman's empirical and the repressive dualistic myths associated with sex-role definitions. Jane Eyre is intelligent and knowledgeable about her life situations. She wants "incident, life and feeling, and liberty, excitement, enjoyment" but she also wants to be "realistic, do her duty and to live a virtuous, Christian life" (pope 165). She has a very strong character which helps her at times to get over great temptations of evil.

One can get the impression of an extraordinary heroine, excluded from love and affection, isolated and is at odds with her society. Charlotte Bronte is good at the art of getting into the inner world of her heroine's mind completely, which is considered a distinctive feature of her literary art. Despite the environment predicament, Jane Eyre aspires for liberty, respect and affection which all keep surging violently in her heart. When the kinsfolk, the Reeds, shun her from their society and entertainment, she is sad, morose, but she quietly withdraws to a curtained window to amuse herself with her imagination. Looking back on her early life t Gates head-Hall, she comments on Mrs. Reed's position as an aunt who has been forced to adopt her:

"It must have been irksome to find herself bound by a hard-wrung pledge to stand in the stead of a parent to a strange child she could not love, and to see an uncongenial alien, permanently intruder on her own family group" (JE 48)

One of the ways in which Jane Eyre tries to get over the sense of alienation is by resorting to "her favorite books and pictures on which she could build fancies" Thomas Bewick's History of British Birds is the book which makes her happy in her own world as she sits hidden in the window seat. She is found concentrating on gloomy vignettes and her enjoyment is studying



the desolate scenes in short-lived as John Reed seizes the book and flings it at her. That she is “dragged out from her retreat and bullied and insulted”, causing a bruise on her head against the stone, makes her “a terrified concerned animal”. The behavior of the impudent cousin, “cut her flesh and bled”, producing sharp pain. But “her terror passed its climax” and instead of breaking into bitter weeping as expected, her “other feelings” take their upper hand. She fights back with “intellectual and imaginative resourcefulness”. She calls him ‘wicked and cruel’. She goes to the extent of comparing him to “a murderer”, “a tyrant”, “an evil Roman emperor”. She violently springs upon him like a mad cat charging its enemy. John Reed taunts her, reminding her of poor status and position by saying “you are a dependent”, “you have no money, your father left you none” (JE 42). She also happens to hear the gossip of the servants regarding her position which hurts her feelings rather deeply. Jane is already a child with status, friend and is now without a loving guardian. She is left alone but felt elated because it is the first victory she has gained. But the fascinating feature of her personality is that the helpless position does not decrease her pride nor dampen her rebellious spirit. But while she analyses her “fierce pleasure”, she also realizes that as a child, she cannot give vent to her furious feelings as done now. Utterly sensitive by nature, she thinks that she has to experience the pang of remorse and the chill of reaction after the let-go of her feelings. She concludes that her “captors are not monsters (and) their point of view is a valid one”.

After the passionate scene with John Reed, Mrs. Reed shuts her up in the Red-room, a room where her uncle was said to have breathed his last. Her little mind is terrified with the darkness and coldness of the room. Added to this, her childish superstitious beliefs in the ghostly tales of Bessie aggravate her fears and the terrors of imagination increase the agony of her imprisonment in the red room. Thus, the lonely, frightful Jane faints. But “no severe or prolonged bodily illness followed this incident of the red-room -...” because with her will power, she determines not to fall ill. Mrs. Reed informs Jane that rebellious will brings only more unhappiness and that her situation may improve only on condition of “perfect submission and stillness” (JE 45)

Unbearable loneliness and intense thirst for human love are predominant sentiments found in the heroines of Charlotte Bronte. The same is the case with Jane. Sometimes she is over sentimental about human love. With the ardor of an adult, she passionately cries out to her aunt Reed as;

“You think I have no feelings and that  
I can do without one bit of love or  
Kindness; but I can not live so; and  
You have no pity” (JE 56)

Jane feels elated about her verbal triumph over her aunt;

“I was left there alone-winner of the field.  
It was the hardest battle I fought and  
the first victory I gained” (P 69)

no sympathy is shown by Mrs. Reed and Jane is locked in again and soon becomes unconscious. When she revives from the fainting fit, she sees the apothecary Mr. Lloyd besides her and feels “an inexpressible relief” and soothing conviction of protection and security” since he was an individual not belonging to Gateshead and though being a stranger to her. Jane is not without opposition for expressing her individuality. Such acts of growing into maturity from its own strength are like “grass pushup between stones”. When Jane rebels against the Reeds, she escapes from the psychological imprisonment and asserts her own worth and individuality and becomes for the first time truly heroic and human in all respects.

After the Red-Room incident, Jane asks Bessie to bring **Gulliver’s Travels** from the library. The imaginary world of “the little fields, hoses and trees, the diminutive people, tiny cows of Lilli put and the monster cats, the tower-like man and women of Broddnag, which formerly delighted her, seen now grotesque and horrifying. After her interview with Brocklehurst, she takes a book on some Arabian tales and finds she can make no sense of the subject as “her own thoughts swim between” “herself and the page she has usually found fascinating” (Wheeler 30). Jane’s responses to her favorite books-are directly attributable to obsessions and anxieties which are engendered in a hostile environment. Mrs. Reed and Brocklehurst share hardened prejudices and narrow ideas fixed on which Jane is expected to base her own judgement” (JE 67) Jane, when calm and tranquil, exhibits marvelous capacity of realism and prudence to analyze the reasons why her aunt is constantly impatient with her presence. She realizes and says;

“had I been a nanguine, brilliant, careless, exacting, handsome, romping, child-though equally dependent and friendless, her aunt, cousins and even the servants may have endured her presence cheerfully” (JE 47).



Quite passionate, proud, rebellious and indicative, Jane makes herself unappealing at times. Though she is an interesting and fascinating character, she is not found to be a child whom one would love to fondle. She strangely declares that human being must love something and in the death of worthier objects of affection, find a pleasure in loving and cherishing a faded graven image and due to such attitudes she does not fail to elicit compassion from the readers. Though desperate and hungry for love, Jane is certainly not ready to exchange her present comfortable dwelling for one with love amidst poverty. Quite candidly, she confesses that she was not heroic enough to purchase liberty at the cost of class.

In Jane-the child, Charlotte Bronte presents a picture of a child whose birthright to receive affection is robbed off and the individual figure of a heart hungry for love and affection. The poor orphan child is barren of comfort. Her sense of alienation intensifies as she grows. On her arrival at Lowood, she tries to decipher the kind of clues which one would look for in a new place. She looks round the “convent-like garden, and then up at the house; a large building, half of which seemed gray and old other half quite now” (P 81). As she surveys the new part of the building, her reading of the hose changes from the metaphorical to the literal, for she who bears an inscription: “Lowood Institution this portion was rebuilt in A.D- By Naomi Brocklehurst, of Brocklehurst Hall, in this country” (JE 81). In the Lowood section of the novel **Jane Eyre**, Charlotte Bronte explores the implications of another contemporary image of her sex and again Jane’s questions create uneasiness to others. At school, Jane does encounter the creed of angelic womanhood in both its positive and negative aspects. The school itself is described as a convent or church and its regime is forbiddingly monastic. The vehement; impulsive hunger of her nature is not satisfied at Lowood; it is only assuaged.

During her eight year’s stay at Lowood, Jane takes advantage of “an excellent education” but never ventures beyond the hills which surround the school. When Miss. Temple leases the place for good, Jane’s adventurous spirit reawakens:

“I went to my window, and looked out.... Tired of the routine of eight years in one afternoon I desired liberty; for liberty, I uttered a prayer; I seemed scattered on the wind the faintly blowing... if not, liberty, at least a new servitude” (P 117)

In many places, Jane’s self-reliance is responsible to conditions rather than chosen creed. Her exertions on her own behalf are a defense against self-extinction on threatening circumstances. At Gateshead and Lowood, self-preservation motivates her to challenge authority; her decision to leave Lowood is caused as much by her feeling that the reason for tranquility, has gone with Miss. Temple’s removal, as by a desire to move into ‘the real world’ with its varied field of hopes and fears, of sensations and excitements” (P 118)

Charlotte Bronte examines more closely the roles of women in social and sexual contexts. As at Gateshead and Lowood, Jane is once more confronted by the influential images of femininity. Rochester’s craze of fashionable lady guests illustrates the social importance attached to women’s appearances. Blanche Ingram, in particular, embodies her own avowed doctrine that loveliness is “the special prerogative of women- her legitimate heritage ... an ugly woman is a blot on the fair face of creation” (JE 208). Though Jane is aware of her deficiency in this respect, she “sometimes regretted that I was not handsomer... I felt it a misfortune that I was so little, so pale, and had features so irregular and so marked” (P 208)

Through portrayal of heroines, Charlotte Bronte also challenges traditional notions of woman behavior within sexual relationships. Though emotionally bound up with Rochester, Jane does not allow custom to regulate their intimacy and rejects the artificialities of formal courtship. For her, their union is to be founded on mutual respect instead of on the “pathos of sentiment” and “turtle-dove sensibility” (P 302) Jane is quite self-critical, frank, out spoken, is that she deserves to be considered as an individual and not merely as a representative of her sex. When Rochester is attracted towards from other women. He persistently views her from a conventional point of view. He repeatedly identifies her as a fairy, an elf, a spirit and an angel, but Jane is prompted to assert her own definition of herself developed from observation and experience. She had already rejected the image of the Christian spiritual female at Lowood and now she rejects the secular version of it:

“I am not an angel... and I will not be one till I die;  
I will be myself. Mr. Rochester, you must  
neither expect nor exact anything  
celestial of me...

I head rather be a thing than an angel” (P 291)

Jane’s doubts about her forthcoming marriage are based on her past experiences. In her opinion, human beings never enjoy complete happiness in this world. Though Jane loves Rochester sincerely, she rejects his offerings of jewels and clothes for





she thinks they are “symbols of servitude”. Jane’s recurrent dream of a child who obscurely threatens her suggests fear of child birth after marriage. Jane’s religious faith is tied up with her commitment to independence and self-regard. Even though she agrees to marry Rochester, she tells him to cherish the equality of man and woman. When Jane flees from Thorn field, she is acutely conscious of the division in her mind-between two moralities: Christianity and romantic love. She acts according to the Christian morality which tells her that “she must be a selfless virgin” (325). She is willing to sacrifice her passion to save her immortal soul as well as her emotional and physical autonomy, but she is tormented by guilt as having deserted the men she loves. Mentally, morally, Jane is strong but physically quite powerless stubble exposed to the “the drought and glow of a furnace”, hunger, pain, sorrow – all join hands in troubling her simultaneously. But Jane is matured enough to feel, think and find them to be her own personal problems and has the will to bear and suffer all her agonies rather heroically. But when problems increase aplenty, almost on an unbearable degree, she succumbs to God’s will and Grace by saying,

“I believe in God...  
Let me try to wait His will in Silence”

Her Lord is impressed by her faith and help is bestowed on her in rich profusion. She is rescued from her wanderings by the timely arrived of an unknown Krishnan, St.John Rivers. Noticing her self-discipline, high morals, patience of enduring Calamity, he proposes to her. In him, Jane sees traditional virginity. He wants only her aid in his missionary work in India. Jane refuses to “abandon half myself; if I go to India, I go to premature death” (P430). The choice between the dark and the light man comes down to a choice of annihilation by fire or ice. Rochester threatens to destroy Jane’s autonomy by passion. He tells her,

“a fervent, a solemn passion is conceived  
in my heart; it leans to you, draws you  
to my centre and spring of life, wraps  
my powerful flame, fuses you and me in one” (JE 342)

Rivers on the other hand is symbolically associated with ice. He says,

“I am cold no fervor infects me” (392)

Jane cannot accompany him as his life wife because she fears that she would be destroyed if she represses her own passionate nature. He wants her to disown half her nature For him, the individual is insignificant and strong will, he regards her only as “a useful tool” (JE 440). He is a chronic instance of male dominance, and Jane’s escape is a psychological necessity.

Charlotte Bronte finds a way for Jane to experience the warmth and joy of romantic passion without losing her autonomy or spiritual salvation. She does so literally and symbolically lessening Rochester’s power over. Jane and by making possible a Christian marriage between them. Bertha sets fire to Thorn field and jumps to her death. Rochester loses an eye and a hand, the Biblical punishment for Lechery. Bertha is the literal equivalent of Jane’s negative inner vision of sexuality. When she understands her own passion as separated from Bertha’s, she is free to value her own sexuality and to love Rochester. Rochester’s disabled condition and the death of Bertha symbolize the resolution of Jane’s ambivalence about sexual passion. She learns that she does not have to be dominated by either the dark or light man. Once she has learned to be her own mistress, she is rewarded with a sense of self – respect compatible with marriage to Rochester, who is humanized now. The happy ending is facilitated by the fortuitous event of Jane inheriting money. Her good fortune and Rochester’s Catastrophe lessen his social and economic advantage over her. She is delighted in that she can now be his wife rather than his mistakes and still more delighted in that she will not be economically dependent on him “I am an independent women now”. She informs him, “I am my own mistress”. Though she is economically independent, she feels and insists:

“I love you better now, when I can really  
be useful to you than I did in your  
state of proud independence, when you  
disdained every part but that of  
the giver and protector” (JE 470)

To conclude, at the psychological and metaphysical level, Jane finds freedom and happiness by reconciling successfully to the dualities of spirit and flesh, reason and emotion, reason and faith and secular love. Neither wholly conventional nor militantly feminist, Charlotte Bronte rewards in the end her heroin Jane with a union in which she finds emotional satisfaction without losing her identity.



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