

## **JANE EYRE: AN UNCONVENTIONAL WOMAN OF VICTORIAN ERA**

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### Abstract

*Jane Eyre* (1847) is seen as a story of defiance against the conventionality in the Victorian Era through the protagonist who was neither beautiful nor rich. In the novel, Jane resists her social identity through her sense of personal dignity, equality, self-respect, autonomy and independence, and liberty. She is different from any other women at that time. She strives for her life and defends her fate in hardships and difficult conditions.

The aim of this research work is to explore the characteristics of Jane Eyre and to put a finger on what makes her non-traditional woman and different from other conventional and traditional Victorian women at that time. It also aims to examine Jane's development in relation to social position in England during the nineteenth century. Her journey and quest for independence, equality, self-worth, and love, which shows Jane as an unconventional woman at that period. Conducting this research, it is hoped that, this research will prove easy access for others who need information about the status of a traditional Victorian woman and how they resist and raise their voice against the social oppression.

Keywords: Unconventionality, Individuality, Suppression, Oppression

### Introduction

During the Victorian era, a traditional woman's life revolved around the domestic sphere of her family and her home. Middle-class women were brought up to "be pure and innocent, tender and sexually undemanding, submissive and obedient" to fit the glorified "Angel in the House", the Madonna- image of the time (Lunden et al, 147). They were considered little more than social ornaments and bearers of offspring. As an author of vivid, intensely written novels, Charlotte Bronte broke the traditional nineteenth-century fictional stereotype of a woman as beautiful, submissive, dependent and ignorant; and delineated the portrait of a "new woman" who is independent and

who doesn't simply submit herself to the norms of the patriarchal setup.

In *Jane Eyre*, Charlotte Bronte reflects the beginning of modernism in Victorian society in her unconventional portrayal of an independently thinking protagonist who challenges traditional class structure and intellectual beliefs.

One of the most debated literary works in terms of depicting the condition of women in the Victorian era, she wrote the novel *Jane Eyre* under the masculine pseudonym "Currer Bell". It is a story of defiance against the conventionality in the Victorian era through its protagonist, who was seen as an unconventional female of the time, passionate and with a strong urge to fight for justice. Through the character of Jane, Charlotte wants to break the roles and to criticize Victorian women; she makes the character as a tough independent woman who has a great self-independence and autonomy (Tirana, 2). Such a rebellious character motivates me to do this research.

#### Literature Review

*Jane Eyre* is the first, also the most powerful and popular novel to represent the modern views of the position of women in society.

#### Study on *Jane Eyre* by Different Author

Ms. Naoual Saada, Kasdi Merbah University-Ouargla (2015), wrote a thesis "The Unlikely Victorian Heroine in Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*." The aim of her research work is to explore the heroism of Jane Eyre and to put a finger on what makes her unlike and different from other conventional and traditional Victorian women at that time. She investigates how Charlotte Bronte portrays her unlikely Victorian heroine Jane using James Phelan's theoretical model of the thematic character. She distinguishes three models: the mimetic, synthetic, and thematic. The mimetic character is when a character is portrayed as a real and possible person; that is to say, she is a human being-like in real life. The synthetic character refers to how the character is artificial; it stresses that character is a literary construct. Finally, the thematic character refers to how a character can be used to embody a certain idea, themes, a group or class within the semantic structure of the literary work. The latter was her main concern; that is to say Jane's struggles and quests for independence and autonomy, equality, self-respect and liberty within the novel could depict and represent some sort of thematic characters which makes her such an unconventional and unlikely woman of the Victorian era.

From Mid Sweden University (2011), Angela Andersson argued that even though Jane is longing for love and kindred she resists the male dominance and remains true to herself. Feminist criticism is used to examine power relations and patriarchal traits. It is also used to examine female identity in the novel. There are many parallels between the author Charlotte Bronte and her protagonist Jane Eyre of which some are used for the psychoanalytical analyses in her paper "Identity and Independence in *Jane Eyre*". By a combination of feminist

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and psychoanalytical criticism and a close reading of Jane Eyre, her aim is to analyze how Jane's identity evolves during her quest for identity and independence and what influence the relationships with the male characters has on her identity. Feminist criticism is used to examine power relations and patriarchal traits. It is also used to examine female identity in the novel. Universitas Islam Negeri Alauddin Makassar (2017), Indah Miftah Awaliah, explored gender issues reflected in Jane Eyre written by Charlotte Bronte. Jane centers women as the second sex under the domination of men. Women autonomy is part of gender issues which becomes a concern of feminist. She found that the impact of gender issues in promoting women autonomy against the injustice of women can be seen in the character of Jane. The frightening night in the red-room causes her growing up overnight. Having experienced true fear, she is no longer afraid of standing up for herself against the patriarchal society. Zheng Kelu's Charlotte's Feminist Declaration discussed, "During the Victorian Age was men- centered and men-controlled times. Women were discriminated against by men at that time. However, the ahead-of-age female consciousness of Jane, the main character challenges men's authority." (p.167). This paper unfolds here from a different perspective concerning women self- realization, esteem and choices to society or marriage. It helps readers to realize the importance of independence and to be enough to fight for their basic rights as human beings. Furthermore, the paper makes it clear that women are equal as men no matter in personality, economy, or social status.

The work is infused with romantic spirit: the emphasis on the sensitiveness of the mind and the intense sensibility to change nature the longing for adventure and the insistence on liberty, independence, and the right of the individual soul and self-fulfillment. After a stranger destroyed Jane's wedding Jane left. Exhausted and penniless, she thinks of nature as the "universal mother".

According to Rowbotham (1992), the word feminist was invented by a French socialist, Charles Fourier, in the early nineteenth century. Firstly, he imagined a new woman who would both transform and be herself transformed by a society based on association and mutuality, rather than being on competition and profits. And this influenced many women to reach their emancipation.

Analysis of Jane Eyre as an Unconventional Woman

The daily life of people in the Victorian era was determined by the social class and formed by the traditional ways of life in which people especially women, lived and worked depending on their tradition and social roles under man's patriarchy that effected on the people and the way they lived. A traditional Victorian woman was considered to be a person, who dedicated her life solely to the home, her family and most importantly her husband. Charlotte Bronte, however; created Jane Eyre as an unorthodox manifest against the society of that time.

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### Jane's Views about Class Oppression

Living in Reed's upper-class family has always been challenging for Jane. From the very beginning of the novel, Jane stands in a low social class. While the Reed family represents the upper class, they use her social standing as a reason to neglect her, and poorly treat her. Jane's cousins John Reed and his sisters Eliza and Georgiana and how they behave with Jane abusing and belittling her because she belongs to a lower class. Living with relatives she feels alienated and seen as a friendless and status-less orphan, without any property:

Despite Jane's living with the Reed family, she is neither considered as a Reed member nor as a working-class servant. This is due to her indefinable class status, Jane's parents were socially ambiguous, and this ambiguity is a part of their legacy to Jane. Her mother was a middle-class woman, and her father was from a poor class. Thus, when Jane was born her social status was obscure and became more ambiguous after her parents' death. This shows the way in which Jane is treated with cruelty by the wealthy Reeds because she is an orphan, poor and she doesn't hold the same social standing they hold. Jane's lack of money lives her dependent upon Reed's for sustenance. She appears to exist in no-man's land between the upper and servant classes. By calling her cousin John, a "murderer," "slave-driver," and "Roman emperor," Jane emphasizes her recognition of the corruption inherent in the ruling classes. As she's dragged away to the red-room following her fight with John Reed, Jane resists her captors like a "rebel slave," emphasizing the oppression she suffers because of her class status. Furthermore, Jane is forced to submit to even greater oppression by Mrs. Reed; she is banished to the red-room like an animal. In the red room, Jane thinks of herself as a revolted slave, unjustly punished and thus isolated as discord in the family. Jane's imprisonment characterizes the way inferior class women were treated and restricted by the class conditions of the Victorian era. She states:

This quotation indicates Jane's outburst to her aunt in her leaving to Gateshead to Lowood School. She resisted in her orphanhood, severing to the little resemblance of the family that she lived with but the only one that remained to her. Even at the young age of 10, she was already well aware of the class system and of what it meant to be impoverished. When asked by Mr. At Lowood, the girls are starved, abused, and subjected to religious terrorism. Because they live by the charity and are of a lowly class and because they are women, all the girls of Lowood are expected to be submissive and thankful for even the most meager livelihood. Mr. Brocklehurst insists on starving the girls because he supposedly believes that by starving their "wretched bodies" he is feeding their eternal souls.

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The radical nature of this statement is impossible to ignore. In exposing the child abuse occurring within charitable institutions, Jane also implies the cruelty of the upper class and the impending rebellion of the lower class.

At Thornfield, when Jane first arrives, she is happy to learn that Mrs. Fairfax is a housekeeper, and not Jane's employer, because this means they are both dependents and can, therefore, interact as equals. The complicated position of an educated governess hired to teach children at Thornfield situates her in a strange borderland between the upper class and the servant class.

The relationship between Jane and Rochester also emphasizes class issues. Mr. Rochester's treatment to Jane is basically bound on being her Master. In a conversation preceding their betrothal, Rochester treats Jane like a good servant, because she's been a "dependent" who has done "her duty," he, as her employer, wants to offer her assistance in finding a new job. Claiming the aristocratic privilege of creating his own rules, Rochester redefines. But she becomes aware of her feelings for Rochester; she is his intellectual but not his social equal. She hesitated to marry Rochester because she senses that she would feel indebted to him for -condescending to marry her.

He even uses Miss Blanche Ingram as a pawn to make Jane jealous, and reveal her emotions about him, and chooses not to be the beginner to express his feelings. Here it is clear that Mr. Rochester is using his power, and upper-class position to control Jane. He causes Jane to question her class especially with the coming of Miss Ingram, and her family. Even Blanche Ingram oppresses Jane after seeing her in the corner of the drawing room. Blanche Ingram, her mother, and sister begin to mock governesses particularly Jane. She describes Jane as a disease because of her class inferiority.

In fact, Jane is incomparable to Blanche Ingram who was a beautiful and rich woman from a high social class, hoped to marry Rochester to secure her position. Jane says: "...and Miss Ingram was considered the belle of the evening" (Bronte, 178). She is very close to Rochester and her way of behaving to foil Jane by discussing loudly all the dreadful governesses she had in order to show the difference between them. This indicates a clear perspective on the reality of social classes and the mental oppression that poor class members face. where Jane, says:

Jane, however, does not break every social rule as she refuses to marry Mr. Rochester when she finds out the truth about his marriage. Despite the fact that his marriage to Bertha is indeed loveless, Jane is adamant that she will not expose herself to such demoralization and takes pride in herself for recognizing that even throughout the eyes of love, this act would make her a social outcast. This dedication to her personal morals

emphasizes Jane's self-empowerment that she will not give in to the pressures of marriage for social status and wealth.

For example, the Rivers are better educated than their employers, though with as little respect as the family cook. Jane fends off marriage proposals that would squash her identity, and strives for equality in her relationships. She proved that she is independent financially and not reliant on Rochester for his wealth. She accepted Rochester's offer. She says:

Finally, Jane proves neither the differences in social classes nor poverty will be obstacles to marry her lover Mr. Rochester "reader. I married him" (Bronte, 514).

The trials and tribulations of Jane's life symbolize the plight of millions of others condemned to poverty due to the slowness of their birth. Her strength and quick tongue challenged the patriarchal system of Victorian England and encouraged women to strive for more.

#### Jane's Conception about Womanhood

The Victorian era is often associated with conservatism and reserve in regard to sex and sexuality, but in reality, Victorians were highly interested in sexual matters and discussed them extensively. During the nineteenth century, sexuality became more and more regulated and "advised". Different sorts of self-help manuals concerning sexuality and other physical, psychological and behavioral questions were common. In theory and as an ideal, then, sex before and outside marriage was out of the question for Victorians; the practice and reality did not quite follow this ideal, and it was typically the women who had to carry the consequences or suffer the punishment. It was generally supposed that women, unlike men, were not interested in sex. Thus, sexual ignorance and innocence were associated with the ideal femininity and the upper classes, whereas sexuality and looser standards were used to describe the lower classes and the lowest of the low.

This division of sexual innocence and sexuality actually and most curiously, was used to characterize the very nature of womanhood in the Victorian era. The aforementioned angel in the house ideology was not the only notion of womanhood alive. In *Jane Eyre*, this Victorian double standard of womanhood is visible in Mr. Rochester's attitude to Jane and Bertha. To Mr. Rochester, Jane seems to represent the "angelic" side of womanhood, while Bertha is the representative of the "demonic" side of the female nature (Shuttleworth, 165). In *Jane Eyre*, this is demonstrated by Bertha, whose insanity is described as stemming from her excesses: "her excesses had prematurely developed the germs of insanity" (Bronte, 352).

Jane is balancing between the sense of power and control and the feeling of powerlessness and helplessness. As Shuttleworth (62) puts it, "Bronte's protagonists shift constantly between a sense of power and autonomy and its converse, a feeling of helplessness in the face of irresistible internal forces". Jane systematically tries to impose rigid control over herself, according to the Victorian ideal but has to acknowledge and accept her strong feelings and desires. In Victorian culture, self-control was heavily emphasized, and with it lived the fear of losing control. However, "men and women were placed in a very different relation to the doctrines of control" (Shuttleworth, 33). Female helplessness and dependency on their own physical and mental forces were juxtaposed with male autonomy and self-control. St. John seems to represent pure rationality and self-control - the attributes that he oppressively tries to impose on Jane as well. St. John's patriarchal restrictions include him restraining Jane's eating, when Jane, starving and exhausted, first comes to his and his sisters' door at Marsh End: "Not too much at first-restrain her," said the brother; "she has had enough." And he withdrew the cup of milk and the plate of bread" (Bronte, 386). St. John, who as a clergyman can be considered the "spiritual nourisher" of his congregation, rather concretely takes away the nourishment from the hungry Jane. He also tries to control Jane's actions, when Jane enthusiastically furnishes the Marsh End home after having her inheritance:

St. John relies on his authority as a man and spiritual leader in telling Jane what she ought to do and ought not to do. Jane, although she loves and respects St. John as a friend and cousin, feels distressed and confused under these spiritual and patriarchal demands, which violate her own will and preferences. Given these restrictions views about womanhood, it is no wonder that many Victorian women felt distressed and imprisoned, and called for a change. Mr. Rochester seems to acknowledge Jane's restlessness and plight under the restrictions of Victorian culture: "Do you never laugh, Miss Eyre? Don't trouble yourself to answer - I see you laugh rarely; but you can laugh very merrily: believe me, you are not naturally austere, any more than I am naturally vicious.

Mr. Rochester sees that Jane is a "captive" in the Victorian patriarchal order, unable to even laugh or move freely, desiring for freedom and new prospects for life. As in the extract above, Mr. Rochester refers to Jane as "bird" on another occasion as well: he calls her "a wild frantic bird" when Jane asserts herself and trembles with emotion (Bronte, 289). In the beginning, Jane the child is feeding a hungry robin with bread crumbs on the window sill at Gateshead (Bronte, 30), and later in the novel she herself is referred to as bird, who, in a way, is in the need for "nourishment of soul". Bird has the potentiality for airy freedom, but as a small and fragile creature, it is easily captured and imprisoned.

The sense of imprisonment and the desire to escape are major themes in *Jane Eyre*. As

Gilbert and Gubar (341) note, the motif of enclosure and escape can be seen throughout the novel, at different stages in Jane's life: as an oppressed orphan girl at Gateshead, as a student suffering from hunger and hard discipline at Lowood, as a governess and dependent in an ambiguous situation at Thornfield, and as a penniless outcast and under religious pressure at Marsh End. It is not until she has gone through all these stages of imprisonment and dependency that she, at last, finds some freedom and autonomy at the end of the novel. In the novel, Jane is pacing backward and forwards in the third story corridor at Thornfield - unaware that Bertha is doing the same just behind the wall

As the excerpt demonstrates, Jane feels and acknowledges the anguish of Victorian women under patriarchal restraint. She demands freedom and equality. Not insignificantly, Jane's rational thinking, reflections, and demands for female rights are juxtaposed with Bertha's "mad" laughter and murmur behind the wall: it is as if Bertha is laughing at Jane's demands (Shuttleworth, 164).

## Conclusion

Charlotte Brontë's novel *Jane Eyre* depicts the place of Victorian women in their society, and the struggles they face for survival. It is a depiction of a girl's journey to maturation in Victorian settings: a journey to finding one's identity and the balance between dependency and autonomy.

Throughout her journey, Jane's identity is formed in interaction with many people, who act as counter-roles for Jane's role-based identities, whether she is in a role of a mistreated orphan, student, governess, lover, wife or a mother. Jane struggles with her sense of inferiority and not belonging in the presence of her cold and unyielding aunt and cousins. She receives support, love, and education from her friend Helen and the teacher Miss Temple, and learns to trust her competence. After meeting and falling in love with Mr. Rochester, Jane had to struggle with her sense of social inferiority and dependency, by knowing the secret of Bertha. Jane receives love and support from her cousins Diana and Mary while confronting St. John's oppressive demands and harsh rationality. Mr. Brocklehurst, starvation at Lowood and during her wandering before reaching Marsh End, madness in the red-room and at Thornfield and coldness by being lonely and by the way St. John treated her.

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