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THE INFLUENCE OF MALE CHARACTERS IN SHAPING
JANE'S CHARACTER IN *JANE EYRE*

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ABSTRACT

In her first published novel, *Jane Eyre* (1847) Charlotte Brontë portrays Jane, the protagonist, as a struggling spirit who is plain and simple in appearance but intellectual and courageous in nature. Examining the narrative structure of the novel, one can see that each household in which Jane finds herself is under the regulation of a dominant male master, who is surrounded by a group of dependant women. Each of the male character tries to chain her in a bond of slavery. While one wants to enslave her in passion, the other wants to imprison her in principle. This paper is an attempt to show that the male characters in the novel function as the catalysts for discovering Jane's selfhood, her self-potentiality, and achieving her liberty. The opposing forces work as the driving force for attaining Jane the status of the hero in the novel. The novel is a journey from darkness to light, imprisonment to freedom.

Key words: Discovery, freedom, power, realization, self-potentiality.

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The wave of the Renaissance came to the English shore in the 16th century, but it did not give birth any major female writer; the Age of Enlightenment began in the 18th century, but it did not light up 'the unlit corridors of history' (Woolf, 220) of English literature by the research of any female scientist or philosopher. Until the second half of the 18th century it was the male writers who enjoyed the monopoly in the realms of English literature. In the early Victorian period (1837-1901), a galaxy of women novelists came forward in a procession, headed by the Brontë sisters, heralding a drastic change in the canon of English literature. Through her novels, the eldest of the three Brontë sisters (two others: Emily, Anne), Charlotte Brontë (1816-55) criticized the conventional portrayal of the female characters (Angel-in the House) in the literature. Brontë heroines do not represent the stereotypical 'sweet' image of feminine behavior rather they are defiant, morally courageous, independent, and rebellious. They have the ability to struggle in the adversity. In *Jane Eyre* (1847), the most popular book of Brontë, Charlotte Brontë creates a feminine hero who challenges the notion of the ideal Victorian woman. The protagonist is portrayed as a model of strength of mind, soul and spirit. In the four important settings – Gateshead, Lowood, Thornfield, and Marsh End Jane encounters four

dominant male characters— John Reed, Reverend Brocklehurst, Edward Rochester, and St John Rivers respectively. The male characters, the novelist creates are not ideal Victorian gentlemen rather they are the embodiment of cruelty, hypocrisy, deception and domineering characteristics. But they help to strengthen the fiber of Jane's moral character and awaken her self-consciousness working as obstacles in the course of [her] life. They act, unconsciously, to empower Jane.

Jane's quest for knowledge, more importantly for self-knowledge, structures *Jane Eyre* as a Bildungsroman. According to M.H. Abrams, "The subject of these novels is the development of the protagonist's mind and character in the passage from childhood through varied experiences— often through a spiritual crisis—into maturity , which usually involves recognition of one's identity and role in the world" (Abrams, 193). The novel is the product of the first wave of feminism which "focuses on women's gaining status as human beings with full civil, intellectual, social, economic and legal rights" (Scholz, 06). The novel can be studied by the discourses of Victorian psychology. *Jane Eyre* can be read as a quintessential expression of Victorian individualism which gives emphasis on self, subjectivity. "Throughout the nineteenth-century psychological theory" Sally Shuttleworth says, "one can see the emergence of a new emphasis on the centrality of opposition as the defining category of selfhood: in Esquirol's insistence that selfhood only emerges with the ability to conceal, and in the phrenologists' grounding of self in the experience of conflict, both internal, between the faculties themselves, and external, between the self and the world, a theory which, in turns, bears a strong relation to aspects of German Romantic psychology. Nowhere are these principles of opposition given more prominence than in a series of articles by James Ferrier entitled 'An Introduction to the Philosophy of Consciousness' published in Brontë's favourite periodical, Blackwood.... In Ferrier's work the German Romantic ideal of striving and becoming is assimilated to the antagonistic, individualistic principles of Victorian economic culture. The self, he insists, only comes into being by an act of opposition or negation . . . the self is not a unified entity, but rather a site of internal struggle between competing energies; and self-consciousness arises only through the experience of oppositional control.... Competition and opposition, as in the economy are defining elements of selfhood" (Shuttleworth, 31-7). According to this theory, the male characters in the novel function as 'opposition' for defining Jane's selfhood.

The first male character Jane encounters in *Jane Eyre* is young master John Reed. He is described as stout, stocky and gluttonous. He has an overbearing presence, at least for Jane and, as we soon learn later, for his mother and sister too. He claims him as the owner of the house as a head of patriarchy. He is shown as a foil to Jane to throw light on the good qualities of her.

John Reed was a school boy of fourteen years old . . . large and stout for his age, with a dingy and unwholesome skin; thick lineaments in a spacious visage, heavy limbs and large extremities. He gorged himself habitually at table, which made him bilious and gave him a dim and bleared eye and flabby cheeks (ch.01, p.4).

He is domineering and bullies Jane simply because she is an orphan and dependant on his family for her survival, which he reminds her all the time. As a dependant, Jane is always obedient to him. But she was not ready for the unexpected incident that happens for her obedience:

I did so, not at first aware that what was his intention; but when I saw him lift and poise the book and stand in act to hurl it, I instinctively started aside with a cry of alarm: not soon enough, however the volume was flung, it hit me, and I fell, striking my head against the door and cutting it. The cut bled, the pain was sharp: my terror had passed its climax; other feelings succeeded (Ch. 1, p.17).

These feelings Jane talks about turn out to be a rage and a feeling of injustice ['Unjust! – Unjust!' (Ch.02, p.22)]. She strikes back at John with her only available weapon i.e. word: "Wicked and cruel boy", "a murderer slave- driver— you are like the Roman emperors! (Ch. 1, p.17)". The spirit of rebellion, which was dormant in

her mind for a long time but dared not to express it in language, has been declared aloud at this very moment, "... like any other rebel slave, I felt resolved, in my desperation, to go all lengths" (Ch. 01, P. 17).

For her outburst, she is sent to the red-room and, after this experience, Jane feels true indignation for the first. She realizes that the way she is treated in the Reed household is not what she deserves and she looks a way out. She raises questions: "Master! How is he my master? Am I a servant?"(Ch. 02. 19). Helen Moglen describes this situation like this: "Jane awakens to the knowledge that she must test the strength of her private self against the constraints of the social world. Her ordeal has aroused in her a burning sense of injustice and the realization that although she is badly treated she is not necessarily guilty: to be a victim is not necessarily guilty: to be a victim is not necessarily to be unworthy" (111).

This first dominant male character gives Jane an understanding of her own self-worth and an understanding of justice in general that she may not have had if she had been treated kindly by Master John. Moglen, further states: "Each act of liberation, each assertion of self, brings with it an awareness of possibility. She understands the nature of John's cowardice and sees that her aunt's guilt makes her vulnerable. And while the angry reproach offers Mrs. Reed is followed by 'the pangs of remorse and the chill of reaction' (p.40). She is in fact, largely freed from her blind fear of authority. She knows now that a display of powerlessness invites scorn and she learns, therefore, that she too holds the secret of power that its exercise is within her intellectual and psychological control" (p.112). Having passed through the gate from the Gateshead, Jane has evidently entered upon womanhood by the end of chapter 4. "Her adolescence is marked first by her sudden and unprecedented revolt against the Reeds" (Showalter, 69).

Like Gulliver, *Gulliver's Travels*, Jane moves from the nursery world of Lilliput to an encounter with the threatening "Brobdingnagian" Reverend Brocklehurst ['what a face he had, now that it was almost on a level with mine! What a great nose! What a mouth! What large, prominent teeth!'] (Showalter,70)]. He follows the double standard for the girls in the Lowood and for his family. He preaches for the simple and humble life for the girls while his wife and daughters are dressed with gorgeous attire.

'I have a Master to serve whose kingdom is not of this world: my mission is to mortify in these girls the lusts of the flesh; to clothe themselves with shame-facedness and sobriety, not with braided hair and costly apparel; and each of the young person's before us has a string of hair twisted in plaits which vanity itself might have woven: these I repeat, must be cut off; think of the time wasted, of'

MrBrocklehurst was here interrupted: three other visitors, ladies now entered the room. They ought to have come a little sooner to have heard his lecture on dress, for they were splendidly attired in velvet, silk, and furs. (Ch. 7, p.76).

Though Brocklehurst is a hypocritical person in principle but his supervision at Lowood teaches her how to co-opt with the situation, how to pacify the anger, and most of all how to always put others before her. In this physical starvation (hunger, cold, disease) Jane has enriched her mind and intellectual capabilities.

"In deciding to leave to leave Rochester, Jane takes the first crucial step toward independence. She has discovered that there is, after all, something more important to her than pleasing those whom she loves, or giving satisfaction to those who love her" (Moglen, 47). Mr. Edward Rochester of Thornfield becomes the master of Jane (after her leaving Lowood), where she works as a governess. He is the first person who teaches her what love is. For the first time in her life she feels affection and acceptance. Up to now, she has never had a personal relationship with anyone. The two later engage in a love-affair which was at first thought, based on intellectual equality (it is only Rochester who is the only qualified critic of her art and soul). "The ease of his manner", Jane comments "freed me from painful restraint; the friendly frankness . . . with which he treated me, drew me to him. I felt at [these] times as if he were my relation rather than my master" (ch.15,p. 171).

But Rochester, having secured Jane's love, begins to treat her as an inferior, a play thing, a virginal possession, a doll. "It is your time now, little tyrant", Rochester declared, "but it will be mine presently and

when once I have fairly seized you, to have and to hold, I'll just figuratively speaking— attach you to a chain like this" (Ch. 24, p. 303). Moreover, the incident of Millcote reminds us the loving tyranny of Rochester: "The hour spent at Millcote was a somewhat harassing one to me. Mr. Rochester obliged me to go to a certain silk warehouse. There I was ordered to choose half a dozen dresses. I hated the business" (C. 24, p.400). She, sensing his new sense of power, resolves to keep him 'in reasonable check'. 'I never can bear being dressed like a doll by Mr. Rochester, or sitting like a second Danae with the golden shower falling daily round me' (ch.24, p.301). Rochester's smile at that very moment seems like 'a sultan' (ch.24, p.301) who in a blissful and fond moment, bestows his gold and gems on 'a slave'(ch.24, p.301). To her dismay, Rochester, in his 'kindness' attempts to mould her into a conventional Lady, who parasitically depends on his host. But, self-respect, self-sufficiency always nourish Jane's mind. Her firm declaration regarding this: "I will not be your English Céline Varens (Rochester's French mistress). I shall continue to act as Adèle's (Céline Varens' biological daughter, who is raised in Thornfield) governess: by that I shall earn my board and lodging and thirty pounds a year besides. I'll furnish my own wardrobe out of that money" (ch. 24, p.302). Jane discovered a strong sense of self-respect only after the tyrannical treatment towards her. Rochester's loving tyranny recalls John Reed's unloving despotism and the erratic nature of Rochester's favours ('in my secret soul I know that his great kindness to me was balanced by his unjust severity to many others' [ch.15] recalls Brocklehurst's hypocrisy. (Gilbert and Gubar, 82)

Her sense of self-respect strengthens when she learns about Mr. Rochester's secret wife, Bertha Mason. When this news comes as an open secret to all the prompt response comes to her mind 'Leave Thornfield at once' (p.335). Though Mr. Rochester insists her to say with him she informs her decision, firmly to him 'Mr. Rochester, I must leave you' (p.342). The reason, according to her, is: "If I lived with you as you desire" she declared, "I should then be your mistress" (Ch. 24, p.342) which reminds her Rochester's previous comment: "Hiring a mistress is the next worse thing to buying a slave: both are often by nature, and always by position, inferior; and to live familiarly with inferiors is degrading. I now hate the recollection of the time I passed with Céline, Giacinta and Clara" (Ch. 24, p. 350). And finally she left Thornfield at the dead of the night without bidding anyone. Later on, when she reviews her decision of leaving Thornfield, whether it was right or wrong, she finds comfort that she did not make any mistake:

"Whether is it better, I ask, to be a slave in a fool's paradise at Marseilles— fevered with delusive bliss one hour— suffocating with the bitterest tears of remorse and shame the next — or to be a village schoolmistress, free and honest, in a breezy nook in the healthy heart of England?
Yes; I feel now that I was right when I adhered to principle and law (p.402).

Moglen says, "The allegorical movement of self-discovery present throughout the novel" (p.48). She compares Jane's leaving to Thornfield as "Bunyan's pilgrim" — "bereft of friends and family: homeless and penniless" (p.49). Until now, Jane has had another adult to rely on or a plan to follow. When Rochester's true history unfolds, she has no plan of action. She does not know where she is going or what will become of her. Like Ibsen's Nora, Jane leaves Rochester to 'know' herself. She flees Rochester not because of moral scruples, but so that she can retain her own oppositional sense of self (Sally, 32). Through Rochester, we are able to see Jane as a self (Weisser, 83).

Because of Rochester's deceit, Jane is forced into a situation where she finally finds a family of her own. She becomes independent, wealthy. She finds herself, if not happy, at least content with her life. At the end of the novel, when Jane returns to Rochester, it is not Jane who is dependant on his money and social position; rather it is Rochester who is now dependant on her for nursing care. Losing his hand and his sight, (in order to save Bertha, who falls from the roof) "Rochester has learnt how to accept help" (Showalter, 75). They depend on each other, however, for mutual love and support. This relationship would not have been possible, however, without Rochester's deception and his crippling.

Before this happy ending occurs, however, Jane is met by another dominating male figure, St John. "It is St John Rivers, the clergyman she meets at the cultured home into which she is adopted, who becomes the means through which Jane will complete her search for self-definition" (Weisser, 89). He acts as an agent for her liberation and the discoveries of herself. Jane has an inner strength which her pilgrimage seeks to develop; 'kind angels' finally do bring her to what is in a sense her true home. The house significantly called Marsh End (or Moor House) which is to represent the end of her march towards selfhood" (Gilbert & Gubar, 89).

St John, whom we later discover as Jane's cousin, is overbearing and domineering in a way no other male has been before. While, like Brockelhurst, St John uses dogma and religion for his power, though he is not hypocritical of his practices. "St John is an older and more importantly, a masculine version of Helen Burn" (Jane's friend at Lowood) (Moglen, 52) and younger version of Brocklehurst.

St John is attracted to Jane initially because of her courage in adversity. "I acknowledge the complement of the qualities I seek, Jane, you are docile, diligent, disinterested, faithful, constant, and courageous; very gentle, and very heroic" (Ch. 34, p.449). He recognizes in her desire to divide her inheritance among the cousins: St John, and his sisters Diana, Maryas a gift of sacrifice. That's why he concluded that she would make him a useful helpmate. "At first, however, it seems that St John is offering Jane a viable alternative to the way of life proposed by Rochester. For where Rochester, like his dissolute namesake, ended up appearing to offer a life of pleasure, a path of roses (albeit with concealed thorns) a marriage of passion, St John seems to propose a life of principle, a path of thorns (with no concealed roses), and a marriage of spirituality" (Gilbert and Gubar, 90). But there is an enormous contradiction in his attitude towards her. He does not want to see her as a woman. He denies her feelings, sexual nature, and considers marriage as a divine duty. According to him ". . . you are formed for labour, not for love. A missionary's wife you must— shall be. You shall be mine: I claim you— not for my pleasure, but for my Sovereign's service (Ch. 34, p. 448). Instead of accepting or plying her like a gentleman would, St John threatens her with eternal damnation. His hardness and unwillingness to compromise with Jane and take her as a sister instead of a wife again puts Jane in a difficult position. St John's argument is "A sister might any day be taken from me, I want a wife: a sole helpmeet I can influence efficiently in life and retain absolutely till death" (Ch. 34, p.452).

If she follows him, Jane realizes, she will substitute a divine master for the master she served at Thornfield, and replace love with duty. According to her, "If she goes with him she'll have to 'sacrifice' her 'heart'. Whilst Rochester literally imprisoned his Creole wife, St John fixes Jane with his 'freezing spell'. And under this spell she realizes increasingly that to please him "I must disown half my nature" and "as his wife" she reflects, she would be "always restrained . . . forced to keep the fire of my nature continually low, to compel it to burn inwardly and never utter a cry, though the imprisoned flame consumed vital after vital – *this* would be unendurable (Ch.43, p.453). Gibert and Gubar comment on this type of marriage: "She will be entering into a union even more unequal than that proposed by Rochester, a marriage reflecting, once again, her absolute exclusion from the life of wholeness toward which her pilgrimage has been directed" (Gilbert and Gubar, 91).

The base of the relationship between a husband and wife is love. But according to Jane, "He (St John) will never love me; but he shall approve me" (Ch.34, p.450) because St John "has no more of a husband's heart for me than that frowning giant of a rock, down which the stream is foaming in yonder gorge. He prizes me as a soldier would a good weapon; and that is all" (p.450). Moreover, the most crucial problem lies in this 'relationship', which is discovered by Jane, is that they do not "love each other as man and woman" (p.451). Jane believes that, if forced to marry St John she could 'imagine the possibility of conceiving an inevitable, strange, torturing kind of love" (p. 531). She angrily and openly opposes his concept of love: "I scorn your idea of love . . . I scorn the counterfeit sentiment you offer: yes, St John, and I scorn you when you offer it" (Ch. 34, p.454). "It is the extraordinary contempt of a virginal young woman for the Victorian concept of sex as duty, for the Victorian denial of the dignity of human passion" (Moglen, 55). "While Rochester had tried to make her 'the slave of passion', St John wants to imprison the 'resolute wild free thing' that is her soul in the ultimate

cell, the 'iron shroud' of principle" (Gilbert and Gubar, 91). Jane recognizes that St John wants to "buy her body with the coin of spirituality, hypocritically posing as God's agent" (Moglen, p. 55).

St John actually offers Jane "a model of empowerment" (Sally, 35). Jane senses that St John is a coward and escapist who denies his own sexual need and therefore her sexuality, fearing the passion which would make him mortal and vulnerable. "In rejecting St John, Jane comes to terms with her need for an external authority. She completes the move towards independence begun in the red-room and continued in her departure from Thornfield. In rejecting St John's repressive sexuality she rejects the perverse sadomasochism it implies, and she attempts to distinguish the sexuality of love from the sexuality of power: the love born of equality from the love subject to idolatry" (Moglen, 56). "When she hears Rochester's voice calling to her, she responds as surely to the need it expresses to the need in herself.... Rather than accepting the sublimation of desire in a patriarchal religious system, she finds spiritual meaning in human experience. She rejects sexual passion that derives its force from masochistic self-denial and insists that duty and obligation must be placed within the context of a generous and reciprocal human love (Moglen, 56).

Gateshead to Marsh End – during this course of her life, Jane transforms from a timid, dependant girl to a self-sufficient, self-reliant one through the interaction with the male characters in novel that awakens her consciousness regarding the vulnerable position she possesses in the family, society. Though she is a human being but she is always treated as a sub-human being. But like the other Victorian woman she never follows the rules and regulation of any authority. She always listens to her heart. She never compromises with the question of her dignity. Here lies her exceptionality. But in attaining her maturity the antagonistic powers i.e. the male characters ironically works for her mental development by testing her mental strength through creating obstacles in the course of her life. Written under the masculine sounding pseudonym Currer Bell in 'The Feminine' phase (the term coined by Elaine Showalter in *A literature of Their Own*, which suggests a period beginning with the use of the male pseudonym in the 1840s until 1880 with the death of George Eliot), she received acclaim for her works. Written in the mid-1800s, the novel maintains its universal appeal through the strength of its heroine– the poor, abused, plain orphan with a commanding and spirited personality. *Jane Eyre* is now hailed as one of the pioneers of feminist writing.

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