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THE BRONTE SISTERS: EXPLORING THE UNEXPLORED “SUBALTERN” VOICES AND THE
EMANCIPATION OF WOMEN IN RELATION TO *WUTHERING HEIGHTS*,
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ABSTRACT

The Bronte Sisters, undisputable female voices in the Victorian period, built unbreakable embankments against the patriarchal flow, paved the way for the free flow of matriarchy and establishes gender equality and above all sets stage for humanity through their works. Emily Bronte wrote *Wuthering Heights*, Charlotte Bronte wrote *Jane Eyre* and Anne Bronte wrote *Agnes Grey*. They wrote these novels based on their own experiences and close observation of life and conditions of women in male dominated society. Their works of fiction depict the saga of women’s struggle (for identity, equality and existence) of nineteenth century England and contain elements of feminism. To raise female voices(subaltern voices), against the male dominated society was unthinkable(taboo) during that period. Freedom, equality, emancipation were foreign to the women of Victorian England. Against this gender discrimination the Bronte Sisters challenged the male authority through their female protagonists, the role model for women’s emancipation and gender equality, Catherine, Jane Eyre and Agnes Grey. Freedom does not come easily. Women cannot wait for social revolution to alter the patriarchal social pattern in a day; rather every individual will have to participate in unmasking male domination by asserting herself. It is unjust to categorize people based on sex gender discrimination, that are purely biological and cultural connotation, consciously created by male dominated society to suppress and oppress the female counterpart. The Bronte Sisters emphasized on hu(wo)man beings and not on male/female binary or “sex/gender” discrimination. Emancipation will follow its own course. They take the medium of writing and express their outlook based on their experiences. Their expressions outlived time, space, and generation. Feminism professes that men and women should be equal politically, economically and socially which the Bronte Sisters strived for throughout their life and works.

Keywords: Bronte sisters, subaltern voices, emancipation, sex/gender, *Wuthering Heights*, *Jane Eyre*, *Agnes Grey* and Feminism.

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Motivation: The female section of the society is the most vulnerable section all over the world. They are suppressed by their male counterparts since the beginning of the concept of social formation. They are considered weaker when compare to male as if it seems there is no way to get rid of this “sex/gender” discrimination. Men are unable to walk a single step without the help of women and when they are used, they are cast out. Male are omnivorous in their attack to female. They are “common property” and “puppets” in the hands of male narrative. Feminists’ are working to bring out the root cause of this discrimination. Novels of the Bronte Sisters have tried to explore this great cause. This motivates the present author of this proposal to explore more reason and solutions of this system.

Methodology: Creations of Bronte Sisters; especially *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Bronte, *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Bronte and *Agnes Grey* by Anne Bronte are thoroughly studied, also feminist criticism, feminist theory, Marxist criticism, subaltern theory and articles and journals are meticulously studied while writing this proposal.

Related works: There are many works in this field, some of them are Reflection of Feminism in *Jane Eyre* by Hiyan Gao (2009), School of Foreign Languages, He Ze City, China; Independence through Education: The Governess in *Jane Eyre* and *Agnes Grey* and Her Relation to Women’s Identity in Nineteenth Century England (2013) by Beryl Glick Frishtrick, University of Vermont; Female Homosocial Relations and Narrative Structure in the Novel of Charlotte Bronte (1994) by Mary Burke Graduate School of Florida, University of Florida, USA, etc. Their works are different from the present author of this proposal as this proposal focuses on different issue which has been discussed throughout this paper.

Introduction

Much has been said about the novels of Bronte Sisters. Their works have been considered for the understanding of women’s condition in the Victorian era. Here the author of this proposal wishes to go further to explore the elements of emancipation for the female counterpart from male/ female, “Sex/Gender” binarism constructed by the male dominated society. The heroines of the Bronte Sisters aspire for worldly knowledge which they consider will bring them freedom and freedom will lead them to emancipation. Catherine, in *Wuthering Heights*, remains confined between Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange. Actually she raises her voice against patriarchy confining herself within the system. It is a revolution against the system not going against it but going with it. Actually she wants to enter in to the deep root of this system. Whereas Jane Eyre in *Jane Eyre* and Agnes Grey in *Agnes Grey* leave their homes and become governess. They get financial freedom which establishes their unique identity as opposed to the mail authority. Thus they break the norms of “sex/gender” inequality and become the path breaker for the suppressed and the oppressed section of the society.

Research Question

Is feminism the only way of solving gender discrimination? Does Nelly Deans, in *Wuthering Heights*, consciously suppress the voice of Mr. Lock Wood, the male narrator in order to raise the voices of the female personal and subvert mail authority? In the Victorian age men and women lived in “separate spree” and that controlled what actions each gender could perform. Men were the earning members and wives were valued as mothers and run errands. But Jane Eyre and Agnes Grey take the profession of Governess; do they perform it to get financial freedom and emancipation from patriarchal dogma? Do the Bronte Sisters choose the pseudonyms as Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell to undermine the taboo on female writings? Was it destined that the author of *Wuthering Heights* born as the siblings of the author of *Jane Eyre* and *Agnes Grey* in order to stop the patriarchal flow? Being a woman, why does Jane subvert the voice of Bertha Manson, the other woman? Is Bertha Manson Jane’s alter ego so she tries to subvert her in order to purify herself? Is their father (Patrick Bronte) responsible for their revolutionary thought as he did not discriminate between male and female children? Why does Agnes Grey choose Edward Watson as husband after so much humiliation? To what extent are their works responsible for the education of women of that period and what is their relevance to the present world? Are they successful in deconstructing the social pattern? Are they really feminist? These questions arise during the writing of this proposal. Judith Butler loves asking questions. She is not interested in

answers. Actually she is making statements. She is somebody who first thinks meaning is constructed through discourse. Discourse is expressed through language. It has no stability. So meaning is unstable. Therefore identity is unstable. Identities produce through language, made through language and fixed through language. It is a social construction. She is going to expose lies. Women are continuously mystified. Patriarchy has mythology, mystified women. So there is no such male/female binary. Emancipation is always there. Women have to practice them.

Literature Review

Feminists work for the upliftment of womanhood. They draw elements from great women authors, analyses them and mingling them with personal experiences and sets examples that women are no longer women which is language construction rather equal to their male counterpart. The Victorian age is noted for male domination and restrictions on women. The Bronte Sisters stand against patriarchal force, write novels, poems, article, letters to give true knowledge to the world. Women can do as men can. Women can write. Authors have no "sex/gender". They are authors. They want, as in Etienne Balibar's terms in his *Mass, Class, Ideas*, "a right to difference in equality" (56). They are stubborn by their claim of "Right" and "Equality". Charlotte Bronte declares, "We are three sisters" (Letters, 203), clarifying the identity and the presence of the new authors by choosing pseudonyms as Culler, Acton, Ellis Bell. They do so perhaps because they are a very private family or they want to surprise the patriarchal world or keeping in mind that they write in Victorian England, *very crucial time (my italics)*. All are included in the narrative of the world. The voices of women authors cannot be ignored as Homi K Bhabha suggest in his *Location of Culture*: "You are part of a dialogue that may not at first be here heralded you may be ignored but your personhood can not be denied" (25). Feminist destroy the idea of categorization. Feminism is based on Identity. They are equal to male counterparts. "Feminist for resist categorization, specially based on father's labels" (1) writes Tong in her book *Feminist Thought* (1998). But the feminist thought has its own label which "signals to the boarder public that feminism is not monolithic ideology, that all feminist do not think alike, and that, like all time honored mode of thinking, feminist thought has a past as well as a present and future"(1).

There are differences among the Bronte Sisters in their thought process. The myth of "difference" begins after the death of Emily Bronte. Charlotte Bronte starts that she does not appreciate *Wuthering Heights*, Emily Writes that when Charlotte Bronte, "writes poetry that power speaks in language at once condensed, elaborate and refined but in prose it breaks forth in scenes which shock more than they attract"(Letters 203). Misses Gaskell, the biographer of Charlotte Bronte continues the Myth making. But "difference" is strength. Charlotte Bronte proves herself a critic. She questions the creation of Heathcliff. "But this I know" Charlotte Bronte writes in her Editor's Preface to the New Edition of *Wuthering Heights* (1850), "the writer who possess the creative gift owns something of which he is not always master. Something that at times a strongly wills and works for itself "(316). But she also praises the work of "Withering Heights was hewn in wild workshop with simple tools out of namely materials" (316). She praises it as a work of art; the novel is not Emily speaking but nature speaking through her. J. Hillis Miller in *Wuthering Heights: Repetition and the Uncanny* (1963), suggest that:

This novel [Wuthering Heights] has been a strong excitement for readers. It exerts power over its readers in its own violence, and in its presentation of striking psychological and natural detail. It absorbs the reader, making him empowered or entrap by the story. In spite of its many peculiarities and narrative technique and theme, it is, in its extreme vividness of circumstantial detail, a master work of, realistic friction. It obeys most of the conventions of Victorian realism, though no reader can miss the fact that it gives these conventions a twist. The reader is persuaded that the novel is an accurate picture of the material and sociological conditions of life of Yorkshire in the early nineteenth century. The novel to an unusual degree gives that pleasure appropriate to the realistic fiction the pleasure of yielding to the illusion that one is entering into a real world by way of the words on the page (362).

As it projects "Victorian realism" it opens the inner part of the subaltern section of our society and their struggle to acquire their right and equality. Anne Bronte wrote two novels *Agnes Grey* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. They were not appreciated much in the earlier period as the work of a feminist:

the feminist critic, who have been so generally successful in revising our literary appreciation and critical estimate of the writers, especially those in the Victorian period, have had surprisingly little to say about Anne Bronte. While Charlotte Bronte has benefited immensely by the feminist perspective, Anne is little better known and scarcely more frequently discussed than she was previously (Langland 157).

But this not acceptable because she speaks of women's issues and urges whole heartedly to raise the voice of women. Charlotte Bronte has a rather authoritative voice. She makes her heroine Jane Eyre in *Jane Eyre* her mouth piece. Graham Holderness in his book *Open Guide to Emily Bronte's Wuthering Heights* (2003), "when Charlotte Bronte wrote of the difficulty of her sister's novels and the perplexity of its critic, she expressed the belief that a true and correct interpretation of the novel was in fact possible. He further suggests that, Charlotte's terms and ideas are those of her age: but her observations draw attention to a contradiction still to the practice of literary criticism (1)". What she means she means. She is the financial supporter of her family which is unthinkable in Victorian period. She is the care giver to her sister, brother and her father. After all the Bronte sister the outstanding genius of the Victorian period are engaged exploring the "subaltern voices" to bring forth them to the forefront. The difference among them is not at all "difference". This "difference" is a concurrence it is rhizomatic in character. This heterogeneity (difference in thought) paved the way for homogenous (unity in action). A kind of Hegelian thesis, anti-thesis and synthesis force which left to the way of emancipation from the male/female and "sex/ gender" bondage.

Contemporary feminist criticism tends to be more overtly part of the wider movement for female emancipation; of the general effort to assert a feminist consciousness or philosophy in culture and society. Here criticism becomes overtly political, assessing its ideological purpose explicitly thus it goes beyond the interpretations of text and rather it needs to know the knowledge of the whole concept of feminism and literary institutions. Feminist thinkers think that the institutions are male dominated both in the terms of men who run them and the patriarchal ideologies they presuppose and foster. Joanna Russ in her book *How to Suppress Women's Writing* argues that male dominated literary establishments employ various strategies to deal with women's writing without every acknowledging it on equal terms. Graham Holderness suggests the feminist critics have sought to "recover" female writing from the kind of masculine versions of history and culture into which it has been processed. They want to see the female writers not as the accessories of a male dominated tradition, but as the articulators of a unique and specific female experience of life. Elaine Showalter in her *A Literature of their own* (1987) sums up that feminist ambition. In *Wuthering in Heights* Catharine reduces Heathcliff to a product of her fantasy which is a reversal of patriarchal domination. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Blake's *Hell*: her power is exercised through her instrument Heath cliff, who simply an extension of her female will. She denied Heathcliff and married Edgar Linton to exercise feminine freedom and power.

In *Jane Eyre* authored by Charlotte Bronte, the main protagonist Jane Eyre, an orphan, struggles throughout her life to get freedom from patriarchal domination and economic freedom. She is special idol out of ordinary womenfolk to lead the way for equality. She leads a life of herself and dares to raise her own voice. Germaine Greer argues that women cannot wait for social revolution that may or may not change the patriarchal notion. Her advice to every single women is to "being not by changing the world but by reassessing herself" (36). Here Jane reassesses herself. She comes out of the confined world to the world of freedom. But the questions come why Jane suppressed the voice of Bertha Manson and did not talk much of her, as she is the narrator of this novel and her own "her-story". Here Greer is pessimistic about the capacity of women to collaborate and much less to fill affection for her women folk. Women, she argues, concentrate only to "bitch" or backbite an absent member of their family. She suggests their "female eunuch". But Jane is not of that kind. Bertha Manson is the embodiment of her anger, who burns everything, the suppressed and oppressed sexuality which needed to be brought out forth. Bertha Manson acts out of the subversive impulses of women

who appear to accept the evils of patriarchy. But that has no change. Sandra Gilbert's analysis of Jane Eyre emphasizes of the confrontation with Bertha, as an encounter for Jane, not with her own sexuality but with her own imprisonment; "hunger, rebellion, and rage" (339). For Bertha, she further suggests, is:

Jane's truest and darkest double: she is the angry aspect of the orphan child, the ferocious Secret self of Jane has been trying to repress ever since her days at Gateshead...specially, everyone of Bertha's appearances-or, more accurately, her manifestations-has been associate with an experience (or repression) of anger of Jane's part (360).

With the death of Bertha the binary between master/slave, men/women, disappear and equality between Jane and Rochester establish. She fulfills her wishes by marrying Rochester who becomes blind then. The blindness is symbolical. It suggests dependence on Jane, the reversal of power-structure. But power brings more responsibility and wisdom which help to become more hu(wo)man being. Jane says: "I find you lonely I will be your companion, to work with you to sit with you, to wait on you, to be eyes and hands to you. Care to show melancholy, my dear master, you shall not be desolate, so long as I live" (310). Here, Jane does exercise her power not to control her male counterpart but to try focusing on Anne Bertha. Love him more dearly. Men need to be learnt more from Jane. This is emancipation from sex/gender binary.

Anne Bronte's genius creation Agnes Grey talks about women's freedom and emancipation from the bondage of patriarchy. It is not a mere struggle of a female governess in the nineteenth century's England but it embodies the reality of woman's struggle to serve a call to arms for burgeoning feminist ideals. Her novel talks about the issues associated with women's liberation. Bettina L Knapp, in her article, Anne Bronte's *Agnes Grey: The Feminist* gives importance on social relation, "Bronte's voice was raised against paltry salaries and poor working women ... in *Agnes Grey*, Bronte pleaded for self fulfillment and equality of sexes (63)". Agnes takes the profession of a governess going against existing order. Reaction of her decision demonstrates the challenging attitude towards women's work that was dominant during the Victorian England. Agnes says: my mother uttered an exclamation of surprise, and laughed, my sister dropped her work in astonishment, exclaiming you governess Agnes! What can you be dreaming of? (10) Agnes, an indomitable spirit that cannot be dominated, clarifies to her reader the excitement of her new freedom: "how delightful how it would be to be a governess! To go out into the world: to enter into a new life; to act for myself; to exercise my unused faculties ; to try my unknown power; to urn my own maintenance ,and something to comfort and help my father, mother and sister...To show papa that this little Agnes can do..(11). Agnes takes responsibility for her tenuous position at well wood even for inability to control the unruly Bloomfield children. She doesn't repent for this because she wanted it:

...Then it was my own will that i had got the place: I had brought all the tribulation own myself , and i was determined to bear it ;nay ,more than that ,I didn't even regrette step I had taken . I longed to show my friends that, even now, I was competent to undertake the charge, and able to acquit myself honourable to the end... (33)

Her suffering against oddities and setbacks, seems to be the hallmark of women empowerment and thus she becomes the strong female force against the patriarchal domination and again see becomes an example to the followed, an invincible women embodiment of feminist in nineteenth century English literature. Her epiphany at the end of the novel shows that it is possible for her to be happy without male attention. Agnes Grey aspires for equality and liberty throughout the journey of her life she finds it at last when she opens her own school. "It is home" as James Simmons suggest in his article class matriarchy and power: Contextualizing the governess in *Agnes grey*, "where Agnes also finds once again the position of equality "(40).These voice and creation cannot confined in ascertain period, it overcomes the boundaries of time and place the position of women in this world. Women are subaltern not in the colonial sense but they are subaltern in the male dominated society. They can speak. Yes, women can speak. They have to speak loudly and then their voice will be heard by their male counterpart. Women are no longer subaltern they are in centre. They are not 'other', they are not marginal.

“Things fall apart, centre cannot hold” There is no centre at all as Derrida defines “centre” as a kind of absence. To make presence out of absence, he constructs the semiotic and epistemology. New narrative focuses on new definition. There is no binary between male and female, there complementary to each other one cannot exist with the other only hu(wo)man.

Conclusion

Martin Heidegger, in his book building, *Dwelling, Thinking in Poetry, Thought* wrote “a boundary is not that which something stops but, as the Greeks recognized, the boundary is that from which something begins its presenting (53). The “boundary “which is drawn by the patriarchal force for women is no longer a boundary. Feminism rises from this and overcomes this” boundary”. The Bronte Sisters tried this and their heroines also showed their presence and earned equality. But the question comes from whom women will seek equality and get freedom, which will also bring emancipation. From men? The author of this proposal thinks no, it is from nobody. Everything is there. Men have to struggle to earn their equality, so women. Freedom, equality, emancipation all are there. You need to do “practice”. Lack of practice is everywhere. It is the root cause for “sex/gender” discrimination. The Bronte Sisters highlighted the need of the practice through works. Catherine, Jane Eyre and Agnes Grey did their practice and set the examples for women. But to draw a conclusion is to stop the possibility of further discussion. Literacy texts have true meaning, intrinsic to their artistic form which would eventually be disclosed if we applied genuine methods of interpretation and our deep knowledge. Any single reading and analysis cannot tell the final words. New a reading brings new perception and re-interpretation can produce the meaning for a question perpetually unanswered, a problem eternally unanswered.

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