



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 3. Issue.3.,2016 (July-Sept. )



INTERNATIONAL  
STANDARD  
SERIAL  
NUMBER  
INDIA

2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

EARLY FEMINISM ELEMENTS IN THE WORKS OF BRONTE SISTERS

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ABSTRACT

Although feminism in literature began in early 1960's, there were many writers who had been preparing for it since long. In English fiction the first few names that come to mind in that respect are Bronte sisters who gave much more power to the woman characters than known earlier. This aspect of their writing has not been explored fully by the critics and scholars. This paper is focused on the elements of feminism in their fiction which paved way for later generation authors and inspired them to present the women characters in more meaningful ways in their literary works.

**Key words:** Feminism, Bronte Sisters, Victorian literature, Charlotte Bronte, Emily Bronte, Anne Bronte

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"This has always been man's world"<sup>1</sup> laments Simone de Beavuir. She goes on speaking about the suppressive character of this world where man is always the subject and woman "the object, the other."<sup>2</sup> It is in this context she goes on explaining the social conditioning going on since centuries, because of which she finally concludes that one is not born a woman, but becomes one. Another feminist critic also speaks of the age old practice "to acculturate woman to tradition roles"<sup>3</sup> so that, as C.P. Gilman points out, woman's world are confined to four C's- cooking, children, church and clothes.<sup>4</sup> As soon as a baby girl is born, she is subjected to a series of moral lessons to become a dutiful daughter, a devoted wife, and finally a sacrificing mother. This pattern of social life is reflected in literature too. Literature has been a true mirror of man's idea of woman and not vice versa. So, history has become in reality "his history".<sup>5</sup> Because of the Biblical fall of Adam on account Eve's greed to taste the forbidden fruit, woman was supposed to be, in the western mind, as "woe-man".

In the first stage of feminism during the 50's-60's, woman writers object to this male mind-set, this androcentric or male-centred principles. The feminist moves towards gynocentric (woman centred) criticism that a woman has as much right as man to lead and express her life. Male writers in the past wrote novels with central figure of a man or hero, and a subordinate female character was also created just to add romance to the life of the hero. In the novels of the past, woman characters had to play only second fiddle to their male counterparts. Not only this bias was resented by the feminists, they also questioned the very validity of truly reflecting a woman's experience by male writers. Even when the caption of the novel was based on heroines- as *Pamela* by Samuel Richardson and *Clarissa Harlowe* by Henry Fielding, the character of the heroine was yet modelled on the male concept of virtue. Jane Austen, particularly in the characters of Elizabeth in *Pride and*

*Prejudice* and Emma in the novel of the same name, tried to do some justice in presenting the female points of view. Yet, there were two factors that hindered her true presentation. She was not bold enough to free herself from social conditioning, that's why, her heroine also thinks mostly in terms of marriage and money. Secondly, Austen was a pure artist, much more concerned about the formal pattern of the novel than anything else. Although writing at the peak of Romantic Age, her presentation of woman's life was singularly bereft of any touch of romance, so conscious she was of the prevailing provincial prudery. This is the precise reason that there are no passionate paragraphs in her novels and no mental agony in her heroines. Rather, in *Sense and Sensibility*, the heroine with passion (sensibility) is discarded in favour of the heroine with prude control (sense). It is not for nothing, therefore, that Bronte sisters were against Jane Austen and her brand of writing.

In English fiction, Bronte sisters are the first to voice, to the extent possible in the nineteenth century, the passionate imagination of their woman characters like Catherine, Jane Eyre, Shirley Keeldar, Lucy Snowe, etc. These woman characters are not conventional role models, but are endowed with a large measure of independence. The case of Catherine is the height of female assertiveness when she cries out in the most important ninth chapter of the novel *Wuthering Heights* "Nelly, I am Heathcliff!"..... "He's always, always in my mind.....as my own being."<sup>6</sup> This type of complete identification with a male is not only unknown in previous heroines, but is also quite unique even in later generations too. These three sisters have put so much of passionate energy and stormy vitality in their heroines that these woman characters may be rated as the first prototypes of feminist characters of today.

Charlotte Bronte's Jane Eyre is a classic example of how an orphan girl could gradually rise to courage and conviction all her own, tame a Byronic hero Mr. Rochester, and put him finally at her mercy. Rochester is the commanding, imperious person of "blind ferocity", who thinks and acts quite independently. But the same hero, after the tragic accident of burning, becomes blind and crippled. It is at this juncture that Jane Eyre reappears in his life to declare, "I am my own mistress" and "independent woman now." The helpless hero bends down to confess his predicament, "I have little left in myself". His pride is gone and he pleads before Jane. "My very soul demands you".<sup>7</sup> Jane Eyre has no helplessness of the earlier days because she has inherited enough property now, but because she loves Rochester so she marries him when he is at the receiving end. This couple is described quite precisely "as if a royal eagle chained to a perch, should be forced to entreat a sparrow."<sup>8</sup>

Jane Eyre is very much clear in her mind what she is doing and why she is doing that. Her life has no traditional dependence of a Victorian heroine. She is giving love to Rochester as normally a husband would do benevolently to his wife. This reversal of role is clearly hinted towards the end of novel when she declares "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".<sup>9</sup>

Although Jane Eyre is not rebellious as Catherine of *Wuthering Heights*, her character has subtle shades of novelty in it. Catherine has been only biologically a woman, but spiritually much more akin to a man in her independent adventure. She is not conceived according to "bourgeois morality"<sup>10</sup> because middle class social setup has never allowed any emergence of free woman. In a way it was good for Bronte sisters to live largely in isolation of their father's Parsonage. The isolation might have encouraged their originality, independent of Victorian social morality and literary bias. It was because of the society and literature of that time could not accept such passionate women characters that too conceived by women writers, that these three sisters had to assume ambiguous pen names like Acton, Ellis and Currer Bell.

But even under that cover, they were sufficiently free to create woman after woman of independent nature. After Catherine and Jane Eyre, even Shirley Keeldar in *Shirley* of Charlotte Bronte, is a sort of pioneer in presenting social upheaval due to industrial and technological development of the time. If Jane Eyre is endowed with "steely control,"<sup>11</sup> Shirley has sufficient "masculinity"<sup>12</sup> to steer her way clear of solid opposition. Even such a heroine as Lucy Snowe of *Villette* has rigorous control of her emotion when she has to face the man's world. In this way the Bronte Sisters, collectively called as stormy sisterhood, gave a new direction to the depiction of women character's who are among the earliest examples of independent woman.

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Dr. Asha Kaushik obtained Ph.D. Degree in English literature in 2011. Her research interests include feminism and social welfare. She has teaching experience of fifteen years and published nine research papers and two books in her academic career. Currently she professes "Professional Communication" at Centre for Professional Communication, University of Petroleum & Energy Studies, Dehradun, Uttarakhand, India.

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