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“ROMANTICISM”: THE ANIMATING FORCE IN JANE EYRE

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ABSTRACT

*Jane Eyre* is an English novel written by Charlotte Bronte under the pen name “Currer Bell”. It is a bildungsroman of the eponymous heroine Jane Eyre and thus traces her growth amidst the trajectory of life. However, *Jane Eyre* contains several features that are generally identified with the nineteenth century age called as the Romantic Age. Romanticism is generally classified as a term where the centrality of Nature, Imagination and quest for beauty, truth and love becomes paramount. However, the affective contents of ‘Romanticism’ are far more heterogeneous than just the love for Nature. *Jane Eyre* exposes the centrality of romanticism in the novel by laying bare its core when read between the lines. It thrives on the proponents of wonder and passion, depicts an amalgamation of realism, fairy tales, Gothic and sublimates the eros of romance into a moral inspiration for future generations. We can easily draw an analogy with the epistemological and ontological similarity with Keats, Shelley, Coleridge and even with Blake to some extent. This paper seeks to underline the romantic tenets which are a plenty in this novel. It offers a fresh approach to human cognition just like the stalwarts of early nineteenth century. The paper also aims to highlight the novel as a text which imbibes the Romantic characteristics of wonder and passion, depicting it as not just a mere love story culminating in a marriage at the end but a story of emancipation of a woman and restoring matriarchy within the inner margins of Romanticism.

**Keywords:** Centrality, cognition, epistemological, ontological, romanticism.

*Jane Eyre* the novel is a bildungsroman of the eponymous protagonist. Throughout the novel we see her approach towards her immediate surroundings. She is depicted as a woman incapable of perceiving anything rationally or in a mechanical way rather she responds in a poetic frenzy. We are reminded of Coleridge’s “Ancient Mariner” when we see Jane responding to the ‘red room’ of her childhood persecutions. Her response towards the Wintry day is equally Romantic, full of affective fallacies and passions. While reading Bewick’s “History of British Birds” Jane is awestruck by the arctic expanses of remote lands and she pictures herself as a solitary reaper amidst the primitive isolation. The excerpts that follow in the book are all Romantic in their content – a single ancient rock in a sea of billow and spray, a broken boat stranded at a coast, the cold and ghastly Coleridgean moon glancing etc. In all these images we find the Romanticism of ‘fairy places forlorn’ and

the medievalism of romance along with the fancy of the infantile mind. Thus, undoubtedly we find a revival of wonder and passion which are characteristics of the Romantic Age.

The novel further unfolds by rupturing the narrative surfaces of Victorian realism with elements of fantasy, fairy tale and Gothic romance. It gives a romantic anima to the novel. Her love encounter can be described as an encounter between a Cinderella and a Byronic Hero. Thus, her love life is "romantic". Harold Bloom summarizes this 'Romantic' love as : " Byron's passive- aggressive sexuality- at once sadomasochistic, homoerotic, incestuous, and ambivalently narcissistic- clearly sets the pattern for the ambiguously erotic universe of *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*."

Charlotte Bronte focuses on the mythic elements while describing Jane's first meeting with Rochester. She describes it as an icy twilight, a rising moon, a great "lion – like" dog gliding through the shadows like a " North- of – England spirit...which ...haunted solitary ways", followed by " a tall steed, and on it's back a rider". The romanticized images hint at a Byronic universe of male sexuality and Rochester personifies the Byronic patriarch with "a dark face...stern features and a heavy brow." He is seen at once as a middle aged chivalric knight or the Romantic warrior who is also a lover. Rochester also highlights the other Romantic aspects by asking about Jane's paintings. He says, " Those eyes in the Evening Star you must have seen in a dream....And who taught you to paint wind ?" Ch 13. We find enormous amounts of Romantic images , metaphors through Jane's perception of her surroundings, her dream vision and her tryst with Rochester.

Romanticism as an artistic enterprise aimed at emancipation from the bondages pertaining to moral, socio- economic, political , theological and aesthetic ideas. The implications of Romanticism were more or less revolutionary as envisaged in Blake's take on the French Revolution or Shelley's invocation to the 'Destroyer' and 'Preserver'. *Jane Eyre* is invested with questions of radical freedom and growth of the protagonist seen and shown in a revolutionary light that is 'Romantic' at it's core. On the outset the novel might simply come across a love story resulting into a marriage but a careful study unravels the hidden layers like – the struggle that the woman faces to shape her life solely by her own will and action. From orphanhood to installation of matriarchy in feudal and patriarchal Thornfield Hall we can see Jane's growth as a female Prometheus reaping her own economic and emotional outcome at the end of the novel. She is seen struggling against various oppressive forces like – childhood trauma, loneliness, despair, madness, cold, poverty, patriarchy, orthodoxy. She is brought face to face with a lot of "others" like the feudal lord, the mad woman in the attic, the androcrat, the missionary. However, she triumphs against these odds at the end. She speaks about her own narrative of struggle and victory and lays out for us her first person rendition of that reclaimed , rebellious achievement. Her story validates the presence of the flavor of the Romantic Age. We find a combination of a proletarian figure with Romantic Egotism of the first person voice and the spirit which aspires for liberty coupled with the restlessness of the wronged soul. All these elements were characteristics of the Romantic Age.

Gothic is the genre which generally is an anti realist mode of writing , invoking supernatural as well as subconscious elements passionately into the narrative. One of the spaces where we find Romantic imagination dramatizing it's politics, psychology etc was the genre called Gothic. Infact , Gothic helped Romantic imagination question the realist novels of the eighteenth century. It also played out the subversive propensities of human behavior. Bertha Mason like Geraldine in "Christabel" is a character which questions the limits of colonial, racial, patriarchal norms and also stands for the desired yet dangerous 'other' to Jane. Bertha is a climax of Gothic forces in *Jane Eyre*. There are plenty of images of haunting , persecution , supernatural elements in the novel which makes *Jane Eyre* as a Gothic Romance. On Jane's bridal mirror we finally see Bertha's monstrous shadow exploding. Even the vocabulary and imagery became phantasmic quite often like – strangling a new born, witchcraft, corpse and other thanatological metaphors are repeatedly used in Jane's narrative.

Thus, undoubtedly *Jane Eyre* bears every characteristics that allow us to delineate the text into the sphere of Romanticism. We find the emphasis on the inner world more than the outer, social, material world like Keats would do in his poetry. Jane's assertive longings to be free, independent, to be loved are similar to

what formed the Romantic crux of Shelley and Keat's mind. Also the monstrous excess, the teratological signifiers which are a plenty in Romantic texts are also found in *Jane Eyre* and it explodes the benign surfaces of realism, tradition, morality and norms. On reading *Jane Eyre* we are at once reminded of the monstrous yet fertile 'West Wind' of Shelley, Coleridge's 'Geraldine' through Bertha Mason's character also the ferocious 'Tyger' in Blake.

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