

How to Cite:

Ahmed, H. A., & Farhood, N. A. (2022). The female voice in Jane Eyre Novel. *International Journal of Health Sciences*, 6(S5), 1879–1886. <https://doi.org/10.53730/ijhs.v6nS5.9994>

The female voice in *Jane Eyre* Novel

Inst. Dr. Hayfaa Abdulkhaleq Ahmed

College of Basic Education, University of Diyala, Diyala, Iraq

Email: basiceng22te@uodiyala.edu.iq

Inst. Nadia Ahmed Farhood

College of Basic Education, University of Diyala, Diyala, Iraq

Email: basiceng14te@uodiyala.edu.iq

Abstract--Charlotte Bronte is considered as “one of the foremothers of contemporary women’s movement”. Charlotte wrote of simple ladies who were satisfied in their lives by the respect they received from themselves rather than from society. Charlotte Bronte’s *Jane Eyre* is one of the famous work of 19th century in which Bronte presented woman who rebelled against all the rules and traditions of her time in one hand, and destruction for the submissive and weak woman on the other hand. Though she was alone, weak, and outcast, yet she fought strongly to reach her purpose; to be independent and to force people to respect her for her dignity and self-esteem. Jane taught us whenever we were lost, hopeless in difficult situations; we should try to survive the life. For all women, the independence and equality as a human is the first task. Number of points were reflected and discussed in Bronte’s novel *Jane Eyre*. In this paper I try to shed the light upon these points.

Keywords---male domination, inequality, role of gender.

Introduction

Charlotte Bronte’s *Jane Eyre* was a notable work. This novel was built upon Charlotte’s own experiences. Through her heroine, Jane, Charlotte perused true love and equality in a difficult period where no right for women. Victorian era was distinguished by male domination, while women were under their control. Both, men and society treated women as an object. The novel has a great affected in Victorian period at that time because Bronte introduced a new woman for society. As Shulamith Firestone asserted, in her book “The Dialectic of Sex: The case of Feminist Revolution”, that “male domination is biologically based and as such existed long before the institution of private property produced. Male domination is the result of the “biological family”, whether matrilineal or patrilineal, within the family upon men, for protection if not subsistence.”

Jane Eyre was published in 1847 in a patriarch society of 19th century. A woman was to be submissive, domestic “Angel of the house” breed to marry and breed under a masculine oppression. Through this novel, Charlotte Bronte wanted to create “new woman” to be strong, courageous to defense herself, fight for her right, and to be independent. Thus, *Jane Eyre* was the weapon who faced and fought male- dominated society as Wang Guofu, the author of the literary Theory of Feminism said “*Jane Eyre* embodies new conceptions of women as heroines of vital strength and passionate feeling”

In 1979, Susan Gubar and Sandra M. Gilbert, American writers, made a search in feminine criticism with their work *The Madwoman in the Attic: The woman Writer and the Nineteenth –Century Literary Imagination*. They use Bertha’s character as a symbol of the so-called “Madwoman in the Attic” to make a discussion about perceptions toward female characters in a literary work of Victorian era. According to these two publishers, the female characters in all the works of this period were under the male-dominated and could be seen either the “angel” or the “monster”. An angel character is a woman who is dependent, weak, and submissive according to men’s view. She is the ideal character in a male-dominated society. Contrast to the “monster” character, a woman who is passionate, sensitive, and rebellious. These qualities caused a great deal of trouble and worry among men of this period.

Jane’s earlier life and the light of feminism

Her trip began in her childhood as the orphaned person of her aunt Mrs. Sara. From her early life, Jane possessed self-esteem, dignity, serious to justice and has a great trust in God. In addition, she was a passionate and disposal, yet she was treated badly because of her low class and lack of economic independence. One day, in her aunt’s Reed she set alone and looked through the barren of the window, she dreamed to be away from this place and approachable by the subjects of the book that she was read it “Be wick’s History of British Birds” this was the first weapon by her hand which gave her a power, that was, knowledge.

Unfortunately, after the death of her uncle John Reed, a good and rich, she was forced to live with her aunt Mrs. Sara Reed. Jane was treated horribly especially by her aunt and cousin. Her aunt hated her and called her as a jinx in addition her aunt’s children neglected and abused her. In fact, Jane was not attractive girl and has plain looks, but she was a passionate person. One day and after a strong argument with her cousin, Jane was beaten and imprisoned in a room for a night though she was ill. From this time Jane faced her aunt and refused to be treated as inferior being. She talked against discriminations to her with sharp and cold exposure. Jane also defended herself when her aunt accused her as a liar by saying “I am not deceitful. If I were, I should say I love you, but I declare, I don’t love you, I dislike you the worst of anybody in the world except John Reed, and this book about the liar, you may give to you girl, Georgiana, for it is she who tells lies, and not I (Bronte, 2003, p.63). She refused to be submissive, weak, or even to be under control of anybody even her aunt. Thus, as a reaction for this bad treated in her childhood, she decided to build her life differently and correctly.

From her childhood, she found herself imprisoned in a struggle to find her place in the universe and built herself as an empowered person, her emotion, her intellectual, and her moral growth too. In addition, her knowledge of her ability to challenging circumstances revealed her internal strength.

One can notice that from this moment her early feminism came out. Even when she rebelled against her aunt and her cousin John, this rebellious expressed her feminist consciousness in getting self-esteem from other people.

Against male-domination

From the beginning of creation, and generation after another, male has been regarded as the dominant gender. His controlling is manifested in most aspects of society. Men in general considered themselves the primary leader person in a patriarchal family, father is superior in the home and be powerfulness over all the members of the family; women, children, and property. Thus, Jane was the first woman who destroyed the male-dominated society. Charlotte refused the image of submissive woman who was weak, giving up to her fate and accepted to be under male domination.

A patriarchal society was the important theme that Bronte depicted in this novel. Jane, the heroine of the novel, endeavored to assert her identity in this male-dominated society. In this novel, Jane met three male characters; St. John Rivers, Mr. Brocklehurst, and Mr. Rochester. All of them worked to keep Jane in dominant position and forbade her to say her feelings and thoughts. They also attempted to find some forms of power to control her. She refused the proposals of St. John Rivers and Rochester; for the first one, because he asked her hand not for love but for duty. He found her a suitable missionary's wife to go with him to India. She rejected his proposal with confident and without hesitation, and she accepted to go with him to India as his sister. She hated Mr. Brocklehurst because she saw him a hypocritical man though he was a clergyman. Mr. Brocklehurst was the headmaster of a boarding school for orphaned girls. He treated the girls badly and keeping them half-starved. In addition, he always told them that they will go to Hell for their sins. Jane was working as a governess to Mr. Rochester, the third man, though he loved her but he used to command and order her as a result of a self-assured and accomplished man, and she was employer, thus he acted the role of master in their relationship. Most of the times, Rochester ordered her rather than request or asking. Therefore Jane believed strongly in the importance of woman's independence and endeavor to keep a position in life and not to be loan to others.

These quotations reflected Jane's strong personality, confident, and self-esteem. Through Jane, Charlotte Bronte fought to change the aspects of her society as male-domination:

"I told you I am independent, sir, as well as rich: I am my own mistress" (303).

It was a wonderful answer of portraying a clearly obvious feministic facet of this novel. One can notice that Jane succeeded to attain selfhood. She refused

strongly to have a husband, she thought that she never needs him or to support her because she was independent and responsible completely about her life. Through this line, she referred to her rejection of a woman who used to play, in a patriarchal society, the role of wife and mother.

“Nonsense again! Marry! I do not want to marry, and never shall marry” (341).

All women at that time were expected to marry. Their wish was to meet a good and suitable match. But for Jane, she was against this idea; she revolted against the traditional role of women.

“If I had anywhere else to go, I should be glad to leave it; but I can never get away from Gateshead till I am a woman”(20).

She was strong enough to depend on herself by taking her decision alone. She began to put plans for her life independently. It is a feminist quote because it showed that with womanhood appeared the ability to supply for oneself and attain a satisfying life.

“I before proved to you the absurdity of a single woman of your age proposing to accompany abroad a single man of mine”... “I say again, I will be your curate, but never your wife” (363-364)

Victorian society would never accept for a single woman and man of the same age to travel together alone, yet this was precisely what Jane suggested. At that time, any woman who did this would be marked as a mistress or improper. Thus, Jane refused the traditional roles of women and insisted to go anyway with anyone.

As any contemporary female writers, Charlotte Bronte did not follow the same characterizations to the strict duality between the terms of angel and monster. She gives her character Jane Eyre the quality of so-called angel as weak, submissive, and controlled in her behavior, but at the same time, she was extremely passionate, brave, and independent. Jane Eyre refused to be inferior person or even to be under the mal-domination in her life. Eventually, Jane defeated the social belief, and her self-controlled came as a result of her learn at Lowood School.

Against inequality

Women in all times felt unequal treatment, in which they were considered as weak, defenseless, and inferior. This idea put women's position under men control because their statue was lower than men. But as human beings, both men and women should be equal because they have the same feeling and same spirit. Victorian society did not confess this truth, and this was the problem with Jane. Victorian period was a time of male -dominated and male-controlled, while women were subject to the voice of men. There were discriminated in a patriarchal society. Moreover, Victorian society was built upon state of people, i. e., divided into levels. For instance, women of lower class have no right for a good life or good marriage. Victorian women did not occupy any important position in society, and

if there was, they were as a teacher or might be served as private governess in a family.

In fact the problem with people of this period they believed that they born inequality and people of high statue scorn the low, in addition, men saw themselves superior to women. Thus, Jane was a reflection for all women who were treated badly and unequally in all fields of life. She rebelled for the right of equality. Hence, the main and important aim of the feminist theory is to achieve equality in the world and to free women who were under an oppression, discrimination and hierarchy state. A wonderful response to Rochester when he asked Jane for marriage, she replied:

Do you think I can stay to become nothing to you? Do you think I am an automaton? A machine without feeling? ... Do you think, because I am poor, obscure, plain, and little, I am soulless and heartless? You think wrong – I have as much soul as you, - and full as much heart... I am not talking to you now through the medium of custom, conventionalities, nor even of mortal flesh; - it is my spirit that addresses your spirit; just as if both and passed through the grave, and we stood at God's feet, equal – as we are(252).

R.B. Martin considered *Jane Eyre* as the first feminist novel “although there is no a hint in the book of any desire for political, legal, educational, or even intellectual equality between the sexes” he said. He added that the aim of Bronte through Jane was to prove that both sexes are the same; they have the same “heart” and same “spirit”.

Jane struggled strongly to achieve equality and to overcome oppression. Not only this, but she struggled to fight against male domination, those who believed women to be inferior to them and tried (women) to treat them as such. Although some early critics argued that *Jane Eyre* was as unrealistic and shocking depiction by presenting a female with a strong voice, an intellectual, in addition she was independent. All these features ran contrary to the real and proper behavior of female of nineteenth century.

Gender and the role of women

Gender roles meant what people expected men and women to do according to their gender. In Victorian time, woman's life was devoted for her home, children, and her husband, while husband's role was to work outside home in a corruption and immorality world. Victorian society was built on the idea of difference between men and women, not only about physically but intellectually most.

Jane destructed strongly the gender role of nineteenth century; where society heavily valued gender roles always tried to change Jane into the subservient and ideal woman of the time, but her fighting and spirit which displayed throughout the events of the novel served as an empowering motive of how gender roles deject or demoralize the spirit, inspirations, and dreams of a free soul and individual. Jane refused to be a copy of nineteenth century's woman, a woman who search for a suitable man to marry him and spending her time before marriage how to be

a successful wife by learning housewife skills such as cooking, washing, and weaving. Women understood that they did not allow taking the same place of education as men. This is the only one impression of inequality and injustice, ejection a free soul to remain reduced because it was society's tradition. Although men were also impressed by society in different way as Felicia Appell stated "... men not only had to gain woman's respect before marriage, but they had to impress the rest of society and their male gender. Men became victims of the social pressures because their peers scrutinized their success". Both men and women belief that they could affect their lives; woman should be feminine, pure, and put down all her desires and dreams, men on the other hand, must be successful and raise a family, otherwise men would not be seen as masculine or rightfully useful .

Therefore, Jane struggled to make her voice heard and to prove that she is here. Her journey was to prove her identity. She refused to be like the women of her time, to be economically devalued and socially marginalized, instead, she fought to be independent especially when she rejected to marry Rochester when she was unequal to him. She refused to depend on him financially though she loved him most. Jane worked as a governess to support herself and to build her own life through her independence. She refused to marry Mr. Rochester when she was poor and unequal because she believed that this marriage will imprison her freedom to reach her aim and she will be under men's control completely. In addition she refused the idea of marriage without love when St. John Rivers asked her for marriage because she was unbelieved to marry just for "a giver and protector". Jane upraised for self, presenting her sense of justness and willingness to destroy the gender role of women being ailment to her "superiors", moreover, her passion and rejection to compromise to fit Rochester's aim of marry were examples of the refusal to denial encircled to a limiting institution.

This passage is quoted from chapter 12(vol. 1, chapter 12) is one of the most interesting in the novel. After she has achieved her wish of leaving Lowood and finding a new life, she still finds herself restless and stands on the roof of Thornfield looking out and thinking about what else the world may hold. She expressed what a radically feminist philosophy was for her time:

Women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise of the faculties, and a field of their efforts as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer; and it is narrow-minded in their more privileged fellow-creatures to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings, to playing on the piano and embroidering bags. It is thoughtless to condemn them, or laugh at them, if they seek to do more or learn more than custom has pronounced necessary for their sex.

The quotation reflected the improper and radical feministic perspective of men and women during the Victorian, patriarchal, time of Charlotte. The quotation also expressed Jane's yearning for independence and equality. Through Jane,

Bronte criticized what she thought to be crushing and suppression Victorian constructed of proper roles. This short passage explicitly presented that Victorian woman endured a lot from being “locked up” metaphorically. Bertha Mason, for instance, who was ultimately turned almost inhuman because she was neglected, and suppressed feelings turned her to be madwoman. Bertha could be seen as a symbol of the confined female’s condition.

Jane Eyre held up as a symbol of a new woman who is equal to men. She talked frankly about everything inside her, presented her ideas, hopes, aspiration, and aims in her life. She refused to be silent or shy because she thought that speech is a good weapon to defense her right and to preserve her personality. Eventually, Jane succeeded to get whatever she wanted, a life full of true love, esteem, and equality. She fought strongly for her survival, surviving for equality in wealth, statue, and marriage.

Conclusion

Charlotte Bronte is considered as “one of the foremothers of contemporary women’s movement”. In her refinement, Charlotte wrote of simple women those who depended upon the respect of themselves rather than society to be satisfied in their lives. In her novel *Jane Eye* and through her characters, Bronte succeeded to give the gift of the modern woman. A woman, who drew her life by her own criteria, determined not by her own society but by herself and herself only.

In Charlotte Bronte’s *Jane Eyre* depicted Jane as a feminist heroine of the 19th century. At that time, women depended on men financially and socially and considered as propriety only useful for marriage and family life. Jane acquired totally independence and showed throughout her story a new meaning of marriage and value of family to women.

Acknowledgment

This study was supported by the Department of English language, College of Education IBN Rushd, University of Baghdad for providing us with all the required facilities to do the recording for the subjects of the study. We are also grateful to two anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments on the earlier version of this paper. Special thanks are further due to Department of English, college of Basic Education, University of Diyala for their staff support in providing up to date references in the field of the study.

Funding

The authors declare that the work was completed without financial support from any person or organization.

Declaration of interest statement

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare

Data availability statement

The dataset for the current study is available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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