

# Comments on *Jane Eyre* from the Perspective of Feminism

Louis G.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Shandong Science and Technology University, China

Correspondence: Louis G., Shandong Science and Technology University, China. E-mail: 40375687@qq.com

Received: June 13, 2015      Accepted: July 3, 2015      Online Published: July 16, 2015

doi:10.5430/wjss.v2n2p34      URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5430/wjss.v2n2p34>

## Abstract

Feminism is a prominent and controversial topic in literary world. Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* is frequently cited as the earliest major feminist novel. This paper analyzes feminism in the novel. The main character Jane and another mad woman Bertha are both representative of feminist characters, for they embody most of the features of that kind. In this paper, the author points out the places where feminism is used in this novel, and analyzed them in details.

**Keywords:** Comments, Feminism, *Jane Eyre*

## 1. Introduction

Feminism has been a prominent and controversial topic in writings for the past two centuries. With novels such as Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, or even William Shakespeare's *Macbeth* the fascination over this subject by authors is evident. In Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*, the main character, Jane Eyre, explores the depth at which women may act in society and finds her own boundaries in Victorian England.

## 2. Comments on *Jane Eyre*

*Jane Eyre*, the masterpiece of British women writer Charlotte Bronte has gained great fame since its birth in 1847. The reason why it has become the monument in the history of British women literature is that it declares the real wake of female consciousness. *Jane Eyre* embraces many feminist views in opposition to the Victorian feminine ideal. Charlotte Bronte herself was among the first feminist writers of her time, and wrote this book in order to send the message of feminism to a Victorian-Age Society in which women were looked upon as inferior and repressed by the society in which they lived. This novel embodies the ideology of equality between a man and woman in marriage, as well as in society at large. As a feminist writer, Charlotte Bronte created this novel to support and spread the idea of an independent woman who works for herself, thinks for herself, and acts of her own accord.

There is an ample amount of evidence to suggest that the tone of *Jane Eyre* is in fact a very feminist one and may well be thought as relevant to the women of today who feel they have been discriminated against because of their gender. At the beginning of the 19th century, little opportunity existed for women, and thus many of them felt uncomfortable when attempting to enter many parts of society. The absence of advanced educational opportunities for women and their alienation from almost all fields of work gave them little option in life: either become a house wife or a governess. Although today a tutor may be considered a fairly high class and intellectual job, in the Victorian era a governess was little more than a servant who was paid to share her scarce amount of knowledge in limited fields to a child. With little respect, security, or class one may certainly have the consciousness of revolt.

Though the narration of the love story between Jane Eyre and Mr. Rochester, this novel creates a female figure who is poor, low-status, but pursues freedom and equality. Jane lives in a harsh condition because of the death of her parents, and she has to live in her uncle's house. The indifference of her aunt and the humiliation of her cousins make Jane's life even harder. However, all of these misfortunes didn't lead her to depravity, but turn out her courage to revolt. Jane Eyre, the character described by Charlotte Bronte, possesses distinct consciousness of female. The honesty and purity of Jane won the respect of Mr. Rochester, also his deep love. But afterwards, Jane found that Rochester had already married. She left him firmly due to herself respect. She tried to uphold the dignity as a woman, no matter what she had to pay. She wanted to be an open and abroad wife, but not a lover on the sly. In order to rescue his mental disordered wife, Mr. Rochester got blind and one hand disabled, and also bankrupt. After Jane had

leant of this fact, she got back to Rochester without hesitation with her sincere love. That is somehow a happy ending.

The love story between Jane and Rochester is in fact the description of the emotional experience of Charlotte Bronte herself. She led a life full of difficulties and frustrations. She lost her mother when she was only a child. She beard hardships in the charity school for clergyman. And then her two dear sisters passed away. Her aunt doesn't like her and she suffered from the ill treatment of housewife when she worked as a family teacher. What's more, the depravity and death of her brother, and the illness of father came one after another. However, all of these misfortunes didn't defeat her. The disappointment of her first love used to make her sprout a thought. Because at that time in British, it was stupid love a married man. As a matter of fact, in February 1842, Charlotte and her sister Emily went to Brussels as pupils, and got to know Mr. Heger in that period. He is a warm-hearted professor, who gave instructions for French language, and also a married man. The talent displayed by the sisters brought them to the notice of Mr. Heger. Charlotte prolonged her study duration from half a year to one year. The sisters didn't get back to British until the message of the death of their aunt arrived. Afterwards, Mr. Heger wrote to Charlotte to suggest her go back to teach, and his behavior was supported by Mrs. Heger. While after her return to teach Mr. Heger English, the relationship between she and the Hegers undergone subtle and obvious changes, and fell into crisis at last. Mrs. Heger appeared to have become jealous of her. The letters she wrote to Mr. Heger after returning home may well be called love letters. So she stopped writing and applied herself, in silence, to discipline her feelings. Therefore, the prototype of Jane Eyre is Charlotte to a large extent, and Rochester possesses some elements of Mr. Heger.

Charlotte lived in British in 19<sup>th</sup> century, and at that period, women's love, thought, career and interest were under great pressure of the conservative power. It is really hard to image the difficulties Charlotte met in her literature writing career. For a long period, women were oppressed in politics, excluded in society, poor in economic, contained in emotion and thought and were educated by men's autocracy. For this reason, the female's images formed two extremes under male writer's pen, one is fairy maiden with innocence, beauty and selflessness, and the other is devil with complexity, buffoonery and selfishness. Therefore, a group of active women writers appeared in writing stage who attempted to subvert the settled image of women in men's heart. They examined female in a new visual angle. And their works disclose the truth of the low status of women, describe their suffering and privation, and deconstruct the old style relation between men and women. They moulded images of new type female, who have courage for the independence of themselves and the liberation of thought. In these women writer's view, the weakness, dependence and gentleness of women are not innate. They may have thought and right to decide what to do. The silence, anger, craziness and hatred began to appear in literary works, which gave equality to female.

In Victoria period, women writer expressed their thirst for freedom and equality due to the isolated social status and constrained emotion of female. *Jane Eyre* successfully creates two female images, one is Jane Eyre who has intense consciousness for independence, and the other is Bertha who is mental disordered and the victim of marriage. The two are quite different women with different experience. The portrait of the character Jane is opposite to the ideal female image of Victoria period, for women were no longer 'silent angel'. In G... she was defined as 'crazy cat' and mouse by the Lides. She spoke out the declaration 'I must speak' in her childhood, and she made up her mind to defend her words and deeds. Jane keeps her dignity in her love with Rochester. When facing Rochester, she never feels herself inferior for her status as a family teacher. She thought that they were equal. '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! And if God gifted me with beauty and much health, I should have made it as hard for you to leave me, as it is now for me to leave you. I am not talking to you now though the medium of custom, conventionalities, nor even of moral flesh; it is my spirit that addresses your spirit; just as if both had passed though the grave, and we stood at God's feet, equal, as we are!' These classical words are very familiar to readers. Though these words, Jane expressed her wishes to pursue equality and keep dignity. However, another woman character Bertha was not able to express her emotions in her heart. She appears five times in the novel, yet four times with crazy deeds. She almost lost the right to speak except that 'strange smile, clear, stiff but sad' which Jane heard when she visited Thornfield for the first time. Bertha could only scream like animals. She was locked in the dark loft by Rochester, and could only knock and hit in that narrow room. Nobody knew her feeling and thought. Rochester asserted that she has history of mental disease, only because her mother used to have that disease. What's more, to Rochester, Bertha was too indulged and lewd. Bertha displayed her existence by her own method. She was always waiting for chances to run away from the loft and revenge. At the end, this crazy woman burnt down the Thornfield manor which symbolizes prison. She became the saboteur of male authority tradition from the victim, and finished the task of revenge in her own peculiar manner.

Bertha, the image of a mad woman and a victim, makes a lot of writers captivated because 'madness is the most

feminist, respectable, and the least threat to faithless man and powerful parents'. Fuke explains in his *Madness and Civilization* that 'Love, which is over-deep but disappointing, especially fooled by death, has no choice but to ask for madness'. Men's madness is associated with social politics, while women's are related to men, sex and love. The mould of mad women is the furious accuse to the cruel reality. Women writers tried to resist the constrains which patriarchy imposed on female though the portrait of rebellious mad women. Women writers lived in a men-created house, so their literary works were tied up by traditional patriarchy. As a result, their works contains many images of fleeting and madness. In their opinion, the madness that those women characters displayed is not accident, but the metaphorical expression of their deep mentality. It is a form in which to fight against patriarchy, and the real voice of feminism could be expressed though it. Usually, people pay much attention to Jane and Rochester. While the mad woman Bertha who is locked in the loft gets less attention. It seems that she only appears as a supplementary figure who is created for the novel's plot. While when readers examine carefully, it is not difficult to find that it is not additional but a mysterious spirit. The mad woman was a live Mrs. Rochester, so she became the obstacle to Jane and Rochester's marriage. Bertha is a distorted and uglified image of victim. To some extent, the mad woman is Jane in anger, and she takes actions in stead of Jane. The following fact is worth considering. Jane dreamed about the deconstruction of manor before her marriage, while one year later, Bertha really burnt down the manor. Bertha stood on the roof after setting on fire, and Rochester got blind and one hand disabled in order to rescue her. It seems that Bertha is helping Jane to let off her anger. The fury of Jane, in that age, is mutual for women protagonists and women writers. That is the mental burden of female towards the patriarchy culture. Women writers expressed their sufferings and fury though madness of women, such as Bertha, and that is the hidden means to fight against patriarchy in that historical condition. Women hit back at men's authority powerfully though madness.

Bertha died in flame after setting on fire, which often appears in women writers' works as ending. Death is the variant of madness, and it is carried on the collapse caused by madness. Death, which often appears in women's works, has metaphorical relation with madness, no matter it is caused by mental collapse or physical disease. The madness and suicide embodies a kind of refusal in common, that is, the women characters refuse to live in the patriarchy culture. Therefore, in this level, death is the same as madness for they both hate living under patriarchy. Death has become the action for self-realization, so the show more or less thirsty and appreciation to death. In their opinion, death could lead them to spirit freedom; therefore, sometimes they even go to death on purpose. These images of death enrich the reading theories of feminism and make them embody active subverting meaning. Edna in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, Susan in Doris Lessing's *The Room Nineteen*, and Bertha in *Jane Eyre* have the same ending, that is, they all show their revolt though death and protest against the unequal fate that men impose on women. Their death is not tragic but implies regeneration and awaking.

There several unique points in *Jane Eyre*'s writing method. First, the author uses the images of ice, fire and moon, especially fire. Fire is always closely related to the fate of leading characters. It draws the track of the existence of life. Therefore, when the raging flames lick the fire tongue, it has composite implied meanings in the expectation. On one hand, it is fire of passion and destruction and implies the crazy entanglement of soul and body, affection and desire. On the other hand, it is fire of regeneration. The fire of desire implies hope and sublimation between reality and ideal, also between hell and paradise. The fire stands for Jane's anger and her consciousness of revolt. Jane compared her fury to "a stretch of lawn on fire, prancing, strafing and engulfing". Fire is also a tool which helps to bring about love. In the night of fire, Jane saved Rochester, and the fire afterwards led Rochester to blind and disabled. The fire makes male and female in a equal status and go to marriage temple at last. What's more, fire is a kind of accuse. The mad woman Bertha set on fire twice, and fire become her meanings of seeking freedom.

Second, symbolism is used in several places. After Jane and her cousin got conflicted, she was locked in the Red House. The Red House, which is described in detail by the author, is the center sign of the Reeds. It is a chilling place where women are oppressed. What's more, it is also a place where female revolution comes into being. While the loft in Thornfield manor give a funereal feeling, and women's body and spirit are both imprisoned. To Jane Eyre, it is also a place of imprisonment. The grotesque arrangement of the scenes makes the novel in a mysterious atmosphere. After locked in the Red House, Jane was daunted because as if she saw her uncle's ghost; In Thornfield manor, terrible sound of laughter came to her time and time again; Rochester's bed room got on fire mysteriously; The visitor Mr. Melson was stabbed when he stayed overnight in the manor; Jane's clothes was torn off before her marriage. All the above event has terrific color of Gothic novels.

And third, the first person narration was used in this novel, and "my readers" was used many times which intensify the consciousness of looking readers as close friends, and this form address is very similar to that in letter form novels. It seems that the author tells her story volubly to readers, which creates a feeling of kindness. At the end of this novel, Bronte uses "Readers, I married to him" which also shows Jane's priority in marriage and her strong

self-consciousness. Jane lost the status as the manor's hostess, but she won the equal status for a wife in the family.

### 3. Conclusion

*Jane Eyre* broke through the 3C world of British conventional female, (ie, Church, Cookery and Children), and it is an evergreen tree in literary world. The story of Jane and her love story with Rochester open a complete new world for the author and other who fight for women's rights. Bronte moulds a female character who looks personality and dignity as the most important thing. It is the veto to deal marriage which depends on money, pedigree and beautiful appearance, and it claims that the true essence of love is devotion and giving. Female can receive respect and find their happiness only through their independence, self-dignity and self-love.

### References

- Charlotte Bronte. *Jane Eyre*. Foreign language teaching and research press.
- Martin, Robert B. (1966). *Charlotte Bronte's Novels: The Accents of Persuasion*. NY: Norton.
- Carol Bigwood, & Earth Muse. (1993). *Feminism, Nature, Art*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Carolyn Merchant. (1979). *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution*. New York: Harper & Row.