



## “No Net Ensnare Me”: A Journey towards Equality and Independence in Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*

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**Abstract:** *The history of women’s struggle to achieve their own position and rights is a long one. Living in a same country, same society, same culture, they are deprived from their own rights as a human being till in the second decades of the twenty first century they have been assaulted by the male members of the society. Later Feminist thinkers and critics have discovered the problem at the heart of feminism in various ways: oppression, exploitation, subjugation, discrimination, inequality and exclusion, sexism, misogyny, chauvinism, patriarchy --- all of these terms invented with limitation of the women related with women social facilities. Until this relevant problem regarding women will be solved, the question of gender equality will be raised again and again. And women have to fight for their rights. Victorian women novelist Charlotte Brontë’s masterpiece Jane Eyre deals with critical, social, cultural, issues regarding gender, sexuality, materialism, patriarchy, education, subjectivity, race, religion, class, feminine style of the canon. This paper seeks to analyze gender roles, women subjugation and their struggles as well as their utmost quest for independence and equality and ultimate attainment of their desired goal.*

**Keywords:** *Feminist, Oppression, Exploitation, Subjugation, Discrimination, Inequality, Exclusion, Sexism, Misogyny, Chauvinism, Patriarchy, Subjectivity, Race, Quest for Independence and Equality*

The proto –feminist text *Jane Eyre* concerns with struggles of a feminist protagonist. In the literary field, feminist criticism is part of that criticism which is concerned with the portrayal of women in literature and with changing women’s position in society by freeing them from their oppressive restraints in the patriarchal society. Generally it depicts the pathetic subjugated condition of the women and their legal fight or struggle for a position of equality in a male dominated universal world order (Barry 125). *Jane Eyre* delineates physical and emotional entrapment of women of different strata and fight of the eponymous heroine in order to make herself free from the snares which are ensnared by patriarchal authority.

Literature always mirrors the society, specially the hypocrisy practiced within it. Victorian Age is remarkable for its progressive nature. It is the age of democracy, social equality, individuality, and education. But in the garb of its progressiveness, the situation of women was not at all an exception. They were thoroughly oppressed, subjugated and tortured by the patriarchal society where gender play a vital role as the social class. With the interpellation of falsified romanticized ideology, ‘angel of the house’, they planned and tried to transform women into domestic animals. An ideal woman’s life should be pivoted around the domestic orb of her family and home. They were reduced to nothing but a material especially for marriage. The women of this era particularly middle class were brought up with the ideologies that they ought to be pure, innocent, tender, submissive, sexually undemanding, and most importantly obedient. They could not demand any rights for their own sake. Cunningly patriarchy deprived them even from their educational right. As it was very easy to exploit an uneducated ignorant one, as it is today also. They claimed that women were incapable of learning as they were intellectually inferior to them. Moreover educated women were basically ornamental things of display which was also restricted within the boundary of upper class fanciful world. Women only got the chance of educating themselves not in literary field but in such kind of field which mainly served the domestic purposes – knitting, singing, cooking, weaving etc. Skill in these grounds perfected women to be leveled as ‘the angel of the house’. If any woman dared to unbind herself from this conventional stereotypical boundary, she was stigmatized as monster or madwoman.

In this scenario, Victorian woman Charlotte Brontë unmask the very struggle of women and particularly her own experiences through her eponymous protagonist, Jane, in her masterpiece. Though she did not write an out and out autobiography, but the novel is touched with autobiographical elements. Like all women, the author has experienced same kind of sufferings and anxieties as the protagonist Jane. She had to fight against all odds and ordeals not only in social domain but also in literary career.

The condition was so oppressive for a woman writer that she could not publish her creation under her own authorship. Situation compelled Charlotte Brontë to publish her novel *Jane Eyre* with a pseudonym i.e. Currer Bell, that not revealed the authentic identity. The very name is ambiguous, neither suggestive of masculinity nor femininity. Strikingly the bestseller masterpiece had rapidly ornamented with negative reviews of literary critics after the revelation of the real identity of the women writer. It is indicative of the harsh bleak reality that even the so-called educated domain of male would not behave generously to share space with a woman of talent. This humiliating attitude of the male writers towards women writers produced an anxiety within them. And this problem of the anxiety of authorship is clearly pointed out by two eminent feminist critics Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in their essay *The Madwoman in the Attic* (Childers 14). Scholars have suggested that the enclosure imagery was used as a way to portray the figurative imprisonment these women felt in their own lives. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar comment on the use of —obsessive imagery of confinement and how it —reveals the ways in which female artists feel trapped and sickened both by suffocating alternatives and the culture that created them (Gilbert and Gubar 64). The dominating force of patriarchy and the societal restrictions of the time prevented women from being free to fully express their opinions. Instead, women used their talents as writers to create scenes in their works that evoked images of enclosure.

Belonging to such unequal society, where women were subjects of subjugation in all strata of society, she had written this novel as a counter challenge.

Though different literary genres can be attributed to the very novel *Jane Eyre*, it is a bildungsroman. In literary field, bildungsroman is a “novel of formation” or “novel of education” (Abrams 200). Basically novelists exploit this genre to portray the development of the protagonist’s mind and character, the journey from childhood to adulthood, from innocence to experience. Unlike the other famous bildungsromans, perhaps for the first time, in this novel, the development (physical and spiritual) of a woman is pictured by the author. Charlotte Brontë’s appropriation of the particular form for her unconventional protagonist marks one of the many ways in which her feminist novel challenges the accepted Victorian typical conception of gender politics and hierarchy, making the fact crystal clear that a woman’s inner development merits as much attention as that of a man. Hence like Tom in *Tom Jones*, Pip in *Great Expectation*, Oliver in *Oliver Twist*, David in *David Copperfield*, *Jane Eyre* narrated the external as well as internal development of the female protagonist. Her graphic journey and quest for a meaningful existence and identity as well as equal position in society by subverting gender role and position.

Deliberately, author presents the struggle of a common ordinary looking orphan who was helpless in every term and whom everybody tried to suppress and marginalize. Through the sketches of the journey of feminist protagonist Jane, Charlotte Brontë picturizes the fighting –self and the tremendous struggles of the early nineteenth century women who were threatened and ensnared in the cobweb of male suppression and social concepts.

*Jane Eyre* can be categorized as the critical text of feminism not only because of the extra-ordinary life story of its ordinary heroine but also of the representation of the various types of women characters of the then Victorian society. They play different roles – some works as the agents of the patriarchy, some accept the traditional conventions of the society and moulds themselves according to their demands. A few has courage to raise their voice against the authority of dominance.

Here the women agents of patriarchy are Mrs. Reed and Grace Poole. Both of them control women for the sake male. They ameliorate their sufferings with deliberate intention though they belong to the same sex. On the other hand, women like Miss Temple and Helen Burns represent that domain of women who unquestionably bow down to the patriarchal authority. By controlling emotions, they can sacrifice their selves and frame them as the ‘angel of the house’.

It is not at all easy job to turn the citadel of patriarchal cruelties upside down. It is not a smooth creamy way to go, but a hard thorny one. A very few women have the guts to protest or go through that kind of way. But when they try, authoritative force executes ploys then and there to control them. And the easiest way is to encage them with the accusation of monster or madness. Probably, Bertha Mason is the victim of such sort of tricks.

Our strong-willed protagonist Jane decides to drive her journey in her own way. She does not agree to be stereotyped herself with the traditional stigma of ‘angel of the house’. In this process of development, she has to confront numerous ordeals in every phase of the life. She fights against all the trials and tribulations of life which the patriarchal society set on her way to ensnare her in their net of domination. But she has her independent will to fly.

From the very beginning of the novel, it is obvious that Jane is fortunate to be suffered and harassed by the patriarchal force. Her experience with her Cousin John Reed is indicative of the fact, even the apparently innocent child world is very much influenced by patriarchal agency of oppression. Consciously or unconsciously, they are aware of the gender role and gender discrimination. Simultaneously, it is also fore-grounded that Jane is not a conventional woman whom patriarchal mechanism can easily subdue.

We first meet with our protagonist when she is reading a book of Bewick named *History of British Birds*. It is suggestive of her hunger for knowledge as only knowledge can free one from the darken ignorance. John chides Jane for being lowly orphan and hurls a book at Jane. John’s interruption and knocking her down

make us understand the fact that patriarchy does not allow women to be knowledgeable. Whenever they try to stand for their rights, they are knocked down.

In spite of harassment and oppression of her elder cousin, John Reed, the only living male member of the Reed family at Gateshead, she has the courage or gusto to protest for herself. She reacts angrily against John's harassment, she also verbally abuses him by calling him – “a murderer”, “a slave driver”, and comparing him to “the Roman emperors”(6).

Jane defends herself from further physical injury. But this act of shielding herself is considered as an act which is beyond her limitation. Jane is told that she ought not to think herself on equality with John. It is her place to be humble, and she should always try to make herself agreeable to them.

From her childhood, Jane always emphasizes on her self. But the entire Reed family in general and John and his mother Mrs. Reed in particular cannot tolerate her such sort of liberal attitude. As an agent of patriarchal oppression, always she favors her son blindly. She is blame for whole incident, she is accused of “flying at master John”, displaying “such a picture of passion” and she is called “a mad cat” (7). As a punishment she is imprisoned in the Red Room which is nothing other than the symbol of patriarchal death chamber. It stands not only her literal but also metaphorical imprisonment. In the Red Room Jane's unconscious mind becomes operative. This horrible experience makes her realize that she is the significant “other”, marginalized in the small unit of an institution named family:

All John Reed's violent tyrannies, all his sisters' proud indifference, all his mother's aversion, all the servants' partiality, turned up in my disturbed mind like a deposit in a turbid well. (10)

In the Red Room, her own reflection in the mirror seems to her disturbing and even her own image appears alien to her. Now she senses that she is doubly imprisoned – in the room as well as in the mirror, both physically and psychologically. This horrible sensation chased her throughout the story until she breaks herself free from this enchainment.

The positive impact of this ghastly, gruesome experience upon Jane is that it makes her stronger and less afraid to defend herself further. And this is the genesis of her flight towards equality.

Another struggle of Jane's life starts when she is shifted to Lowood from Gateshead. There she faces the wooden Mr. Brocklehurst, another tormenting attorney of patriarchy at the school. To dominate the women he uses religion skillfully as an instrument. Mr. Brocklehurst, the second male character whom Jane has to confront to resist the typical male dominance. The Victorian “super ego” Mr. Brocklehurst appears to her as:

A black pillar [...] a sable clad shape standing erect on the rug; the grim face at the top was like a carved mask, placed above the shaft by the way of capital.(25)

Hypocrite Mr. Brocklehurst uses his power wrongly to oppress the girls and teachers of the school, skillfully makes them aware about their position in the society and suppresses their individuality as well as identity. He attempts to render the girls sexless in order to refine his own position as a powerful masculine authoritative figure. He tries to assert that the girls are sexually immoral and in this process he actually finds way to hide his own sexual immorality and sinful thoughts. Here we can remind the Millet's discussion on intrinsic link between sex and power which suggests that women's sexuality needs to be repressed in order to keep males in power. He threatens the girls who are not timid that naughty girls will burn in the hell. But our protagonist defies when she is asked how to avoid ending up in hell as she is considered as a naughty girl. Her courageous answer is –“I must keep in good health and not die” (26). This firm answer of Jane shows her indomitable spirit and self-reliance. She is not willing to modify herself entirely to fit into the ways patriarchal society desires to mould her.

Through Mr. Brocklehurst, Charlotte Brontë represents the hypocrisies of the nineteenth century's Evangelical movement. He spends a luxurious, wealthy life at the expense of Lowood students.

The rebellious self of Jane becomes prominent when she is contrasted with submissive Helen Burns. Helen is presented quite pathetic character. She never raises her voice for defending herself. She actually believes in fruitless morality. She is always governed by the idea that she will get justice in heaven. Jane likes Helen but she does not understand how she endures the punishment she receives from some teachers without defending herself. She tells her:

And if I were in your place, I should dislike her; I should resist her. If she struck me with that rod, I should get it from her hand, I should break it under her nose. (46)

Third phase of Jane's life is very significant in the novel as well as in her life when she begins her career as a governess at Thornfield. Here Jane not only meets with the embodiment of patriarchal energy, Rochester but also the worst victim of that burning energy, Bertha.

Mr. Rochester's entrance in this novel is a dramatic entrance. He appears as a lion-like creature with long hair and huge head, with strange pretercanine eyes. His appearance is suggestive of his animalistic self. As usual she faces same negligence of her new master Mr. Rochester initially. At the beginning of their relationship, their master-servant relationship is very much prominent. But eventually it transforms into a love relationship. In the course of time, she expresses her true feelings for him and accepts his marriage proposal. Though she accepts the proposal, but she ponders over her decision because she realizes the social difference between them. After

marriages she would depend on him for finance. This marriage actually will reduce her into a patriarchal slave. But Jane is liberal minded woman, to her nothing but her self is much more important than anything else. In exchange of anything she would not sacrifice her integrity and dignity.

It is true that Jane loves Mr. Rochester genuinely, but probably he is not. If he, he cannot hide anything from Jane. He does not reveal the existence of his first legal wife Bertha, until it is revealed at the church. The story of Bertha produces another angle of social exploitation of patriarchy. Mr. Rochester himself clarify that his previous marriage is not at all out of love, it is out and out an outcome of mercenary politics. The arranged marriage between Mr. Rochester and Bertha exchange their financial status. After Marriage Mr. Rochester becomes rich by obtaining his wife's dowry and simultaneously Bertha transforms into a penniless one. She is now absolutely dependent on her husband. After that he thoroughly neglects her. Not even he tries to know her a little bit. As his sole purpose or actual intension of marriage becomes fulfilled, now Bertha is none but a insignificant burden to him. That's why Mr. Rochester easily imposes eccentricity on Bertha with this allegation that she belongs to a family with a history of madness. So madness is quite natural for her.

If we accept, Mr. Rochester's account that she is abnormal, then why does he as a responsible husband provide her proper treatment??

Without showing proper care, sympathy, understanding he imprisoned her for ten years under the surveillance of Grace Poole. Mr. Rochester propels her into such sort of situation, which she cannot get better other than deeper insanity.

We can say that the madness which Jane has experienced in the Red Room reemerges at Thronfield through Bertha's entrapment in the attic by Mr. Rochester. She is the madwoman in the attic. Thronfield's attic becomes a complex focal point where Jane's own rational And irrational self intersect together. Here Bertha appears as a Jane's alter-ego, her unconscious, repressed, mad raving angry part which she has learned to repress during her years at Lowood by Miss Temple. In a patriarchal society where dominative force prevent woman from being free to express their opinions, little bit insanity is necessary for protest. At the wedding day, Bertha tears Jane's wedding veil what Jane secretly wishes to do, but cannot. Marriage as an institution has been criticized. At last Bertha sets fire to Thronfield, the main centre of male dominance and ensnarement. Mr. Rochester becomes the victim of the situation as if here he is ensnared within his own snares. He is the cause of her monstrosity and he is the worst victim of that.

Jane is now well matured. That's why she cannot degrade herself in the position of mistress, though she is in love with Mr. Rochester. Like typical Victorian Woman, she can easily marry wealthy Rochester, but she cannot. Self – respect is more prioritized by Jane than love. And that's why she ultimately decides to leave Thronfield. Jane refuses to compromise only in order to fit Rochesters' idea of marriages. This marriage will only constrict her passion and desire to be unbound to gender construction of Victorian society.

Jane escapes in numerous ways. She flights to escape from Gateshead, starvation to escape Lowood, and madness (via Bertha) to escape from Thornfield hall (Gilbert et al 339). But the question is, where is Jane aiming to go when she escapes? We may argue that she is simply escaping from the structures of a hierarchal society.

*Jane Eyre* is a novel which not only about Jane's quest for romantic love but also Jane's quest for root, belongingness, kinship.

At the Marsh End, Jane for the first time finds a stable ground, family, good relatives as well as she intellectually stimulates herself by studying together with her cousins, Diana and Mary. Even her long cherished dream of starting a small school comes true with the help of St John Rivers. But in spite of that, here patriarchy also demands submission from her. St John Rivers offers Jane to become his wife and helper as a missionary in India. Jane cannot find anyone in her life who only gives priority on her self. Jane is not such kind of character who is governed by pure impulse. She is very balanced character. She knows very well that if she unites with John, it will be loveless union and there will be no space for her personality and independence. She herself says:

I could no longer talk or laugh freely when he was by, because tiresomely importunate instinct reminded me that vivacity (at least in me) was distasteful to him. (352)

At the end, it is true that Jane returns to her love Rochester. But it will be very wrong analysis if we interpret her returning as her ultimate negotiation with patriarchal conventions. Even it will be incongruous to say that she responds to Mr. Rochester's scream but actually she responds to her own self.

In marrying Rochester, She does not sacrifice anything but starts a new kind of relationship where there is equality. She marries him when her first wife Bertha is dead and she is also economically independent. It is now a marriage between two equals. As Jane herself asserts:

I am my husband's life as fully he is mine....To be together is for us to be at once as free as in solitude, as gay as in company ... We are precisely situated in character—perfect concord is the result. (Chapter 38)

In providing a happy ending, Charlotte Brontë seems to suggest that individual who manages to navigate the pressures and hypocrisies of established social and religious structures can eventually enter into lasting love.

Phyllis Chesler points out that “women are motherless children in a patriarchal society” (qtd. in Brontë 470). This implicates the fact that women have been dependent on men as children are on women. It clears that

dependence is associated with women whereas independence is associated with men. In *The Second Sex*, Simon de Beauvoir also emphasizes the difference between the sexes – “Woman herself recognizes that the world is masculine on the whole; those who fashioned it, ruled it and still dominate it today are men” (609).

But in this novel, our protagonist Jane experiences and struggles against different forms of dependence. She stands out from the traditional idea of women as dependent. Jane possesses Byronic pride and passion and these qualities help her to transgress the so-called binary opposition. She leaves Mr. Rochester and does not return until she is in a more dominant position. She returns to him, when she finds him injured after a great fire; he has lost his sight and one hand. And at that moment she is economically independent.

So, we like to go to that point, from which we began. This novel is a very sample of a woman’s quest for independence, her struggles and her ultimate acquirement of equality. Jane here exemplifies the fact that it is not so impossible for a woman to achieve independence and success on her own, no matter whatever odds are against her and in whichever era she belongs to, be it nineteenth century’s dogmatic society or the so called progressive modern society. Thus we can say that Jane’s actions in the text may open the door for a new interpretation of women.

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