



Identifying Feminism and Dislocating Binary Oppositions in Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*

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Abstract : *Jane Eyre* is undoubtedly Charlotte Bronte's masterpiece and one of the greatest contributions to Victorian literature. Charlotte Bronte often wrote about simple women who are strong, independent and free-willed. She created such fine characters like that of Jane Eyre, who symbolizes the modern woman – a woman determined to rise above and make a mark on the world. Several Binary oppositions can be found in the novel such as that of master/servant, rich/poor, independence/dependence and sane/insane. It can be observed that terms like “master”, “rich”, “independence”, and “sane” are often implicitly associated with men or masculinity, whereas terms like “servant”, “poor”, “dependence” and “insane” are negatively associated with women. In the novel, Jane upsets these binaries and challenges the deep-rooted patriarchy prevalent in the 19th century British society. She rebels against the problematic and unfair notions associated with these binaries through her defiance against the set norms of the Victorian society and portrays free-will while making her choices throughout the novel. Indeed, in a true non-conformist-fashion, Jane refuses to be subjugated by men around her, who are supposed to be her “superior” in the male-dominated society she belongs to, and instead, achieves true independence, both financial and personal, by the end of the novel, ultimately being free to make her own decisions. This paper attempts to study feminism and the dislocating binary oppositions found in Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*. Moreover, the paper analyzes Jane as a true feminist figure as she upsets several binaries and questions the prevalent wrong implicit meanings attached to them, thus carving a path for herself without conforming to society's patriarchal and sexist standards towards women during the Victorian era.

IndexTerms – Binary Oppositions, Feminism, Male-dominated Society, 19th Century British Society, Patriarchy, Victorian Literature

I. INTRODUCTION

Binary Opposition is a concept related to Saussurean Structuralist Theory. It can be defined as a pair of contradictory (or rather, the exact opposite) terms. These could be thoughts, ideas, beliefs, things etc. such as male/female, black/white, good/evil, happy/sad. Ferdinand de Saussure is considered to be the person who first introduced the idea of Binary Oppositions and its correlation with human society. Binary oppositions consist of two mutually exclusive words that are, theoretically, opposite to one another and are set off against each other in the society. According to structuralism, the role of Binary oppositions is one of a fundamental organizer; it is considered to be an organizer to language, thought, culture, and philosophy. Sometimes, out of the two contradictory words, one word is considered to dominate the other term. Moreover, according to Pieter Fourie, these binary oppositions have further sub-binaries that provide it with more meaning. For instance, the concepts of angel/demon comprise of secondary binaries such as good/evil, heaven/hell, kind/cruel etc. According to the Chinese philosophy of Yin and Yang, the pair of words of a binary system may be interconnected, complementary and interdependent to one another. For instance, the binary system of light and dark could be a perfect example to explain that. There won't be any light if there is nothing dark. This means that light depends on dark to exist and vice-versa. The use of binary oppositions is observed in many literary works as they help to bring out the contrast between two characters, ideas, feelings etc. and also often bring out symbolism in the text. *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Bronte incorporates many binaries in the novel and goes on to break them, thus producing a powerful effect in bringing out feminism and defying the unnecessary and problematic notions implicitly associated with these binaries.

The Bronte Sisters – Charlotte Bronte, Anne Bronte, and Emily Bronte – are known to be great and well-known 19th century poets and novelists. Not many women, of those times, would opt for writing as a career choice, and that is precisely what makes the life of the Brontes unconventional and empowering. The Bronte Sisters attended various schools; however, they were home-schooled also. When left alone, the Bronte Sisters would write stories for enjoyment and entertainment, due to which their creative intelligence was developed. They were all situated at different circumstances as governesses and tutors. Charlotte and Emily went to Brussels to enhance their French in the year 1842, but they were needed to return home because of the passing away of their aunt. Charlotte came back to Brussels as an English instructor in 1843. The Brontes, in May 1846, published their poems, at their own expense. They took up different names, that is, male pseudonyms – Currer, Ellis, and Acton – for Charlotte, Emily, and Anne respectively. These male pseudonyms were used by them throughout their respective careers in writing in order to hide their true identity of being women writers. Henceforth, the Bronte sisters wrote and published many literary works, and achieved varying degrees of success. Both Charlotte's and Anne's first novels, *Jane Eyre* and *Agnes Grey*, were published in 1847. *Jane Eyre* received a greater amount of fame and acclaim, and was also considered that year's best seller novel. The same way, Emily Bronte's and Anne Bronte's novels, *Wuthering Heights* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* respectively, were both produced in 1848, with *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* getting greater acclaim than Emily's book.

Charlotte Bronte, the eldest Bronte sister, was born on 21 April 1816. Charlotte was the most successful of the Bronte sisters and one of the most phenomenal women writers of Victorian England. She was a woman of intellect, free will and thought, with a strong moral character. Her works often dealt with issues of religion, class, passion, and women's roles in the society, empire, feminism, and post colonialism. She was a progressive woman, quite ahead of her time. Her writings often challenged gender roles and criticized the patriarchy and gender stereotypes in the Victorian society. She openly spoke against the oppression of women and the evils of the deplorable treatment of women present in the society. In her novel, *Jane Eyre*, Bronte creates a strong, independent and free-willed woman like Jane, who goes through many hardships in her life right from childhood but ultimately finds the strength and resilience to make a mark on the world by defying the patriarchal and sexist society of her time. The following lines from *Jane Eyre* represent Bronte's feminist mindset and echo her own feelings as a woman writing in the Victorian era.

"Women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel... 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." (Bronte, 126)

II. A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF CHARLOTTE BRONTE'S JANE EYRE

Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* is a classic Bildungsroman novel. The novel traces the life of Jane Eyre, an orphan, who was initially resident at Gateshead Hall with her aunt and benefactress Mrs Reed. Mrs Reed is a cruel woman who despises Jane and treats her with coldness. In Gateshead Hall, little Jane is bullied by her cousins, especially by the unruly John Reed, and is not shown any love that a child deserves. For nine years, Jane lives with her tyrannical aunt, until being tired by Jane's passionate nature, Mrs Reed finally decides to send Jane to a school named Lowood. Lowood is a school for poor, orphan girls, where they are placed in a deplorable and unhygienic environment. The headmaster of the school, Mr Brocklehurst, is a cruel man who abuses the children by not providing them with proper food, shelter and care. Jane initially struggles at the place but eventually adjusts herself with the help of her friend, Helen Burns. She admires and looks up to Helen. Unfortunately, due to improper nutrition and unhygienic environment, Helen catches consumption (while many other students catch typhoid and get sick) and later dies, leaving Jane alone and heartbroken. Even though Helen dies, the lessons she taught Jane stays with her for the rest of her life, and it is only because of the optimism and faith that Helen used to talk about that gives Jane fuel to survive Lowood.

After spending a few years at Lowood, Jane decides to leave it and goes to Thornfield Hall. There she becomes a governess to a young girl, Adele. She soon falls in love with her master, Mr Rochester, who is a mysterious and impassioned man. Rochester too secretly in is love with her and proposes her for marriage which she gladly accepts. On the day of their wedding, however, Jane is revealed about the existence of a previous marriage of Mr Rochester and that his first wife is still alive and locked away in a secret cell in the manor. Rochester explains to Jane that his wife, Bertha Mason, is actually a mad woman who never loved him. Jane is heartbroken and decides to leave Rochester, though she forgives him and wishes him to have a good life. Desolate and starving, she is forced to beg for money when three siblings give her residence in their house. The charitable and kind-hearted people are Mary, Diana and St. John Rivers, who live in Moor House or Marsh End. Jane grows fond of them and they all soon become friends. She also finds herself a job of a teacher through the help of St. John. She is surprised by St. John one day when he says that Jane's only uncle, John Eyre, has sadly passed away and has left her a fortune worth of 20,000 pounds. St John also reveals that John was his uncle too and that the Riverses and Eyres are related. Jane shares the money with them after knowing this truth. When John asks Jane to marry him and go with him to India, she refuses his proposal of marriage as she is still in love with Mr Rochester, but decides to go to India with him.

Jane, one night in India, hears her name being called by Mr Rochester. She understands that she cannot stay away from the man she loves and decides to head back to Thornfield. On reaching Thornfield, Jane gets to know that Bertha Mason burnt the house and that no one lives there anymore. It is also told that Bertha Mason died in the fire, though everyone else was saved by Mr Rochester. She finds Mr Rochester in his other house, named Ferndean, and sees that he has been blinded and has lost one arm during the fire. They rekindle their love. Jane and Rochester then, get married, and the readers are told that they have been married for 10 years since. It is also told that Mr Rochester, after two years of marriage, regained his sight in one eye.

III. A FEMINIST APPROACH TO ANALYZING DISLOCATING BINARY OPPOSITIONS IN THE NOVEL

Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* is a novel that employs various binary oppositions throughout the narrative such as binaries of master and servant, independence and dependence, rich and poor, and sane and insane. Through the character of Jane, Bronte dislocates these binary oppositions in an attempt to dismantle the patriarchal notions attached to these binaries. The binary of master/servant can be seen throughout the novel since the beginning. A very fine example of that could be the relationship between Jane and her cousin, John Reed. Jane is a member of the same family as John is, though she is treated like an outsider. John can often be seen asserting the fact that he is a "master" to Jane and of Gateshead Hall itself, even though he is just a 14 year old child. He leaves no chance to make Jane feel inferior to him. After the death of his father, John Reed is supposed to be the "patriarch" of the house. It can be observed that since nobody discourages John's assumed role of a master, his own mother believes him to be the true master of the house. It is evident that the only reason John Reed is supposed to be a "master" is because he is the only man in the house, and Jane is supposed to act like his servant because she is a girl. The fact that John's attitude has never been chided by any of his elders and that he is encouraged in his belief that he is superior to everyone in the house, clearly demonstrates the kind of chauvinist environment that used to be there in Victorian society, and is maybe, still evident in some parts of the world. In a patriarchal world, according to the celebrated feminist philosopher, Simone De Beauvoir, women are considered a "servant" or a slave of men. They are supposed to showcase obedience and accept "masculine authority." Women are asked to be patient and passive, and have a servile attitude. Patriarchy, in itself, believes that men should dominate over women that give men a master-like role and women a servant-like role in the society. Metaphorically, the master/servant binary system can be seen in this feminist aspect as well, where the term "master" has been implicitly assigned to men and "servant" to women.

After leaving Gateshead Hall, Jane goes to Lowood Institution to receive her education, where the cruel Mr Brocklehurst is supposed to be her "master". He treats the students at the school like he owns their lives. He decides the amount of food the girls should get, the kind of clothes they should wear, the way they should behave etc. Mr Brocklehurst symbolizes the patriarchal society that imposes unnecessary restrictions on women and tries to control and manipulate them, and for men to always be the masters of women. In choosing to leave Gateshead hall, much to Mr Brocklehurst's dismay, Jane liberates herself from Mr Brocklehurst's shackles and chooses to not let him be her master anymore. She decides to live her life on her own terms and work for whoever she chooses. At this point in her life, she attains personal independence to choose who her master should be, which in itself, is a bold and admirable move on her part.

When Jane arrives at Thornfield Hall, in later years, she is assigned a new master other than John Reed and Mr Brocklehurst, whose name is Edward Rochester. However, this time Jane decides to not be subjugated by another man. Edward Rochester too is unlike John Reed and Mr Brocklehurst that he does not want to control Jane. Jane has often asserted that she is, in every way, equal to Mr Rochester, which is a very unconventional statement said in those times when women were considered to be the inferior beings in comparison to men. The following lines depict a statement made by Jane to Mr Rochester, in which she rejects his supposed “superiority” and shows her free spirit and fearless attitude:-

“I do not think, sir, you have a right to command me, merely because you are older than I, or because you have seen more of the world than I have; your claim to superiority depends on the use you have made of your time and experience.”(Bronte, 154)

By the end of the novel, it can be seen that Jane becomes the master of her own life, deciding not to be a slave to anyone. Previously, on leaving Lowood, she had attained independence to decide who she wants to work for. But after leaving Thornfield Hall and Mr Rochester, Jane attains true freedom as she decides not to be a servant to anyone. Even when she goes back to Mr Rochester in the end, she goes to him as his equal and not as someone beneath him in any way. Jane Eyre, in this way, breaks the expected pattern of the binary opposition of master and servant.

Independence and free will, during the 19th century, were traits not seen in a woman’s life. It can be seen in the novel that women, in those times, were dependent on men. Adele, the little girl who is Mr Rochester’s ward, is dependent on him as he is supposed to be her father. Mrs Fairfax and Grace Poole and all the servants working at Thornfield Hall are dependent on Mr Rochester as he is their master who pays them. Bertha Mason, Mr Rochester’s first wife, too is dependent on him because she has to stay locked in that room and cannot get out of there as Mr Rochester will not allow it. Jane has always been dependent on people her whole life- The Reeds, Mr Brocklehurst, and Mr Rochester. What makes Jane different is her conduct and her actions, throughout the novel. To some people, Jane Eyre is nothing less of a feminine hero. She is passionate and takes pride in being who she is. She never lets people treat her like a servant. She refuses to accept the patriarchal views of the society and never allows herself to feel inferior to men. In the following lines, Jane makes this phenomenal statement to Mr Rochester that perfectly captures her sense of independence:-

“I am no bird; and no net ensnares me; I am a free human being, with an independent will; which I now exert to leave you.”(Bronte, 282)

Jane Eyre behaves in a way that the Victorian society would expect from men. She takes her own decisions in life. She doesn’t let herself be controlled by anyone. She openly shows her anger towards something that she does not like, much to other people’s dismay. She struggles to achieve her independence throughout the novel. Being a governess under Mr Rochester, she is supposed to be dependent on him but she never lets that affect her free spirit. In fact, one can even observe that it is Mr Rochester who soon comes to be dependent on her. Jane is defiant and passionate, and that is what makes her an unconventional woman, who disturbs the dependence/independence binary opposition.

In *Jane Eyre*, the contrast between rich and poor has often been made. The novel starts by showing Jane as a poor, orphan girl who lives on the generosity of her rich aunt, Mrs Reed. Poor people are shown as low and dependent, whereas, rich people are shown independent. It is also evident that financial independence is more easily achieved by men than women. By the end of the novel, Jane receives a large sum of money through her uncle’s will. At this point in the novel, Jane is no more a poor, unfortunate girl anymore who has to be under someone’s generosity to get by in life. She is a woman of her own with enough money to sustain her without being someone’s servant. Jane, in attaining financial independence, dislocates the rich/poor binary opposition.

In the novel, Jane also upturns the mad/sane binary. As is evident, the madness in the novel is referred to Bertha Mason, Mr Rochester’s first wife. She is locked away in the attic of Thornfield Hall and is not allowed to leave that room. She is chained so that she doesn’t leave and hurt someone. Jane suspects of her own madness in the following lines in the novel:-

“Laws and principles are not for the times when there is no temptation. . . . They have a worth—so I have always believed; and if I cannot believe it now, it is because I am insane—quite insane: with my veins running fire, and my heart beating faster than I can count its throbs.”(Bronte, 352)

According to some critics, Bertha Mason can be seen as the dark side of Jane’s psyche. It can be understood that the “madness” in Bertha Mason in fact symbolizes Jane’s own repressed emotions, waiting for an outlet. Another interpretation of the madness could be the tendency of the conservative and restrictive Victorian society calling female passion as “madness”. After leaving Thornfield, Jane finally frees herself from the madness, and thus, challenges the sane/mad binary.

IV. CONCLUSION

Charlotte Bronte’s *Jane Eyre* is Bronte’s most celebrated work and is considered by many a feminist classic. The novel was written in the Victorian era, at a time when women had to face many restrictions in all spheres of their life. Bronte herself had to adopt a male pseudonym – Currer Bell – in order to successfully write as a woman. This was because in those times, women were not allowed to work or to have a career. The Bronte sisters were unconventional women as they all lived by their “pen”. But all of them had to adopt male pseudonyms to get their works published and achieve a reading audience. In the Victorian era, women writers were not taken seriously and were criticized for trying to step into a man’s profession. Bronte’s *Jane Eyre* perfectly portrays the sexist and patriarchal attitude of the Victorian society. Throughout the novel, the protagonist, Jane, has to undergo many struggles to survive as a woman with a sense of independence and free spirit in a society that expects her to be patient, passive, and obedient, and have a servile attitude, especially towards men, who are supposed to be her social “superior”.

In the novel, Jane is confused as to why her cousin, John Reed, should be her master. She says that she is not a servant. By doing so, she questions the patriarchal system of the society and breaks the binary opposition of master/servant. When she goes to Lowood, she despises Mr Brocklehurst. As she grows up, she rejects Mr Brocklehurst’s offer of becoming a teacher at Lowood and leaves to become a governess in an open defiance to her supposed “master”. In Thornfield Hall, she is met with yet another “master” of her life – Mr Edward Rochester. However, in Thornfield Hall, she openly embraces the idea that just because she works for Mr Rochester does not mean that she is in any way “inferior” to him. She refuses to let any man be deemed superior to her simply because he is a man. She, later, decides to leave Thornfield Hall as she could not bear to live with Mr Rochester as his mistress. This was because Mr Rochester was married to a madwoman, Bertha Mason, due to which, according to Christian rituals, he could not marry Jane. Jane, being a woman with self-esteem and dignity, refuses to live with Mr Rochester and leaves him. She also decides to no longer be a servant to anyone and be a “master” of her own life. Thus, Jane upsets the master/servant binary. She takes a step towards gaining independence by rejecting marriage proposals and working on her own to attain financial independence and be the master of her own life. By the end of the novel, Jane finally becomes financially secure as her uncle leaves her some money and attains independence. At last, she is the one who controls her life and is independent. She then returns to Mr Rochester as his equal and marries him, thus, dislocating the independence/dependence and rich/poor binary oppositions. Jane also upsets the sane/mad

binary as Bertha Mason's madness symbolizes the repressed emotions and the dark side of Jane's psyche. Hence, Jane, in dislocating these binary oppositions, proves herself to be an iconic feminist figure.

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