JANE EYRE: A STRUGGLE FOR IDENTITY

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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 had gifted me with some beauty and much wealth, I should have made it as hard for you to leave me, as it is now for me to leave you.

(Bronte, C. Jane Eyre, 284)

The power of a female gets its outburst by the lines of Jane Eyre, a character very fantastically caricatured by Charlotte Bronte. The novel by Bronte depicts Jane’s struggle to make her voice heard and to express the truth of her own experience. The unspoken heart of a woman find it utterance with her mighty pen. Likewise, Bronte has minutely described her own quest for identity with the character of Jane Eyre. The novel is a feminist study and made way for Gaskell, Trollope and George Eliot. K. Tillotson opines:

It is not like Dombey and Son and Mary Barton a novel of contemporary life, nor like Vanity Fair, a novel of a recent and specific past, impinging on the present... It is both in purposes and effect primarily a novel of the inner life, not of man in his social relations, it maps a private world.

(Novels of the Eighteen Forties, 257)

Jane Eyre, like many women in her time, is economically devalued and socially marginalized, largely because of her gender, but also because of her lack of an independent source of wealth.
The story of Jane Eyre, the emotional reality of oppression and struggle for identity that her story depicts is representative of the emotional reality of many Victorian women’s lives. Jane Eyre does not expose the evils of society but concerns itself with a world apart, a world of feeling and imagination of the most passionate kind. David Lodge in his work Fire and Eyre says about the theme of Jane Eyre, “the struggle of an individual consciousness towards self-fulfillment and the romantic imagery of landscape, seascape, sun, moon and the elements, through which the theme is expressed.”(114)

Primarily, the scenic beauty adds more to the inner beauty of the female character, an attempt of hers to fly like a bird in a free sky, away from the male dominated society. Throughout the novel, the title character is locked in a struggle to find her place in the world and establish herself as an empowered person. Jane’s emotional, psychological, intellectual and moral growth, her awareness of her own faculties, challenging circumstances bring out her inner strength. Jane’s journey begins in her childhood as the orphaned ward of her aunt. She is a disempowered character, a Cinderella figure in a hostile environment. She manages to steal a few minutes’ solitude behind the folds of scarlet drapery in the drawing room window seat. She daydreams herself away to the barren climes reachable only by the subjects of the books in her hand ‘Bewick’s History of British Birds’. By reading that Jane manages to acquire the only kind of power she has access to, that is, knowledge. Her quest for identity and power and the symbol of the working class woman has begun to discover from a young age.

Imprisoned for her insolence in the horrifying red room at Gateshead, Jane remembers:

My heart beat thick, my head grew hot, a sound filled my ears, which I deemed the rushing of wings: something seemed near me, I was oppressed, suffocated: endurance broke down—I uttered a wild, involuntary cry—I rushed to the door and shook the lock in disparate effort.

(Jane Eyre,24)

Despite the punishment, she has gained power through her resistance to her abuse, as well as through reading. Her character has begun to form as a steadfast young woman who knows she has been wronged, one who is not afraid to strike back. Aunt Reed showed the young girl no love and wishes to have ultimate power over her mind and spirit, similar to her son, John’s intentions. She retaliate Mrs. Reed saying that she can’t live in this unloving environment. She feels her soul begin, ‘to expand, to exult, with the strangest sense of freedom, if an invisible bond had burst and that I had struggled out into unhoped -- for liberty.’(Jane Eyre,31). Jane feels happy leaving Mrs. Reed and feels herself as a free being, with an independent will. She enters the Lowood Institute. The cruel master of the Lowood school, Mr. Brocklehurst, is another
example of a man in Jane’s life who tries to rule completely over women, as is seen by his attempts to force the girls into subordination and simple living. She displays courageous defiance to Mr. Brocklehurst in answer to his question about where evil children are sent after death. The fortitude and mental strength begins with Mr. Brocklehurst and is further nurtured through more interpersonal interactions at Lowood school. Miss Temple encourages the spirit of independence and dignity in Jane. She feels no more a cornered hunted animal but finds peace in the Lowood environment till Miss Temple inhabits it. This dignity in Jane was also strongly influenced by her childhood friend, Helen Burns. She was introduced by Helen to a religion based on complete trust and faith, one based on hypocrisy and subordination by Mr. Brocklehurst and yet another based on ambition by St. John. Jane looks strong to form her own ideas on religion as she forms an opinion of social classes and as she implores Mr. Rochester to look beyond her servitude and into the affairs of her heart.

*Jane Eyre*, as a story depicts a heartfelt journey of a girl, who craves for freedom and identity, struggles hard to find it and in the end accomplishes her real identity, freedom and fortitude. Jane’s movement from Gateshead to Lowood and from Thornfield to Morton, are testing grounds for her individual assertion. She is left on her own resources, devoid of status and money, to fend for herself. It is by this way, that a new woman comes up and shines.

Mr. Edward Rochester, the most prominent male figure in the novel, represents the upper-class male that truly oppresses Jane and her kind. The first encounter between the two characters seems to be symbolic itself. While in the woods surrounding Thornfield, Jane first meets Rochester, where he has fallen from his horse and injured himself. The upper class man has fallen from his high horse and cannot function without the working class woman. The events sets in motion the relationship between Rochester and Jane to be unconventional. Jane’s relationship with Mr. Rochester is a constant struggle for her to maintain her own individual identity. In Thornfield Hall, Jane acquires a job of a governess, she plays the role of a servant yet makes it clear to Rochester that she doesn’t consider herself below him in terms of spiritual qualities. The Thornfield area for Jane Eyre is the romantic centre in the novel. Donald D. Stone in *The Romantic Impulse in Victorian Literature* observes:

*This turns out to be Thornfield Hall, aptly named from a religious point of view, where the prospect of romantic fulfillment is dangled before her, but a fulfillment that she must reject on moral ground.*

Rochester finds in Jane a fierce combination of passion and reason. Although Rochester is Jane’s social and economic superior and men were widely considered to be naturally superior to women in the Victorian period, Jane is Rochester’s intellectual equal. He offers Jane lasting love and a real home. Moreover, after their marriage is interrupted by the disclosure that Rochester is
already married to Bertha Mason, Jane is proved to be Rochester’s moral superior. Jane realizes that marrying Rochester will mean a loss of dignity for her. Jane will only enter into marriage with Rochester after she has gained a fortune and a family. Jane appears as a strong feminist. Her disapproval of being objectified is the strongest indication that she does not define herself by two of the marriageability grounds particularly, economic status and beauty. She says:

*The more he bought me, the more my cheek burned with a sense of annoyance and degradation.*  
*(Jane Eyre, 236)*

Jane’s leaving Rochester shows her courage although it was very difficult for her to leave a life of security, promise and love for the unknown, refusing the man to maintain his grip on her heart. Her refusal to become mistress shows her spirit of dignity, refusing to give in to her physical and emotional desires that would be seen as ungraceful by society. Bound by a sense of duty, she goes to Gateshead to meet her ill aunt and is told that she has an uncle, who left her property. The journey occurs now from Thornfield to Marsh End where she meets St. John Rivers who proposes marriage to her. Jane refuses him and tells simply that she hates his idea of love which is selfish and rests not on feeling. Jane is reminded of Rochester’s true love and goes back to him. Thornfield Hall built on marriage without love is destroyed, killing Bertha and Rochester is purified in the process of saving his wife, becomes partially blind. The journey to Ferndean is a journey towards self-fulfillment and ultimate happiness. Rochester loses his eyesight but wins a jewel in the form of Jane Eyre. Jane gets what all she wanted, a life full of real love, dignity and equality. Jane struggles for her survival, surviving for a life equal in wealth and status and a marriage of equality.

Adrienne Rich opines that:

*She returns of her own free choice and because of her belief that she can become a wife without sacrificing a grain of her Jane Eyre-ity.* *(474)*

Rochester stands for romantic passion, St. John Rivers for Christian ambition, each urging in their way, Jane, to submit to his particular trait. The household of Mrs. Reed with Eliza, Georgina and John Reed stands in contrast to that of Diana, Mary and St. John, a journey from the obscene homeland to a struggling free-breathing individuality. Diana and Mary inspires Jane to accelerate her personal intellect. Diana urges Jane not to go to India indicating the same opinion on independence. Diana and Mary not as passionate and forceful as Jane in their ideas, but embody the same feminist characteristic, a desire for intellect. Moreover, Blanch Ingram and Bessie strikes contrast to Jane. Ingram places importance to physical beauty and social status unlike Jane. Bessie Lee, former maid to Jane Eyre, married Robert Leaven, a coachman of her
same class. Though Bessie is happily married, her marriage contrast with Jane’s, which will lift her into a new social class and as so a new life and a new identity.

The novel *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Bronte, seems to be a celebration of true love, but more importance lie on the fact that a new being is evolved, the exploration of one’s soul, identity, fight and struggle to uphold the true and cherished values. Charlotte Bronte in inventing a character like Jane Eyre, spoke about herself. Phyllis Bentley in the work *The Brontes* writes:

*Jane is a version of Charlotte herself, her suffering at Lowood are a version of Charlotte’s suffering at Cowen Bridge school... Mr. Rochester is another version of M. Heger... they have become representative typical symbolic, of many facts, they have gained universality by entering a realm of fiction.*

Modernity in approach gets fully revealed by the character of Jane Eyre wherein she stands as a symbol of a new woman, equal to man. Jane Eyre emerges as a speaker, speaking frankly about her ideas, hopes, dignity, aims and aspiration. She finds speech a better weapon to preserve her personal integrity than silence, exile and cunningness. She substitutes voice and frankness. Although, she does choose exile as a defensive weapon, she returns from it when she gains the means to be peacefully united with Rochester and the world as a whole, secure in her identity, free to speak her truth and have her truth and have them heard properly. Bronte succeeds in showing women’s emancipation and gives further air to Jean Rhys who analysed and wrote about Bertha Mason of *Jane Eyre*, in her novel *Wide Sargasso Sea*.

Virginia Woolf quotes on *Jane Eyre*:

*We are conscious not merely of the writer’s character... we are conscious of a woman’s presence—of someone resenting the treatment of her sex and pleading for its rights.*

A woman’s struggle for identity is an ancient yet contemporary aspect. Globalization compressed the whole scenario of the thought process. Likewise, the works of British female writers influenced the writers of India as well. New woman era gathered momentum and accelerated to further great heights. The idea of self grew so rapidly that female started growing in each field and working with men at par. Such a novel as *Jane Eyre* exhibits energy and vitality to every female to struggle and succeed with flying colors.
References


