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Feminist Readings of Marriage, Autonomy, and Resistance in Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*

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ABSTRACT:

This research paper takes a feminist approach to *Jane Eyre* and is concerned with how the novel by Charlotte Brontë unfolds traditional gender roles and the portrayal of strong female independence, morality, and emotional state. Against the backdrop of Victorian England, when the female part had only a few rights and roles in the society, Jane Eyre introduces a heroine who wants to be treated as an equal and respected by her surroundings, who live in a rigidly patriarchal society. This paper analyzes major feminist issues identified in the novel, such as the right to make independent decisions, the necessity to find an identity, the struggle against the domination of males, and the importance of women's education and financial independence. It also examines minor characters like Bertha Mason in an effort to know how the voices of women are spoken or hushed in 19th century literature. This study uses feminist literary theory and contributions to it made by feminist scholars like Sandra Gilbert, Susan Gubar, and Elaine Showalter in order to argue that *Jane Eyre* is a required reading in the feminist literary canon. The study also reminisces on how the novel has continued to capture the imagination of scholars even in contemporary feminist criticism.

Keywords: Traditional Gender Roles, Female Autonomy, Marriage, and Resistance, Voices of Women.

Introduction:

Feminist literary criticism has become strong to the extent that it is used to evaluate the reflections, reinforcement, or challenge to gender-based power structures in literature. It examines not only the representation of female characters but also considers the ways of female writers in the writerly area with the patriarchal limitation. *Jane Eyre* has been critiqued as a great feminist work that has been revisited in several other novels. The novel was printed in 1847 and tells a story of the life of Jane Eyre, an orphaned girl who becomes a powerful and morally upstanding woman that does not buckle under the weight of social, love, and religious demands that are made on her life at the expense of her dignity and self-will. Brontë's depiction of Jane was historic in her days. During the times when females had to play mostly the role of women, could not get as much education or jobs, and had to be subordinate to the male rule, Jane Eyre developed a female heroine who did not want equal rights with men, did not want to be ruled by them, and decided to live her life as she believed in any way possible. The relations Jane has with her aunt, the school, her employer Mr. Rochester, and even herself are the manifestations of how dependent and helpless women were in 19th century England and how much they strived against it. This battle is the gist of feminist texts. Besides, the novel does not restrict itself to one type of female experience. Whereas Jane is seen as a guardian against imposition and self-determination, scholars have argued that Bertha Mason, or the so-called madwoman in the attic, is symbolic of the voiceless woman who is deemed repressed by patriarchal society. Her appearance in the story creates an opportunity to mark certain conversations in the world of mental health, colonialism, and oppression of women in the expression of anger. The study will initially consider the social and literary context under which *Jane Eyre* had been written. Then it will consider how the personal circumstances of being a woman and the surrounding context influenced the vision of the Brontës as feminists. It will be analyzed how Jane comes to become a feminist character, what feminist motives can be found in the novel, and how critics have viewed the novel through time. In such a way, the paper aims at addressing Jane Eyre not only as a classic piece of work but also as radical feminist literature that keeps challenging gender expectations and generating new generations of readers. Jane Eyre can only be truly classified as a feminist piece of literature when considered simply in relation to the historical and literary context in which it was written, in early 19th century England. The early to mid-Victorian era (1837-1901) was an age of social conservatism, moralist rigidity, and strict gender hierarchy. Law and economic dependence of women upon males was accompanied by denial of voting rights, and ideals of domesticity, modesty, and submission were expected of women. They were mostly restricted to the domestic realm, and even professional women with their own educations received limited work opportunities except as teachers or governesses, which also appear in the professional experience of Jane Eyre. The legal principle of coverture held that a woman, on marriage, became legally absorbed into her husband and lost legal existence. She was not capable of owning a property, nor was she open to contracting or having her children in custody unless in unusual circumstances. Female weakness and unrepresentativeness at the hands of this system reached that point where independence was a distant dream. It is against this backdrop that Charlotte Brontë, through her lead character Jane Eyre, bravely claimed her right to dignity, independence, and equal treatment, which were also the values that resonated with early feminist values, before the women's rights

movement was fully established in Britain. Increasing concern about female education and rights was evident during the same period in the writings of reformers such as Mary Wollstonecraft, whose influential treatise *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) contributed to early feminist thought. Such ideas may have influenced Brontë and the prerogative of her own experience as a woman writer in a literary culture dominated by men. The name she used (Currer Bell) when she first published in 1846 is clear evidence that she did not want her gender to be a factor in the reception of her work, which speaks to the gender discrimination inherent in the publishing sector. *Jane Eyre* is part of a literary collection known as the Gothic tradition, where secluded heroines, haunted mansions, and emotional extremes were common practices. Yet, she turned these tropes to a feminist end. Although the novel possesses archetypal Gothic elements, i.e., Thornfield Hall and the enigmatic Bertha Mason, it employs them as the mirror to the psychological and social entrapment of women. In addition, the first-person narration completely immerses Jane in the story; her inner voice and moral reasoning put themselves front and center as opposed to the passive female characters common in earlier works.

Jane Eyre met with mixed reviews on its initial release. Although its originality and fervour were celebrated by many, some denounced it as anti-Christian and unfeminine because it depicted a woman who questioned authority and social convention. The emotional impact of the novel and Jane not becoming submissive were considered outrageous and threatening during the Victorian era. This challenge to the patriarchal order is, however, the very thing that has given *Jane Eyre* an undisputed place in feminist literary tradition. The life of Charlotte Brontë, as well, throws light on her work. Being the daughter of a clergyman in an isolated village in Yorkshire, she had little opportunity for social advancement, and education was also rigorous, which she fictionalized in her book *Jane Eyre*. Brontë, like her heroine, had been a teacher and a governess, and thus she had seen with her eyes the plight of economically dependent women. The personal letters and the subsequent novels display an understanding of individualism, intellectual ambition, and emotional richness, all of which were defining life experiences as well as literary outcomes.

Major Feminist Themes in *Jane Eyre*:

Autonomy and Self-respect: A strong feeling of independence and self-respect is one of the most noticeable feminist themes in *Jane Eyre*. Even when subjected to cruelty, isolation, and temptation, Jane stands up for her dignity and maintains her moral stand, both during her childhood at Gateshead and Lowood, as an adult at Thornfield, and in later life. Her strength in not letting herself be controlled with either the religious rule of Mr. Brocklehurst, the sexual oppression of Rochester, or the spiritual submission of St. John Rivers outlines her unwillingness to be turned into an object or a muzzled animal. The journey of Jane helps to challenge the Victorian image of the passive woman. Jane does speak, does not think like others, and demands to be treated as an equal and consequently worthy of respect. The fact that she completely abandoned Rochester, despite being strongly in love with him, on learning that he was already married shows her sound morality and her attachment to self-worth at the expense of romantic love. This is in line with a feminist orientation that upholds a woman's agency above her social or communal identities.

Economic Freedom and Education: Brontë is one who introduces education and economic independence as a major path of empowerment of women. Along with the tough schooling situation at Lowood, Jane can provide a living through education as a teacher and governess, which were somewhat the only acceptable professions for women during this era. Education enables Jane to have a degree of control of her life. What is more important is that after she is bequeathed a fortune by her uncle, Jane can become economically independent. It is symbolic because through this change she does not anymore have to rely on the man to live: her reunion with Rochester is only possible when she will be able to represent a man equal to him. By doing that, Brontë is popularizing the notions of education and money as the means through which a woman may drive herself to self-realization and independence.

Love, Marriage, and Dynamics of power: In *Jane Eyre*, Brontë portrays a very intricate and forward-looking scenario of romantic love. Although deep emotional attachment can be found in the novel, the theme of the novel criticizes the conventional forces in marriage that make women inferior or possessions. The relationship between Jane and Rochester passes through several changes until it becomes balanced. He is in an advantageous position on the one common sense level because he is her employer and on the second emotional-moral level because he is a man of wealth and status, but Jane demands emotional and moral parity. The refusal to become his mistress even when seduced by love is a radical step of self-respect by her. Once they finally reunite, Rochester is a physically weaker and humbled person; thus, Jane now becomes his caretaker and intellectual equal. This change is indicative of power balance in their relationship, an ideal of partnership and equality seen in feminism.

Women's Solidarity and oppression: Brontë also shows how women oppress each other and support each other. Female solidarity is well demonstrated by the ability of other characters, such as Helen Burns and Miss Temple, to provide Jane with emotional support and moral insight in her early years, which they do. Meanwhile, villains such as Mrs. Reed embody internalized patriarchy the women who perpetuate unfair systems at the cost of those who do not conform to them. This theme is complicated further by the figure of Bertha Mason. Frequently accused of the racial and imperialist undertones, the character of Bertha can also be interpreted as a representation of the so-called madwoman in the attic, a woman who was ruined by the gender roles and mental constraints of Victorian society. The famous feminist objections to the novel, by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, in particular, identify Bertha as the embodiment of Jane Eyre and her righteous wrath and frustration against the patriarchy.

Character Analysis through a Feminist Lens:

Jane Eyre: The Voice of the Feminist Rebellion: The best demonstration of Brontë's feminist thoughts is her own Jane Eyre, the main character. Since she was a child, Jane has transformed into a justice and held her right to dignity. Her defiance of her Aunt Reed at Gateshead and her rejection of normative dogmas at Lowood show that she is quite moral. With her maturity, her rebellion transforms into a silent yet steady demand for equality and self-sufficiency. Jane is a character who makes decisions in her life and in the novel as a whole that are dictated by self-respect and inner belief. She does not quit Thornfield because she loses her love of Rochester but because she does not want to sell her principles. She refuses to marry

St. John even when given an opportunity to speak out with a life of duty because, to her, it would be a muffler of both her passion and personality. Jane can only be united with Rochester when they are equal on all levels, thereby, among other things, making Jane one of the most empowering heroines in English literature.

Bertha Mason: The Silenced Other: Bertha Mason, the first wife of Rochester, is one of the most controversial characters in feminist reading. She is fed in the attic because of her mental illness, which is depicted as animalistic, violent, and destructive. However, most contemporary feminist critics (see Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1982)) describe them as indicators of the repressed anger within women in the world controlled by men. In this sense, Bertha cannot be viewed as being in the path of Jane and making her miserable only, but she is viewed as the representation of what can happen to those women who can bend to the rules of society too openly. Her imprisonment and lack of humanization invite several questions about mental health, agency of women, and colonial implications of Victorian literature. In feminist criticism, Bertha is interpreted as the shadowy alter ego of Jane, the receptions of her own desires and rage physically embodied.

Helen Burns: Inactive Tolerance: Helen Burns, a friend of Jane in Lowood, is an example of Christian fortitude and spiritual succumbing to the will, which completely opposes the justice felt by Jane. Helen promotes tolerance and compassion in the context of pain. Although Helen is graceful and mature enough to impress Jane, her passive nature and willingness to be punished can also be viewed as a typical expression of feminine virtue that was popular in Victorian culture. As depicted by feminist readers, the character of Helen plays out the specifics of unreasonable moralistic approaches towards women. Her premature demise may be felt to form an analogy of how such ideals have failed to sustain or even safeguard women in the real world. In contrast, being alive and asserting herself are depicted to be more effective and realistic forms of resistance in the case of Jane.

Mrs. Reed and Blanche Ingram: Patriarchal Women: As an extension of the patriarchal system, Mrs. Reed and Blanche Ingram, the first love interest of Rochester, offer good examples of women that do not subvert the patriarchal values but adhere to them. Her brutality indicates how patriarchy has been internalized, whereby women tend to betray other women, those who do not conform. Blanche Ingram, in her turn, symbolizes superficiality and vanity. She does not marry out of love; she marries to gain social standing, keeping in line with the materialistic values of her ranking. The fact that she regards Jane so low, due to her lower status, outlines the impact that the restrictions on female unity by classes have. The two characters remind us that not every female character in a book (or in the real world) can be an ally in the war on gender inequality.

Feminist Literary Criticism and Critical Reception of *Jane Eyre*:

Since its initial publishing in 1847, *Jane Eyre* has generated a copious amount of critical commentary. A 19th century Victorian governess story soon turned into a fertile field of feminist literary criticism, particularly in the 20th and 21st centuries. The feminist thinkers have moved the novel into the role of the landmark text in the expression of the female agency, inner voice, and emotional independence in works created by and about women. Among the most powerful feminist explanations was that given by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in their revolutionary book of 1979, *The Madwoman in the Attic*. Analysts have said that *Jane Eyre* is shrouded in the intense battle between the female author and the demanding self-projection as well as the limits of a patriarchal society. They claim that *Jane Eyre* is the voice of a repressed woman who tends to get heard, but Bertha Mason is the voice of a repressed madwoman, the rage, libido, and dissatisfaction that Victorian women were not permitted to express. This polarization of character between the well-unbalanced Jane and the wild Bertha has become a key idea in feminist critical theory. Another famous scholar, Elaine Showalter, is a feminist thinker who views *Jane Eyre* as a feminine coming-of-age novel. She highlights the fact that the story of Jane, which leads through trauma and development and finally leads to her independence, corresponds to a model of Bildungsroman, which has recognizably female forms. In the case of Showalter, Jane rejects not only the patriarchal authority that is witnessed by her flight when Rochester proposes to commit an immoral union with her but also the rejection of self-sacrifice by refusing to get married to St. John. The exclusion of John (without love) sounds like one of the radical feminist stances. More recent criticism has explored how *Jane Eyre* intersects questions of race, class, and colonialism, which are also essential to intersectional feminism. For example, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak famously criticized the novel for building Jane's empowerment at the expense of Bertha Mason, a Creole woman of ambiguous racial background. According to Spivak, *Jane Eyre* reflects how Western feminism often ignores colonial subjects and non-European women. This view has opened new debates about whose voices are included or erased in the feminist canon. Despite these debates, *Jane Eyre* remains a landmark text in feminist literature. It was one of the first novels to focus on a woman's emotional and moral journey without reducing her to a romantic figure or a passive victim. Its first-person narrative gave readers direct access to a woman's thoughts and feelings, a radical move at the time. Readers of all generations have admired Jane for her courage, her strong sense of identity, and her demand to be treated as an equal human being. Feminist literary criticism has helped *Jane Eyre* evolve from a classic Gothic romance into a layered, powerful feminist text. It continues to be studied not only for its themes of gender and identity but also for its influence on the way women's voices are represented in literature. Bronte's novel remains essential reading for understanding the history and complexity of feminist thought in fiction.

Conclusion:

Jane Eyre is one of the most important feminist works in the sense that it deconstructs gender stereotypes in Victorian society. Using the character of Jane, Bronte can give the reader a woman who is interested in her self-respect, ethical integrity, and emotional autonomy rather than social norms or romantic satisfaction. The fact that Jane refuses to be the richest man in town, Mr. Rochester, as his mistress and even refuses to get married to St. John Rivers in his name if she does not love him is a statement to the level of her agency and her autonomy. As has been seen in this study, the story that Bronte followed is not merely that of a personal struggle; it is an argument about the right of women to speak, be, and be equal. Feminist scholars like Gilbert and Gubar have added that it is a form of symbolic duality between Jane and Bertha Mason in the novel that should be understood as a struggle against reason and oppressed feminine anger. Other critics, such as Spivak, have questioned the colonial overtones of the novel, asking which freedom

was most valued in the novel. Nevertheless, *Jane Eyre* can be regarded as a groundbreaking figuration that gave rise to feminist literary criticism. The theme of emotional selfhood, moral power, and intellectual equality is arguably still relevant to readers today. It is a reminder that feminism is not one dimensional: it can be silent and individualistic but immensely revolutionary. *Jane Eyre*, therefore, is not only a tale about a woman rising against all odds but also an aggressive statement about a female taking charge of her identity and making choices.

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