

## FEMINIST CONSCIOUSNESS IN CHARLOTTE BRONTE'S NOVEL *JANE EYRE*

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Charlotte Bronte, the Victorian novelist, wrote three novels *Jane eyre*, *Shirley* and *villette*. The central concern in all these novels is the struggle of the protagonist to survive and succeed in the society as well as in her own house. The present paper focuses on the Feminist consciousness in the novel *Jane eyre*.

*Jane Eyre* was published in 1847 under the name of Currer Bell. It is a love story which is autobiographical to a great extent. Jane is described as a girl who is “no doubt plain, small and unattractive but at the same time courageous enough to speak out against infustice”.<sup>1</sup>

Jane likes independence and is against ‘lamb like submission’ to anyone, even to Mr. Rochester who is her employer. She says “I am a free human being with an independent will”. (160-161)

Jane asserts her independence of the prevailing idea that it is not the duty of a woman to sacrifice in improving a sinning man. Keeping in mind the history of Rochester’s past mistresses, Jane refuses to compromise by staying with him after his attempt at bigamous marriage. While Jane’s relationship with St. John is developing, she is impressed by his personality. She does obey him, but can never give up herself to him. She is under great pressure from St. John to become a kind of woman that society would approve, to live life where duty is pre-eminent and submerge her own personality. She rejects his proposal of marriage because she cannot lose her identity. She cries out: “I desired for liberty; for liberty I gasped; for liberty I uttered a prayer” (P.107)

Jane’s experience of the marginal options available to a woman without class and wealth makes her ponder over human problems even as she thinks about her personal experience. She articulates: “Women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties, and a field for their efforts as much as their brothers do, they suffer from too rigid a constraint too absolute a stagnation precisely as men would suffer.” (P.134)

Jane’s call for gender equality as early as the nineties shows that her creator was far ahead of her times. “Feminism is a belief that men and women are inherently of equal worth”<sup>2</sup> says Estelle freedman. This is exactly what Jane tries to point out.

Jane Eyre is concerned fundamentally with rebellion against the accepted order of things. Rebellion and reconciliation are central consciousness in the novel. Jane Eyre opposes the contemporary notion that a woman can be the agent of moral reform and spiritual salvation. She asserts her independence of prevailing idea that it is the duty of woman to sacrifice her in protecting a sinning man. Rochester is brought to a position where he has to depend on woman. Jane, however, continues to refer him as 'sir' and 'My Master' while Rochester thanks God for returning Jane to him.

Jane Eyre is the story of a woman who succeeds in 'getting on'; she strikes out courageously and independently and forges her own career, first as governess and then as independent school mistress. The novel has thus voiced the sentiments and concerns which are manifest in the feminist movement of the twentieth century.

Jane bitterly attacks people who would attempt to confine women to bland domesticity 'to making puddings' and 'knitting stockings', to playing on the piano and embroiding bags and the passage in which this challenge to stereotyping occurs explicitly.

Feminism, in its broadest sense refers to an intense awareness of identity as a woman. Janet Radcliffe Richards says that feminism is intended to mean that there are excellent reasons for thinking that women suffer from systematic social injustice because of their sex. Adrienne rich comments:

"Feminism means finally that we renounce our obedience to the fathers it implies that we recognize fully the inadequacy for us, the distortion, of male-created ideologies, and that we proceed to think, and act, out of that recognition."<sup>3</sup>

Jane's relatives rejected her but she survived on her own terms with courage. The fortune eventually arrives and her independence is secure before her marriage. At the end, in a situation that can be read as having symbolic force, Rochester blind, disgraced and represented in Jane's life is dependent on her, the balance of power is thus re-titled.

Through the character of Jane, Charlotte Bronte aims to project that injustice and cruelty of all kind must be fought in house, in education, in religion and in workplace. She sought to discover and change the deep-seated cause of women's oppression. Charlotte Bronte is a great writer who set an example how women can struggle to free their minds from patriarchal thought and achieve a feminist consciousness for autonomy and equality. Charlotte Bronte's heroine needs to be loved but not at the cost of her dignity and self-respect. Bronte made it possible for coming women writers to reveal that "the story; of the feminine soul as it is really exists under its conventional coverings".<sup>4</sup>

It is this feminist consciousness which distinguishes charlotte Bronte from her contemporaries and establishes her as one of the greatest feministic writers of the world.

## REFERENCES

1. Bronte charlotte, **Jane eyre**, (New Delhi: Rupa classics, 2001) P.53. subsequent references to the text are from this edition and have indicated by page numbers in parentheses
2. <http://noturningback.stanford.edu/quotes.html>
3. <http://notuningback.slanford.edu/quotes.html>
4. Oliphant Margaret, **Novels** (Black wood's Edinburgh magazine.102, 1867) P.258.

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