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Subaltern Voice in Jane Eyre: A Study in woman's Struggle for Equality

Manoj Kumar Jha

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-0523-8530>

Corresponding Author: Manoj Kumar Jha, Assistant Professor of English, Nandan Sanskrit College, Madhubani, K. S. D. S. University, Darbhanga,
manojmadhav91@gmail.com

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Abstract

Aims: The paper is a modest attempt at woman's struggle for equality as depicted in Jane Eyre. A novel is the most powerful tool to express one's feelings and reactions using imagination brimming with reality. During the Victorian days, a number of novelists expressed social, economical and political realities of the time. Jane Eyre by Charlotte Bronte is an empowering Victorian novel brimming with Gothic tropes and explosive energy. The novel tries to empower women maintaining morality and dignity.

Methodology and Approach: The paper aims to realize women's potential to gain their rights to in male-dominated society. Initially, the novel is a love story. But the way Jane struggles to get what she desires is really very appealing.

Outcome: The novel is clearly a petition for the equal rights of women. Jane is a character of strong faith and determination. The novel is also read as a feminist tract. Jane's character reveals that life can only be satisfying when lived fully and on one's terms. Jane represents women who are desirous of getting their own way in life.

Conclusion: Finally, it is clear that Charlotte Bronte depicted the masculine subjugation of women and the prejudices associated with it in her book. In the book, women were raised exclusively to perform household tasks. Their gender and class distinguished them as oppressed women against oppressor men. Charlotte Bronte depicted the masculine subjugation of women and the prejudices associated with it in her book. In the book, women were raised exclusively to perform household tasks. Their gender and class distinguished them as oppressed women against oppressor men.

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The Victorian age was the period from 1837 to 1901. It was the years through which Queen Victorian ruled Britain for the longest period in England's history. Radical changes surfaced in people's life during the age in all fields: cultural, political, and economic. The age also witnesses technological developments and scientific achievements. The stereo-type of marginalizing women highly existed during the age. This phenomenon was a source of discontent of almost all women. Since there was no gender equality, women were seen as inferiors staying at home taking care of their children and husbands. The woman's ideal place was home where she has been dedicated to serve and please her husband by cleaning, providing hot dinners and creating the atmosphere of comfort and protection.

This monotonous mentality concerning women claimed women novelists' attention. Jane Austen, George Eliot, and Bronte sisters were mainly concerned about women. Their novels are Victorian women's encyclopaedia. So far as Charlotte Bronte is concerned it is in Jane Eyre (1847) that she achieved a perfect fusion of realism and romance. It is the most popular of all the Bronte novels. The reasons for the popularity of this novel are quite obvious. It embodies two age-old human stories, two basic folk themes: the Cinderella story (poor oppressed girl marries powerful prince) and the success story (the new arrival suffers, perseveres, and triumphs).

Jane Eyre presents permanently true view of woman's position in the social fabric. In a series of superb scenes with the powerful and wealthy Rochester, the poor but independent Jane presses passionately upon him her conviction that she is his equal, that she has as much mind and soul as he, that she will follow the dictates of her conscience without fear, that she can earn her own living and "need not sell her soul to buy bliss," that she has "an inward treasure" which will sustain her in all circumstances. In 1847 such an attitude was an astonishment and a portent; even today it is not as generally accepted as could be wished. Jane is all woman but bends upon the woman's eternal problem of love versus society, her mind as well as her heart.

The central theme of Jane Eyre is the right of woman to seek justice in a male-dominated society. The novel presents Jane's agonies and joys, her fears and

love. The novel is nothing if not moral and Christian, a probing into the whole problem of right behaviour in the situation in which god has placed each individual. Jane Eyre is in essence an emotional and spiritual pilgrimage which seeks to discover the right balance between the demands both of the body and of the soul, and of society and the individual. Each stage of the story is attended by revelation of self-discovery and self-adjustment. Jane's pilgrimage takes place within a specific social context, one in which women were still denied the most elementary of political, emotional educational and physical rights. In presenting the humiliating and limited scope which a male-dominated world sought to impose on a spirited and intelligent girl like Jane, the novel includes a passionate plea for justice for all women. Time after time, Jane insists that love and passion must not involve a swamping of individual independence. It is significant for instance, that when Rochester proposes marriage to her, she tells him that she wishes to go on working in order to maintain her economic independence and also insists that they must maintain a certain emotional distance and detachment for their mutual benefit. In other words, she, like her creator, was demanding for women an emotional, and by implications, a sexual independence. It was a revolutionary demand at the time.

In the very opening chapter of the novel we get the impression of social domination while Mrs. Reed chides Jane. She says to her: "Jane, I don't like cavillers or questioners; besides, there is something truly forbidding in a child taking up her elders in that manner. Be seated somewhere; and until you can speak pleasantly, remain silent."³ During Victorian era a woman had hardly any chance to speak her mind and do her will. Women had to face or bear pangs of inequality without any rhyme or reason. Charlotte Bronte maintains this in the novel when Jane talks about John who bullied and punished her continuously. She writes: "He bullied and punished me; not two or three times in the week nor once or twice in the day, but continually: every nerve I had feared him, and every morsel of flesh in my bones shrank when he came near. There were moments when I was bewildered by the terror he inspired, because I had no appeal

whatever against either his menaces or his inflictions.”⁴ Moreover, voices of inequality become even stronger when John Reed mocks at Jane in these words:

You have no business to take our books; you are a dependant, mama says; you have no money; your father left you none; you ought to beg and not to live here with gentleman’s children like us, and eat the same meals we do, and wear cloths at our mama’s expense. Now, I will teach you to rummage my bookshelves: for they are mine; all the house belongs to me, or will do in a few years. Go and stand by the door, out of the way of the mirror and the windows.⁵

Charlotte Bronte deems poverty a great hindrance to society. She writes on its grimness when she maintains: “Poverty looks grim to grown people; still more so to children; they have not much idea of industrious, working, respectable poverty, they think of the word only as connected with ragged clothes, scanty food, fireless grates, rude manners, and debasing vices: poverty for me was synonymous with degradation.”⁶ Mrs. Reeds’ behavior towards Jane witnesses her degradation. She writes: “Mrs. Reed surveyed me at times with a severe eye, but seldom addressed me: since my illness, she had drawn a more marked line of separation then ever between me and her own children; appointing me a small closet to sleep in by myself, condemning me to take my meals alone, and pass all my time in the nursery, while my cousins were constantly in the drawing-room”⁷

Jane’s Journey to education is fraught with horrible experiences she had at Lowood School. In the very beginning we notice Mrs. Reed’s holier-than-thou attitude towards Jane when she calls Mr. Brocklehurst to get her enrolled at Lowood School. Mrs. Reed intimates him regarding Jane’s sulkiness. Mr. Brocklehurst intimidates Jane in these words: “Children younger than you die daily. I buried a little child of five years old only a day or two since, - a good little child, whose soul is now in heaven. It is to be feared the same could not be said of you were you to be called hence.”⁸

In Victorian England there were two kinds of systems of education. The rich sent their wards to good public school and the children of the poor were sent to orphanages or the charity school. Charlotte Bronte in Jane Eyre details the

reality of charity schools only to focus on the education system meant for women. Lowood institution was an orphanage. The children who had lost their parents were often sent there. It was a charity school. The sanitary conditions were not good. The quality of food given to the student was of a very bad standard. The lessons were long and tiring. Teachers were most cruel and apathetic. Even the manager, Mr. Brocklehurst, inflicted cruelty on the students and wanted them to bring under the thumb. He wanted the girls to grow in an atmosphere of simplicity and severity so that they do not grow lavish.

Sundays were dreary days in winter. The pupils had to walk two miles to Brocklebridge church where their patron officiated. They sat there cold, they arrived at church colder, and during the morning service they became almost paralysed. It was too far to return to dinner. They got cold meat, bread and porridge in the penurious proportion. Mr. Brockehurst's words to Miss Temple regarding pupils' breakfast is heart-wrenching. He says: "Oh, madam, when you put bread and cheese, instead of burnt porridge, into these children's mouths, you may indeed feed their vile bodies, but you little think how you starve their immortal souls!"⁹

The political and economic changes that took place during the nineteenth century brought a significant differentiation between genders whereby a man seemed to possess virtue, courtesy, morality, reason and independence whereas women were supposed to be passive, weak, domestic and obedient. Obviously, the 19th century women lived in an age characterized by gender inequality as they were dominated by men and their rights were completely denied. David Damrosch said about the woman question: "Woman were physically and intellectually inferior, a weaker sex that would buckle under the weight of strong passion, thought or vigorous exercises, only in their much vaunted 'womanliness' did women have an edge, as nurtures of children and men's better instincts."¹⁰ Marriage played a significant role in the life of the Victorian women since it was only through marriage that women could have a social status and position. The majority of women did not have the option not to marry simply because it was a necessity for survival and society prevented women from making their own living

subsequently once women got married, they would lose all their right, including the right to own property and even custody of their children. John Stuart Mill was one of the great thinkers of the Victorian Era. In “The Subjection of Women”, he tells how few privileges women had and that they were slaves to their husbands. He also says women are their own people and should be free.

Fortunately, literature played a significant role and helped greatly to transform the traditional ideas by paving the way for those who fought to the causes of women’s emancipation. In Charlotte Bronte’s *Jane Eyre*, she delineates on the some of these burning issues. Jane, the insane Bertha Mason, Mrs. Reed and her daughters along with other female characters in the novel mirror the hardships and misery they went through. Women are socially and economically devalued, mainly because of their gender, but also because of their social class status. From the very beginning of the novel, Jane stands in a low social class. While the Reed family represents the upper class. They use her social standing as a reason to neglect her with poor treatment. Jane says: “I was a discord in Gateshead Hall: I was like nobody there; I had nothing in harmony with Mrs. Reed, her children, or her chosen vassalage.”¹¹ In Gateshead, not only the Reed, but also the servants in the house act as if they are masters over Jane Eyre, who is supposed to be treated equally with John, Eliza, and Georgiana according to the wishes of her uncle, Mr. Reed. The servant’s words clearly define Jane’s oppressed position in the house: - “You ought to be aware, Miss, that you are under obligations to Mrs. Reed: she keeps you: if she were to turn you off, you would have to go to the poorhouse.”¹² In *Thornfield*, Jane is considered to have a lower social status than Mr. Rochester because she is only a governess who works for him, and supported by him. Jane feels herself as a bird trapped in a golden cage owned by an upper-class patriarch. She exemplifies the gender discrimination between men and women in the Victorian society.

Highlighting social aspects that pervaded Victorian society Charlotte Bronte pictures gender oppression exercised on Victorian women. According to the Victorian mentality, the women can only stay at home, do household work and please male in her society. It is due to the patriarchal traditions that the father,

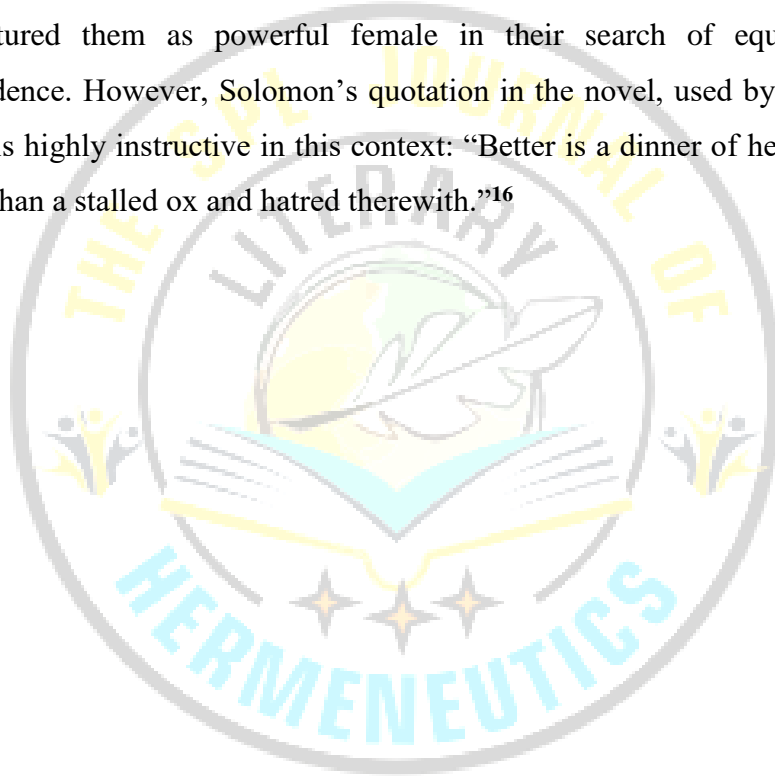
brother or husband had higher status than women in their families. Their superiority lies not in their being reasonable but in their being males. It is they who have the power of decision making. Facing this gender oppression, female characters in Jane Eyre react differently. Jane, for instance, stands up against class barriers, challenges them, and does not remain silent when males oppress her. Jane's reply to Rochester proves the point in detail. She says:

"I tell you I must go! I retorted, roused to something like passion. Do you think I can stay to become nothing to you! - A machine without feelings! And can, bear to have my morsel of bread snatched from my lips, and drop of living water dashed from my cup! 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. I am not talking to you now through the medium of custom, conventionalities, nor even of mortal flesh; - it is my spirit that addresses your spirit; just as if both had passed through the grave, and we stood at God's feet, equal. - As we are!"¹³

In the novel we get Jane's idea of liberty and freedom for women. She says to Rochester: "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."¹⁴ Jane's arrival at Thornfield Hall marks her turning point towards independence, it is where she acquires a job, turns into an empowered woman in the sense that she is no longer economically dependent on the Reeds or Lowood's affluent benefactors, and being able to economically support herself through teaching. When Jane's pilgrimage towards economic independence reaches the Moor House, the protagonist ends up as an empowered Victorian woman. Jane is no longer dominated by the upper class control. Her emancipation from males, and oppression standing are the key driving points for her economic wellbeing. Ferndean is Jane's final destination where she meets and marries Rochester. However, this time the positions are reversed. At Fernden they meet for the first

time as equals and there is nothing that stands in their way. Jane discovers that Mr. Rochester has gone blind and helpless. She freely expresses her independence and self-realization. She says to Rochester: “I told you I am independent, sir, as well as rich: I am my own mistress”¹⁵

In conclusion, we see that Charlotte Bronte reflected in her novel the male oppression of women and the stereotypes placed upon them. Women in the novel were brought up to life only to serve in the domestic sphere. Class and gender defined their status as oppressed female in opposition to male who were oppressors. Most importantly, Bronte changed this image of oppressed woman and pictured them as powerful female in their search of equality and independence. However, Solomon’s quotation in the novel, used by Charlotte Bronte, is highly instructive in this context: “Better is a dinner of herbs where love is, than a stalled ox and hatred therewith.”¹⁶



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Manoj Kumar

Dr Manoj Kumar Jha did his MA and PhD from LN Mithila University Darbhanga Bihar. He has been working as a faculty of English at Nandan Sanskrit College Madhubani, a constituent unit of KSDS University Darbhanga since 2018. He is a lifetime member of All India English Teachers' Association. He has presented a number of his research papers in AIETC conferences organised at Andhra University, Visakhapatnam, Osmania University, Hyderabad, Rajasthan Technical University Kota, RTM University Nagpur, Magadh University Bodhgaya, and CCS University Meerut. He presented his paper on English Language at IIT Patna also. His area of interest lies in Indian English Novel, British Novel, Criticism and Short stories.