



SOCIAL CLASSES IN VICTORIAN ERA

Mohd. Tahir Amin Khan

Research Scholar CMJU

ASBTRACT:-*In Jane Eyre, Charlotte Bronte mainly seeks to debunk the social conditions in which women like herself were living. In fact, she drew materials for the novel from her own personal life. So this topic involves a deep discussion on the status of woman dealing with social classes, taking the glance at upper class woman, middle class woman and the barriers of social class, moving to the conditions of woman in the 19th century. Also, woman suffering and success as well as women and sense of responsibility, focusing on the main areas of study the content which are the plot and the characters.*

KEY WORDS: Social Classes, Upper Class, Middle Class.

1- Social Classes

The division between the middle and upper class was prominent in England social life during the Victorian era. Thus, the daily life of people in Victorian England was determined by the social class and formed by the traditional ways of life in which people especially women lived and worked depending on their tradition and social roles under man's patriarchy that effected on the people and the way they lived. They have a distinct position related to the class that women come from (Mitchell, 2009). Jane Eyre bears a critique Victorian England social hierarchy and treated the imbalance between the social classes. Thus, at the beginning of the novel, Bronte explored the status of the upper class represented in the characters of Jane's cousins John Reed and his sisters Eliza and Georgiana and how they behave with Jane abusing and belittling her because she belongs to a lower class. She states that:

mama says; you have no money; your father left you none; you ought to beg, and not to live here with gentlemen's children like us! (Bronte, 2003.P09). Also, —tell mama she is run out into the rain—bad animal! (Ibid .P.08). This shows the way in which Jane is treated with cruelty by the wealthy Reeds, because she is an orphan, poor and she doesn't hold the same social standing they hold. They treat her more like a servant than a family member. She also states:

—I am glad you are no relation of mine: I will never call you aunt again as long as I live. I will never come to see you when I am grown up; and if any one asks me how I liked you, and how you treated me, I will say the very thought of you makes me sick, and that you treated me with miserable cruelty! (Bronte, 2003.p36).

This quotation indicates Jane's burst to her aunt in her leaving to Gateshead to Lowood School. She resisted in her orphan hood, severing to the little resemblance of the family that she lived with but the only one that remained to her.

Furthermore, the complicated position of an educated governess manner, hired to teach children at Thorn field situates her in a strange borderland between the upper class and the servant class. In fact, she feels part of neither group, thus, Jane is a figure of vague class standing: She interacts with people of every level, from different social backgrounds. As a governess, she is expected to be respectable and to possess the —culturel of the aristocracy. She is more treated as servant, thus, Jane remains penniless and powerless while at Thorn field. Jane's understanding of the double level when she becomes aware of her feelings for Rochester; she is his intellectual but not his social, equal. She hesitated to marry Rochester because she senses that she would feel indebted to him for —condescendingl to marry her. Jane's distress, Jane tries to ignore her feelings towards Rochester and convince herself that her relationship with him is a clear cut master. This examines the consequences of class boundaries that causes many problems in love between Jane and Rochester; thus, a relationship between a simply governess and a wealthy gentleman would be forbidden by proper society known by class prejudice which appears most strongly in Chapter 17 where Jane, says:

—....I had any cause to take a vital interest. Not that I humbled myself by a slavish notion of inferiority: on the contrary, I just said —You have nothing to do with the master of Thorn field, further than to receive the salary he gives you for teaching his protegee, and to be grateful for such respectful and kind treatment as, if you do your duty, you have a right to expect at his hands. Be sure that is the only tie he seriously acknowledges between you and him; so don't make him the object of your fine feelings, your raptures, agonies, and so forth. He is not of your order: keep to your caste, and be too self-respecting to lavish the love of the whole heart, soul, and strength, where such a gift is not wanted and would be despised (Bronte, 2003.P 164)

It seems clear that Jane is torn between her love and feelings and the need imposed by society to conform to social ranks and belonging. Also, it is clear to be Brontë's critique of Victorian class attitude and the difficulties that individuals face in personal relationships. Later in the novel Jane speaks out against class prejudice in Chapter 22 she faces Rochester thus:

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! (Brontë, 2003.p256)

1-1 Upper Class Women

As we have mentioned before that the nineteenth century life of Victorian England is known by the fact that the upper class women did not work and stay at home as respectable members in society. They have a special way of living, dictate the servants, make parties and traveled. (Mitchell, 2009) Through Jane Eyre, this image reflected in the character of Mrs. Sara Reed who is cruel aunt, she sent Jane to Lawood School and she was the cause behind the problems that Jane had faced. She was described as a woman with —robust frame, square-shouldered and strong-limbed! (Brontë 1994). In addition to that Jane warns her; People think you a good woman, but you are bad, hard-hearted. You are deceitful! (Brontë, 2003.P.36) Also, Blanche Ingram who was a beautiful and rich woman from a high social class, hoped to marry Rochester to secure her position. She was beautiful and wealthy but not bed personality.

Jane says: ...and Miss Ingram was considered the belle of the evening. (Ibid.p.160)

That means Blanche Ingram was a beautiful women represented high social class with elegance and she was the attractive women. She used to show how Jane act and think as she does towards Mr. Rochester. Also show the difference between her and Jane as members of different social position. Blanche looks as beautiful as Jane imagined. She is very close to Rochester and her way of behaving to foil Jane by discussing loudly all the dreadful governesses she had in order to show the difference between them. She was a competitor to Rochester and she makes him sign a duet with her.

1-2 Middle Class Women

Middle class women lived ordinary lives. If married they worked as servants, if unmarried, they had has two choices: writing as Charlotte Brontë and her sisters who dictated themselves to writing, or being a governess, gives lessons to children in their home where she also lived (Mitchell, 2009). This is reflected in many nineteenth century novels in which their heroines are governesses. Before becoming a governess, Jane lived in poverty and had faced many social difficulties related to the working class. She struggled in all of her life until she serves as a governess and that is only when she is able to maintain a honest living with this job. Her life as a governess remained the position that the single woman like Jane Eyre strive for. It signifies an important development increasing their economic and social hardships and expecting to be well bred, well educated and perfect gentle women contradictory to a ignorant and vulgar woman of the working class. Governess is a middle class figure who was more reliable in a period when she was criticized in social stability (Poovey.1997). Thus; she realizes a type of freedom, a respectable social position and economic stability.

She says: I'm the governess! (Brontë, 2003.P116).

That means she introduced herself as the governess. The position she held as the teacher.

1-3 Social Class Barriers

Jane Eyre critiques Victorian class differences. Thus, Jane is an orphan individual lived lonely unwanted within wealthy environment particularly with the Reed family who were the cause behind her estate in her early age; by sending her to a charity school where she struggled and abide bed treatment and hard conditions of the school and the cruelty of Mr. Brocklehurst, the head of Lawood, as a result of her standing as an orphan girl from the lower class. Also, her position of being a governess rising from poverty to becoming a better and respectable person. She is the main competitor of Rochester who is a wealthy man. Jane rejects him feeling that their marriage not based on equal social standing. Jane fends off marriage proposals that would squash her identity, and strives for equality in her relationships. When she inherited the fortune of her uncle and divided it with her cousins. She proved that she is independent financially and not reliant on Rochester for his wealth. She accepted Rochester's offer. She says: —Gratitude!! he ejaculated; and added wildly—Jane accepts me quickly. Say, Edward—give me my name—Edward—I will marry you! (Ibid.p.258)

This quotation indicates Jane's emotion comes from her belief that her social position will make it impossible for Rochester to love her. Rochester almost reveals his own feelings for Jane. Yet, by commanding her to attend the parties, he still doesn't treat her as an equal. She continues to believe that Rochester will place a higher priority on class constraints than on his emotions.

2- The Condition of Women in the 19th Victorian England

As we have seen in the second chapter, the industrial revolution had had social consequences in England at the beginning of the 19th century. It affected people's way of life and thinking. It changed the attitudes toward women's place in the social set (Mitchell, 2009). Women were subjects of a patriarchal system (Gaskell, 2005). Bronte was aware of the nature of women's oppression and economic dependence.

Through *Jane Eyre*, Charlotte Bronte represents a figure of the Victorian time and spots light on the lives of women. Women were living in a misogynist world and under male dominance. (Muda, 2011) In fact, women were deprived of many rights granted to men and had consequently a very low status in society. Jane takes a very few opportunities. The only profession opened to her was a governess, a position that raised her from her low standing. In fact, this is the role that the society creates for middle class women of being a governess as we have said, schoolteacher like Miss Temple in Lowood school companion to a wealthy lady as a servant like Bessie Lee, the servant of Mrs. Reed. Also, other women tried to write to live against the social hardship, as Charlotte Bronte, but literature is not enough to be the business of a woman's life, very few could succeed as Bronte did. Furthermore, as we mentioned before teaching is the only respectable profession opened to the women of Bronte's society and teaching salary is not sufficient to encase women's needs and independency. As Bronte dealt generally with Jane, she names economic dependency as their —great curse! (Gaskell, 2005). Jane did not expect a good marriage which provides her complete security. In the other side, married women like Bertha Mason, Rochester's wife, she had no legal rights and no economic independence. She lived under man's patriarchy and had no financial independence because their property transformed to her husbands after marriage. This is likely a miserable status of Victorian married. It reflected that Victorian women never divorce their husbands, they depend on their husbands and could not own property as we have said in the backgrounds chapter. With the capitalist industrial growth, Victorian society witnessed profound changes in the role of women who brought out of home, entering man's sphere. Also, the traditional ideas about women had changed in which women become —a perfect lady and Angel in the house! strong in her inner purity personality. They strove to be equal to men and their needs being the same as Charlotte Bronte said talking about the character Jane Eyre. Jane cannot escape from her position, but she can express feeling, her sadness and disappointment for her position as a governess living lonely in isolation with only the company of a child and a housekeeper. Having little access to people, she tells how she longs for more things to do. Thus, with feminist campaigns to improve both employment opportunities for women and women's education reveals the critical role in the representation of the governess played in reproducing the domestic ideal. As teachers, they argued that the governess charged with domestic virtues. (Poovey, 1997). Jane says:

—It is in vain to say human beings ought to be satisfied with tranquility: they must have action; and they will make it if they cannot find it. Millions are condemned to a stiller doom than mine, and millions are in silent revolt against their lot. Nobody knows how many rebellions besides political rebellions ferment in the masses of life which people earth. Women are supposed to be very calm generally: but 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 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, 2003. P111)

This extract occurs after Jane's arrival at Thornfield. Although Jane has achieved her wish of leaving Lowood in hopes to find a new life, she still finds herself restless and stands on the Thornfield's family. Thinking about what the world may hold. She states that women have to be independent and equal to men. As well as, Jane moves from place to place hoping to find freedom in an oppressed society to achieve self-esteem, independence and realize identity.

3- The relationship between man and women

In Victorian England gender roles affected people's behavior and identities. Thus, Jane has faced a strong battle to become independent, achieve self-fulfillment and overcome oppression. In her life, she stopped at many stations and faced many men who don't respect women as their equal and don't acknowledge her rights. Generally, men like

MrBrocklehurst, Rochester and John Rivers believe that women have to be inferior to men. Each one tries to put Jane in an obedient woman position where she doesn't have the right to express her own thoughts and feelings.

Most male characters in the novel try to patronize Jane and to dominate her. Jane must run away from MrBrocklehurst in Lowood School, rejects her cousin John and accepts to marry Rochester only after becoming independent financially. In fact, once socially equal with Rochester, she is able to prove that she did not marry him for his fortune and ascertain her personality as a self fulfilled person. Thus, in chapter 12 Jane articulates her feminist philosophy:

—Women are supposed to be very calm generally: but 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 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, 2003.P110). With a reference to the feminist theory in the relationship between gender and the patriarchal oppression of women and the way in which they viewed in terms of gender and they do not possess equal rights to men, feminist concept indicates that women should be equal to men and should advocate equal rights and interests.

It shows as that Jane expresses and reflects her view in life after her arrival at Thorn field where she becomes a woman standing for self, wishing she could see and interact with more of the world. It means that there is no difference between man and women, they play role of forming their individual identity. They should take their opportunities as men do women have the right to achieve happiness and fulfilled her vision of the future. Jane is a very strong woman and despite of her troubles, she struggles a lot in life and is a very independent.

4. Women suffering and success

Jane Eyre is an example of how women can move from a life of poverty and oppression to independence and success. Bronte herself suffered a lot in her life before becoming an accomplished writer. She lived in the same environment under the same conditions as Jane do, that means, Bronte reflects a part of her life, inner self, also, the society in which she lived in the work of Jane Eyre which mirrored the writer's life that was as inspiration in achieving the novel.

Jane led a life of sufferance for different reasons as a woman. She suffered in all her life stages from her childhood through adolescence to maturity: her childhood in Gateshead, her education in Lowood School and her time as a governess of Adele at Thonfield. Jane spent unhappy childhood under the care of her aunt Mrs. Reed where she was treated harshly. She was abused physically and mentally; doing very hard work out of her ability and excluding her in the red room which is cold and quiet, where her uncle died. She suffered with her aunt family and especially with her cousin John who bullied her, Jane states about this: —...Then Mrs. Reed subjoined—Take her away to the red-room, and lock her in there. Four hands were immediately laid upon me, and I was borne upstairs (Bronte, 2003.p10).

Then, her suffering at Lowood School. Thus, Elaine Showalter said

—The Lowood School where Jane is sent by her aunt is the penitentiary for which the red room was the tribunal. Lowood represents sexual diminishment and sensual discipline the girls are systematically starved and deprived of all sensory gratification in 1824 both Charlotte & Emily attended the clergy daughter's school at Cowan Bridge for 10 months. The recollection of childhood at this school forms the model of lowood institution which Jane attended for eight years in the novel Jane Eyre¹¹

Lowood School in which Jane had attended for eight years, it was like a prison for her, where she suffered and treated with cruelty by Mr. Brocklehurst and Miss Scatcherd. Jane saw what happened with her friend Helen Burns when Miss Scatcherd punished her. Jane was particularly shocked to see Miss Scatcherd's harshness. But she suffered from Mr. Brocklehurst who punished her more than ones and cut her hair Bronte (Barker, 2002). She says:

—I saw myself transformed under Mr. Brocklehurst's eye into an artful, noxious child, and what could I do to remedy the injury? —(Bronte, 2003p.33)

—I disliked Mr. Brocklehurst; and I was not alone in the feeling. He is a harsh man; at once pompous and meddling he cut off our hair; and for economy's sake bought us bad needles and thread, with which we could hardly sew. (Ibid.p125)

Mr. Brocklehurst, who —buys all our food and clothes (Bronte, 2003.p50), is domineering and attempts to make the girls at the Lowood school —humble through the means of food deprivation, cutting off their hair, and allowing them no luxuries or comforts. He makes assumptions that females are inclined to luxury and indulgence, and that they need to be —tamed, thinking that it is his religious duty to deny the girls of food and freedom, treating them like animals.

In addition to that, the important phase of Jane suffering was at Thornfield where she served as governess to educate Adele. This is not an easy job for women to leave in a new family and new house, but it was the first time that she enjoys a sense of independence.

She was a girl in eighteen, she was attracted to her master and falls in love with him who is almost twice her age. She is a plain girl didn't enjoy her social position.

Also, she faces a competitor for Rochester from his guest Blanche Ingram, a beautiful and rich woman from a high social class, hopes to marry Rochester to secure her position in society. Who makes Jane think, depict expectations and jealous. But Jane considers herself to have emerged victorious over Blanche and contemplates marrying Rochester, who is dishonest man. Bronte stated: —I was about again to revert to the probability of a union between Mr. Rochester and the beautiful Blanche (Bronte, 2003.p161)

A real barrier to Jane's love explored that her companion is already married and can not married legally, this truth came to the light in their wedding in which Jane is heartbroken. She felt that she is betrayed. Thus, the next morning, she makes her decision and abandons she leaves Mr. Edward Rochester without as much as a word or a letter. She had left without any arrangement and money traveled for a long distance. She slept outside in the wood and lived dark nights until she found a refuge with a family who is her cousins (the Rivers). Furthermore, she inherited a fortune from her uncle and she divided it with the river's sibling's John and his sister. As he was planning to a religious mission to India, he offers her to marry and accompany him as his wife, a marriage without love but she rejected him because she loves Rochester.

All her suffering does not lead her to give up, it was a motivation to success and achieves independence and her authority over her own experience. She attains a lot of in her life. She was very independent, in this she is an original feminist figure whose flexible class status allows her to evaluate other characters on their actions and personalities rather than on their economic status and physical appearance.

She defies many social conventions especially those affecting women. She is courageous, educated aware and know to temper her emotions with self control. She controlled her feeling with judgment based on her dignity and had a strong personality. Although all the conditions she faced, she succeeded to overcome her difficulties and achieve happiness by making a family with the wealthy man who she loves and any girl dreams about and she became independent financially. Jane says:

—Reader, I married him! (Bronte, 2003.p.445) In this quotation, Jane informs the reader that she got married her master Mr Rochester. Thus, it dictates that Jane finally achieved her fulfillment and found happiness that she is strived for. Also, She finds, love, independence and creates her own family.

5. Women and sense of responsibility

Through Jane Eyre, Bronte portrayed a strong, free and independent woman. She struggled alone in a world fraught with problems and known by social inequality from place to place searching for freedom and independence. She took decision and was able to define herself as well as to equip herself with enough wisdom and confidence to face life. Thus, her class status allows her to illustrate how personal virtues are better indicator of character than class. Furthermore, Bronte gave her character her own qualities of intelligence, a clear conception of moral responsibility and above all, great courage and determination. Jane stands up to Mrs. Reed as a child, and she is Mr Rochester's equal in conversation and struggled to retain self-respect as a teacher and governess. Jane says:

—I can live alone, if self-respect and circumstances require me so to do. I need not sell my soul to buy bliss. I have an inward treasure born with me, which can keep me alive if all extraneous delights should be withheld, or offered only at a price I cannot afford to give! (Bronte, 2003.p.203).

According to feminist theory, women should be independent, strong without the society and men's bounds.

Conclusion

To conclude, in this chapter we have tried to show Bronte's portrayal of women in 19th century Victorian England through Jane Eyre which is one of the most successful novels of its era and it is a worthy addition to English literature in Lewis's opinion. Also, Jane Eyre character that is one of the greatest female characters in the history of English literature used to critique the Victorian issues of class, economics, and gender roles.

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ABOUT AUTHOR:



Mohd Tahir Amin Khan is a research scholar CMJU. He has done graduation from Govt. Degree College Rajouri affiliated to Jammu University. He has done LLB 3 years (Professional) from Dogra Law college Jammu, affiliated to Jammumu University. He has done Post Graduation in English from CMJU