

Women's Voices in the Victorian Era – Feminist Consciousness in the Bronte Sisters' Works

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Abstract: Before the Victorian era, it was rare for women to be authors and writers to fix the protagonists of their works as female characters. However, in the 19th century, there was a rapid increase of women writers and emphasis on feminist consciousness. Among all the works of women writers, *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* which were written by the Bronte sisters were distinctive. The Bronte sisters conveyed their feminist consciousness and described the society in their works. Both works emphasized romantic relationships as the narrative thread. By shaping the female characters in their works as self-reliant women who fought for equivalence and freedom in the era where male chauvinism occupied leadership roles, the Bronte sisters conveyed their eagerness for freedom, equality, and their feminist consciousness. This paper combines features of the Victorian era and the Bronte sisters' life experiences to analyze feminist consciousness in these two works and make comparisons between them.

Keywords: Victorian period; Bronte sisters; Feminism consciousness; *Jane Eyre*; *Wuthering heights*

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1 Background of the Feminist Consciousness in the Victorian Era

Feminist consciousness refers to a succession of events to establish and stand up for the rights of females in regard to politics, economy and social status.^[1] Achieving gender equality, especially gaining equal access to education and career is the principal goal of feminist consciousness.

Ever since patriarchy was established, men have been holding leadership roles, while women have low status and were considered appendages of men. In the Victorian era, women in Britain gradually realized the inequality they were going through. Hence, many of them, including several female writers devoted themselves to pursue women's rights.

The enormous social transformation laid solid foundations in the upsurge of feminist consciousness.

In politics, the increase in feminist consciousness has close relations with political movements.

In the 1790's, many women took part in the French Revolution, which marks the beginning of female consciousness in France. In view of that, women in Britain began to reflect on their lowly status and self-worth as a female. Along with the Industrial Revolution was the transition towards democracy where people desired to have a voice in choosing their own leaders and ruling government. Women in Britain realized that there was no place for them in the political sector. These factors facilitated the movement of feminist consciousness in Britain. In 1832, when the Britain government amended the electoral law, women began to strive for equality and the improvement in their social status.^[1]

In the early 19th century, the status of female was extremely unfavorable, and they devoted themselves to their male counterparts. For many years, women just stayed at home. In addition to that, with the development of industrial capitalism into the era of monopoly capitalism, there were huge gaps between the rich and the poor. Work

responsibilities or duties that were once done by both men and women at home have been drawn away from private home settings into public workplaces. This transition gradually excluded women from meaningful work. For the rich, women became pampered, whereas in poor families, women have no place at all. Facing such crisis, pioneers of the feminist consciousness revealed the plight of women of different social classes to the world and called for women to stand up for themselves. From there onwards, more women ventured out and were involved in social rivalry. The participation of women in the economic sector, broadened their horizons. This stirred up the realization that women have been suppressed, thus calling for the revolution of women's rights.

Focusing on cultural aspects, the Victorian era contributed to the feminist consciousness with its culture and ideology. In the 19th century, the spread in the ideology of freedom and equality encouraged women to reflect on their low status. Women, then became more dominant in an unprecedented way during the Romantic era. There were many women writers during that period who laid solid literary foundation for the development of feminist consciousness by portraying vivid women characters in their literatures.^[5]

Since the Victorian era, novels written by women have emerged whereby feminist consciousness was highlighted. Among them, the works of the Bronte sisters were distinctive. With *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*, the feminist movement was encouraged, and women started to fight for their speaking rights.

2 Feminist Consciousness in the Bronte Sisters' Works

2.1 Feminist consciousness in Jane Eyre

Jane Eyre may be viewed as an autobiography of Charlotte Bronte whose life was as rough as the characters'. Charlotte Bronte was born in a country at Yorkshire. She lost her mother when she was eight years old and was sent to Cowan bridge boarding school which left a terrible memory for Charlotte Bronte. This was her inspiration when

describing the Lowood Institution which is an orphanage mentioned in *Jane Eyre*.

Similarly, *Jane Eyre* lost her parents at a very young age. She was brought up by her aunt who was filled with resentment and abused by her cousins. She was treated like a maid.^[2] *Jane* matured earlier due to all the inequality she faced, and her sufferings motivated her to escape from these unbearable oppressions. The opposition from her aunt became more intense after she stood up against her cousin's assault. She chose to die out of hunger instead of being insulted and bullied to protect her self-esteem.

The children at Lowood were half-starved, and lived in cold, unkempt quarters. The teachers treated their pupils with contempt and insulted them. Helen Burns and Miss Temple brought hope to her life in this austere world. In a conversation with Helen Burns, *Jane Eyre* showed that she had a rebellious spirit, saying, "When we are beaten for no reason at all, we should strike back very hard, and I believe we should strike hard enough to teach those who beat us never to strike again." Although life at the institution was tough, she would not trade Lowood for the luxury of Gateshead, where she lived under the care of her aunt. In later parts of the narration, Helen, who was meek and talented, passed away because of being abused. Her character had significant contrast with *Jane Eyre's* defiant personality.^[3]

In the romance with Rochester, *Jane* did not bother about the secular gossips which criticized the unequal social status between them. *Jane* had high self-esteem, rationality, and was strong enough in the pursuit of love. However, when *Jane Eyre* realized that Rochester took advantage of her inferiority and poor status, she shouted, "You think that because I'm poor, obscure, plain, small, so I have no heart, no soul? You're wrong! My soul is exactly like yours, and my heart is exactly like yours! If God had gifted me with a little beauty and a little wealth, I would have made it as hard for you to leave me as it is for me to leave you. I do not speak to you now by customs or even mortal flesh – but my spirit speaks to your spirit; It is as if two men had passed through the grave, and we stood at

the feet of God equally -- for we are equal!" When she learnt that Rochester's wife was still alive, she refused Rochester's entreaties and to be moved by wealth that was already within her reach.^[3]

Jane chose to leave Rochester to protect her own values although, her love for Rochester was intense. However, after the destroy of Thornfield, Jane returned to Rochester who was blind and disabled. She married Rochester and lived a happy life.

Jane Eyre's character was distinct in comparison to the meek traditional woman in the Victorian era. Jane Eyre had a pale face and low social status. However, she had a strong character, whereby she pursued the world eagerly. In the context of romantic relationships, Jane Eyre was not as submissive and shy as traditional women, because she thinks that relationships should be built based on equality between two people. It was the independence, courage, and concept of equality in love that deeply touched Rochester.^[4]

In Charlotte's view of feminist consciousness, she stressed on women's independence and argued that women should have their own ideologies instead of just being appendages of men. She strongly fought against the patriarchal society and advocated equal respect for women. She also emphasized on women's economic status, which was obvious in Jane Eyre's dedication to earn a living.^[4] Charlotte was deeply aware of the opposition of women's rights, so her feminist consciousness not only requires women to be respected by others, but also emphasizes that women should respect and love themselves. Charlotte's emphasis on self-respect and self-love was reflected in her works. For example, Jane Eyre had a unique personality, which were namely, sincerity and self-love. The image of Jane Eyre was a display of Charlotte's perspective on a "forward-moving" female and feminist consciousness.

Charlotte's portrayal of Jane Eyre was undoubtedly successful, as it offered a way out for women who had lost themselves in the world of patriarchs. A woman who seeks balance in this society in order to meet the desires of her heart, must work for it. Only in this way can she be

confident to pursue the love and freedom she desires.

2.2 Feminist consciousness in *Wuthering Heights*

Wuthering Heights was controversial in the 19th and early 20th century because of its unusually stark depiction of physical and mental cruelty. It challenged strict Victorian ideologies regarding religious hypocrisy, morality, social classes, and gender inequality.^[3]

Catherine, unlike Jane Eyre, came from a prestigious background. She was a young lady of the old Earnshaw family at *Wuthering Heights*. *Wuthering Heights* was like a metaphor of the British society at that time, which was a patriarchal empire full of status contradictions and racial struggles. Catherine was deprived of all rights by the patriarchal system. However, she never gave up her pursuit of happiness, which reflected the rebellious nature of a matured female at that time. Even during games, she was keen to play the role of a hostess by giving out orders to people. Hence, this desire for power and control, subconsciously implied that little Catherine wanted to take fate into her own hands.^[5] She enjoyed doing what her father hates most by showing off her control over Heathcliff and making that boy carry out her orders. This was a form of challenge to patriarchy. She questioned of why she should be a "good girl" if her father himself fails to be a good man. Catherine questioned and evaluated the whole male society and consciously challenged the structure of the society in regard to gender.

The Thrushcross grange became the turning point of Catherine's life after her father's death. The Thrushcross grange instilled a deep-rooted traditional value in Catherine and gradually brought this "rebellious" woman back into the patriarchal society.

The Thrushcross grange, with its noble grace, dampened Catherine's carefree nature and made her realized that marrying Heathcliff meant being completely abandoned by the patriarchal society while displaying her nature. Marrying Linton, on the other hand, meant gaining social approval,

comfort, and security at the cost of surrendering her female ego and becoming a woman cultured by the patriarchal society. Pressured by the patriarchal society and her anxiety, rebellious Catherine lost herself and finally chose Linton, while compromising to the patriarchal culture.^[5] However, in time, she was unable to yield to the betrayal of her soul and the pursuit of her “true self.” Hence, the process of returning to the patriarchal society led to psychological trauma and depression.

There was something in Catherine about the fear of seeing her own reflection in mirrors. She, who lost herself, could not recognize herself. She insisted on opening the window in a cold weather, as she knew she could never return to freedom. She said, “Oh, my heart is burning! If only I were a girl again; savage, hardy, and free. Any injury would only make me laugh, and not drive me mad under it!”

Catherine died under the pressure of patriarchy without fulfilling her desires in pursuit of feminist consciousness. On her deathbed, she had pale cheeks, bloodless lips, and twinkling eyes with a hint of spite over her expression. However, Heathcliff was the “continuation” of her life and replaced her in the pursuit.^[3]

The executor of the beginning of female consciousness – Emily Bronte, alludes their oneness in many ways: “I am Heathcliff!” “Whatever our souls are made of, his (Heathcliff) and mine are the same,” “Catherine demands to be buried in the wilderness after her death,” and “her soul continues to dominate and influence Heathcliff by wandering freely in the wilderness.”

Catherine wanted to discard the aristocratic class consciousness but was unconsciously influenced by it. The fear of loneliness is a weakness and makes one falls deeply into it, hence, unable to extricate oneself. From aversion to the shackles of religion, and the fact that she was unable to decide her own fate, forced her to use religion as a form of sustenance. Love and marriage also contributed to her tragic fate. Women in that period placed themselves in a subordinate position and reflected their values in the sacrifices made for men. In the end, they were not able to stand strongly

against the society, which implied that the consciousness of self-liberation was still in an underdeveloped stage.

2.3 Comparisons between the two works

The era of the Bronte sisters was a time when British women were on the edge of enlightenment, whereby both works revealed dramatic feminist consciousness. The sisters were brought up in a turmoil, when the capitalism in Britain was rising but the status of women was still as unfavorable as hundreds of years ago. Buried in their hearts were resentments to this unfair world. Their works broke through the secular barrier and began the pursuit of women’s independence and freedom.

Jane Eyre and Catharine have similar characters, which showed as rebellion to the unfairness, the sincerity and persistence to love, and the dominance towards their own fate. It is easy to appreciate the consistency of the two novels in displaying the truth of human nature, promoting humanity, and the sincere love between men and women.^[1]

The protagonists in these two novels strived for women’s liberation, independence, equality, personal integrity, and sought to eliminate the unequal dominance of males.^[3]

However, the differences in this two works can be seen in the ways by which the two protagonists struggled with their fates.

Jane Eyre successfully portrayed a woman who was resentful of the reality yet strived for her fate by standing up against the society. Jane spent her whole life struggling since childhood. However, in the presence of ladies from high society, she was composed and had self-pride. Jane’s charm came from her inner beauty. She remained dignified and did not yield to any frustrations or dilemmas. Jane was always optimistic in the face of discrimination. We may deem her life successful in regard to the happiness that she finally owned.^[4]

Wuthering Heights, on the other hand, was a total love tragedy. Catherine chose death as the only way to eliminate social and religious oppressions. Catherine desired freedom. However, her inner vanity could not resist the temptations of

the outside world. She hoped to change her fate through marriage, but the results were contrary to that. In turn, she became the victim of fate. The death of Catherine seemingly became a challenge to patriarchal society but, in fact, it was an act of avoidance of fate. This novel lacked the spirit of optimism, instead it portrayed the fears and struggles of a woman as the result of oppressions.

2.4 Limitations and compromise

Although the Bronte sisters desired to improve their status under the oppression of the authority, traditional customs, religious ideas, and moral standards, in addition to strong elements of feminism in their works, they were still constrained by the patriarchy and were placed in conflicting situations.^[6]

In the Victorian era, a happy marriage was an ideal finale for female characters in literatures and most of the satisfying endings were based on certain economic status. Although women were no longer the appendages of men, devotion and tolerance were still traits of most women.

In *Jane Eyre*, Jane could not achieve economic independence without marriage, which was the most convincing way to guarantee a woman's fate. Jane's status as a governess was unfavorable and she had to follow orders from the host. This was a compromise on her part.

In *Wuthering Heights*, the writer places Catharine in an awkward situation, whereby she had to choose which men to marry. This indicates women were still victims to marriage.

Hence, their enlightenments were only in regard to family matters or the economic sector but not in broader aspects, namely the political sector. As mentioned, women in this period still placed themselves in a subordinate position and reflected their values in the sacrifice made for men. Hence, they were unable to persistently stand up strongly against the society. This implies that their

consciousness of self-liberation was still underdeveloped.

3 Conclusion

In the first half of the 19th century, the feminist consciousness of the Bronte sisters was the result of specific historical, cultural, economic, and philosophical background in Britain. These two works portrayed that the image of women should be independent, and constantly working towards their own happiness. The growth of women is relative to independence, self-expression, and walking their own path without being anyone's appendage. Hence, independence must be made habitual. Deeper understanding of the relationship between men and women can also be appreciated from these two works. In regard to that, the Bronte sisters would have thought that relationships should be harmonious, interdependent, and grows on the basis of understanding for each other.

Disclosure statement

No conflicts of interest.

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