

Gender Relations And Female Sexuality In Victorian Fiction

A study of Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*, Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights* and W.M. Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*

Kritika Sharma

Assistant Professor (Ad-hoc)

Department of English, Hindu College

Email: kritikash.english@gmail.com

ABSTRACT:

The Victorian Age was often a contradiction unto itself. An age of industrial and technological progress, it was also the age of strict moral codes. While most Victorian morality impinged on women's life, the woman's question became a pervading subject of much Victorian fiction. This paper is an overview of, or an introduction to, the way gender relations were dealt with in Victorian classical fiction, as well as how that treatment was almost always, inevitably, informed by the portrayal of female sexuality. The three novels in the scope of this paper deal with these very questions, albeit differently. Published quite close to each other, Jane Eyre, Wuthering Heights, as well as Vanity Fair, have strong female heroines – all of whom find themselves at the margins of the conventional Victorian society in one way or the other. This paper explores the relationships of these individual

heroines with the society they inhabit in general, and with themselves in particular.

KEYWORDS: Victorian Novel, Victorian heroine, Female sexuality, Gender relations, madness, self-assertion.

‘Women are motherless children in patriarchal society.’

In her essay ‘The Temptations of a Motherless Woman’, Adrienne Rich explains the statement quoted above (originally by Phyllis Chesler) as ‘...women have neither power nor wealth to hand on to their daughters; they have been dependent on men as children are on women; and the most they can do is teach their daughters the tricks of surviving in the patriarchy by pleasing, and attaching themselves to, powerful or economically viable men’ (1979).

The Victorian age, like any other, was a very dynamic age. And the large-scale changes that occurred in the Victorian Age, of course, are reflected in the fiction of this age. One of the major issues that the Victorian novelists wrote about is what popularly came to be called by the feminist school of thought as 'the woman's question'. One reason for the interest in the woman's question, perhaps, was that with the emergence of the 'novel' as a literary genre, and literacy among women during that age, a lot of women novelists emerged. The Bronte sisters- Charlotte, Emily and Anne, George Eliot, and Elizabeth Gaskell are well known women-Victorian novelists. However, it was not easy sailing for a woman novelist in the Victorian age. This is why most women novelists chose to publish their works under male-pseudonyms. While MaryAnn Evans chose the name 'George Eliot' the Bronte sisters chose relatively ambiguous names. Charlotte, Emily and Anne Bronte wrote under the names Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell respectively. Explaining their choice Charlotte Bronte says in the 'Notice' that they had 'scruples about assuming Christian names positively masculine', yet at the same time:

Averse to personal publicity, we veiled our names... we did not like to declare ourselves women because... we had a vague impression that authoresses are liable to be looked on with prejudice; we had noticed how critics sometimes use for their chastisement the weapon of personality and, for their reward, a flattery which is not true praise. (Kapadia 2007)

However, this voluntary choice was not only a measure against reviewers who were prejudiced against women novelists but also a measure against being evaluated in the same category as a large quantity of literature by women which other novelists, including the ones named above considered 'frivolous' or of 'inferior quality'. In her famous essay 'Silly Novels by Lady Novelists', George Eliot says:

We believe that the average intellect of women is unfavourably represented by the mass of feminine literature, and that while the few women who write well are very far above the ordinary intellectual level of their sex, the many women who write ill are very far below it. (Eliot 1856)

Thus, 'serious' women novelists were threatened not only by the prejudiced other sex but the incompetent same sex too.

The position of a woman in the Victorian Age is that of the 'angel of the hearth'. Any deviation from what is conventional is strictly not allowed. The marginalized status of women is something which is practically fought against by the women novelists in their novels. Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* (published 1847) is one of the major novels to address the issue of women's rights and their place in society. It is the story of a plain, poor and orphaned governess who rises against all odds and moves towards a happy conclusion through all sorts of upheavals. She is completely destitute, and since she is not beautiful either, she has only her brains to recommend her in the world. *Jane Eyre* is hailed by many critics as being among the first feminist novels. Her words 'I care for myself' (213) are regarded as a clear feminist statement – among the first spoken by a fictional character. An equally applauded speech by Jane which is regarded as radically feminist by the standards of the Victorian Age is when speaking to Mr. Rochester, her employer and lover, she says:

Do you think I am an automaton? – a machine without

feelings?... Do you think because I am poor, obscure, plain and little I am soulless and heartless? You think wrong! ... I am a free human being with an independent will ... I have as much soul as you – and full as much heart! 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! (215)

These words coming from the mouth of a governess, a paid subordinate, were radical for a Victorian woman. No wonder the early reception of *Jane Eyre* was not really congratulatory. One unnamed critic wrote in the *Quarterly Review* that this novel was 'excellent if written by a man but odious if written by a woman' (Allott 1973). This sort of prejudice is exactly what Charlotte Bronte and her sisters were worried about. *Jane Eyre* is considered radical for its age because the heroine is no 'angel of the hearth' who works towards domestic accomplishments only in order to better her prospects by gaining a husband. Jane is an independent working

woman who falls in love with her employer, accepts his marriage proposal, finds on the wedding-day that he already has a wife who is 'mad' and thus leaves him. She steps out of Thornfield – Mr. Rochester's house – in order to find her own selfhood without compromising her morality. Her life, unlike that of other women of her age, does not revolve around a man. Instead, she lives for herself. *Jane Eyre* thus, is one of the first representations of the 'new woman'. Jane emerges victorious against patriarchal constraints in the form of John Reed, her cousin and Mr. Brocklehurst, the hypocritical evangelist, who try to contain her in a self-immolating feminine model. She proves her superiority (practically if not theoretically) to the moral femininity symbolized by Helen Burns and the very Victorian feminine models in the form of Blanche Ingram and Georgiana Reed, who are nothing but beautiful and pampered heiresses. In fact, *Jane Eyre*'s apparent feminism is also a critique of society's inherent patriarchal values which govern all the basic rights of women. Blanche Ingram, Jane's beautiful rival is portrayed as cold and proud. However, she is as much a ready member of the marriage market as any other conventional Victorian woman – ready to give herself away to the highest bidder.

Jane who is not beautiful at all is removed from the social mores not only because she is a governess but also because she herself refuses to acknowledge any sort of rule that binds and takes away her individual identity. Her fierce intellectualism, represented by the ever present 'I' in the 'autobiographical novel' is what attracts Mr. Rochester who is a social outsider in his own right. Though he is a rich gentleman, his various adventures and sexual liaisons in the exotic continental countries and the subsequent disillusionment make him as much outside and against the social mores as Jane. The happy ending of the novel with Jane and Rochester's marriage is Charlotte Brontë's statement of the triumph of the new woman. Gender relations in *Jane Eyre* are portrayed as a constant struggle between the genders not for domination but for equality of both sexes. Jane falls in love with Mr. Rochester because she finds her intellectual equal in him. Mr. Rochester loves her for the same reason. However, *Jane Eyre* does not show gender relations in this simple light only. Before reaching her happy conclusion Jane has to fight a lot of patriarchal constructs – John Reed's cruelty, Mr. Brocklehurst's brutal evangelicalism, St. John's cold and harsh Christianity and even Mr. Rochester's wild

adventures which include his affair with his continental mistress Celine Varens, and other mistresses, and his 'mad' Creole wife Bertha Mason who is locked up in the third storey of Thornfield.

The narrator of *Jane Eyre* quite coolly renders the realities of Victorian women's lives and the constraints women faced everywhere they turned in society. These constraints are symbolized by Jane being locked up in the Red Room and the perpetual restlessness of Bertha locked up in Thornfield. These constraints may lead to either madness as in Bertha's case or more 'rational' rebellion as in the case of Jane. After all, Bertha's madness too is a form of rebellion, and much critical focus throughout the twentieth century posits Bertha as the vanguard of feminist rebellion in the novel, and not so much Jane.

It leads to both, madness as well as rebellion, in the case of Catherine Earnshaw, the heroine of Emily Bronte's novel *Wuthering Heights* (published 1847). Emily Bronte, Charlotte Bronte's sister, in her only novel, writes about a completely different society. She portrays a rustic society where religion and social customs are almost invisible if not absent. However, the portrayal of gender relations in *Wuthering*

Heights is in the same vein as it is in *Jane Eyre*. Patriarchy rules here as well. Cathy's rebellion in childhood, when she refuses to learn Ladies' ways and manners, against the patriarchal constraints takes another form in adulthood. Due to the impossibility of the assertion of her selfhood in a 'normal' way she is left to maniacal rages which are almost on the verge of madness. Whatever the expression, the cause here is same as in *Jane Eyre* – cruel patriarchy, which can rule only by suppressing women. Her brother Hindley's cruelty in separating her from her childhood friend Heathcliff infuriates her and causes her to rebel. However, once she has been successfully separated from him for five weeks, she is made into a 'lady'. For a brief period of time she falls into the trap laid by patriarchy and makes the most fatal mistake of her life – deciding not to marry her childhood love because it will be socially degrading. She says to Nelly Dean, her servant, almost foster sister and her confidant, 'It would degrade me to marry Heathcliff' (81). However, she goes on to say that she will marry Edgar Linton, the rich gentleman, so that she 'can aid Heathcliff to rise' (81) in the world because if she and Heathcliff married they would be beggars. This decision of hers leads to all the ensuing tragedy in the novel. When Heathcliff returns to see her married, he sets

out on a mission of revenge, aggravated by Cathy's death, which ends with his own death – while everybody else, Hindley, Edgar, Isabella (Edgar's sister and Heathcliff's wife) dies along the way. This fatal decision of Cathy is a result of many reasons – one among them is gender struggle. If she had married a poor, beggarly Heathcliff, she and he would not have survived. He is a social outcast, nobody knows his parentage, and she a woman. She exchanges her life with Heathcliff for a Lady's life with Edgar and gets unhappiness in the bargain.

The basic difference in the treatment of gender roles by Charlotte and Emily Bronte is that while Charlotte Bronte sees the two genders as distinct and partially, if not completely, antagonistic, Emily Bronte sees them as two parts of one whole. The underlying force which compels both Cathy's and Heathcliff's characters is a desire to be together, to be joined or unified. But both find themselves in situations where joining the other is impractical while alive. Thus, both seek for a union in death. Jane and Rochester on the other hand find their 'heaven' on the earth itself.

Broader and in many ways different from both these novels is W.M. Thackeray's *Vanity Fair – A Novel Without a Hero* (1847-48). In very

succinct terms it is a novel about the growth of two characters – Rebecca/Becky Sharp and Amelia Sedley, both of whom are as different from each other as chalk is from cheese. While Amelia is our Victorian ideal woman – meek, gentle and submissive, a perfect 'angel of the hearth', Rebecca is our regular adventuress – she varies from a coquette to a temptress, apparently gets away with murder and gains a fortune in the end. However, these characters are not as simple or able to be easily defined as that. Both are much more complex than typical angel or villain characters and what renders them interesting is that however different their ways, both work strictly under the patriarchal mores. Amelia from her childhood is made to idolize George Osborne by her parents because he is to be her future husband. Her whole life revolves around him and after his death, their son. From her childhood, she has been groomed for the marriage market. Her greatest fault as a character is her idolization of her husband who is a regular scoundrel – ready to elope with her friend Becky Sharp just days after his marriage to her. In her idolization of her husband even after his death Amelia ignores her lover William Dobbin, whom many critics have called the only 'gentleman' in the novel. Her self-abnegating behaviour can be easily seen as resulting from the Victorian

values of womanhood yet the question A.E. Dyson raises in his essay 'An Irony Against Heroes' is also relevant – 'Is self-sacrifice not an insidious self-indulgence in disguise?' (1964). Amelia's self-sacrificial behaviour thus can be seen as not a reinforcement of the gender-roles that the society has placed her in but a measure of preventing herself from falling into them. By marrying Dobbin she will have to revert to the role of the Victorian wife, which is not welcome to her since her first experience has not really been a good one (though she does not acknowledge it). Rebecca, on the other hand is ready to marry the first (rich) man whom she meets – be it the stout, shy, pompous Joseph Sedley or the old Sir Pitt Crawley at whose house she is a governess. She marries his son Rawdon Crawley but does not respect him until much later (when he hits her) because she thinks he is not 'manly' enough. Interestingly, this is an example of how rigid gender categories may stereotype men too. Rebecca's conquests even after her marriage include baronets, colonels, majors and Lords, and George Osborne and Joseph Sedley (again) whom she apparently murders for his insurance money which is in her name. However 'villainous', Becky's conduct too can be said to have been forced on her by society. She has to find herself a husband because she

has no mother to do the task for her, and a rich husband because survival is impossible otherwise. Once in the novel the narrator comments that if Rebecca had money, who knows she would have turned out a different woman. But Becky, like many Victorian women had only one means of getting rich – marrying a rich man. It can be said that the quest for husbands is same in both Amelia's and Becky's cases. Marriage, especially in the Victorian Age is a market where women barter themselves and their accomplishments for a life of fortune dependent on the husbands they are able to get.

The treatment of gender relations in all three novels cannot be studied in isolation from the treatment of female sexuality in them. Psychosexual readings of *Jane Eyre* as done by Adrienne Rich (1979), and Gilbert and Gubar (1979) make one common point – that patriarchy essentially works by repressing female sexuality – and this is shown in all the three novels referred to. Elaine Showalter in her essay 'Feminine Heroine' says that Jane is a balance of two personalities – Helen Burns and Bertha Mason (1977). While Helen's stoic Christianity is an expression of her repressed sexuality, in Bertha's case it comes out as 'madness' and animalistic behaviour. Both are

ways in which they try to fight this repression. Jane's fierce assertion of her independence, Catherine's mad rages and deliriums, Rebecca's 'adventures,' and Amelia's self-abnegating behaviour – are measures of both expressing and fighting against the repression of their sexuality.

Another point important to note is that more often than not, the staunchest agents of patriarchy are women themselves. Jane is repressed by her aunt Mrs. Reed, and her servant Bessie, while Catherine is urged by Nelly Dean to follow the societal norms. However even this is not as straightforward as it seems, since most of these women are themselves victims of patriarchy. Mrs. Reed does not have financial security of her own and hence fears Jane's usurpation. Bessie and Nelly are poor house-keepers. Grace Poole, the keeper of Bertha Mason is herself caught in the patriarchal web. She keeps a fellow woman under suppression at a man's bidding. If she refuses, the man will find another way to suppress Bertha's madness. But she will never come across a better way of making a fortune.

In most Victorian novels, the cause of the heroine's problems and subsequent rebellion is that the society tries to repress her sexuality.

Marriage is always connected to childbirth and societal prospects, not sex. This comes from the basic Victorian belief that sex for pleasure is evil and sinful, and hence the desire for it should be controlled. Reviewers' harsh reactions against novels like *Jane Eyre* stemmed from this very belief.

Gender relations are complex relations. Sexuality is an even more complex concern. However, novels in the Victorian Age, including the three novels referred to in this essay, took a major step by bringing forth these concerns into the reader's mind. More than one hundred and fifty years later, the concerns are still relevant in contemporary society – and it is here that the importance of these novels lies.

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