

Chapter II

The Condition of Nineteenth Century British Women in the Works of Charlotte Brontë

The novels of Charlotte Brontë depict women who suffer social restraints which confine them within a domestic sphere and deprive them of education, experiences and employment prospects. This confined sphere is presented in contrast to the male's broader sphere in which men receive proper education, work and are exposed to variety of experiences. The traditional demarcation of role and sphere forces women to live within a confinement which generally narrows their life prospects and concerns to matters surrounding marriage and home life and reduces them to the level of male dependents. Within the scope of relationships, women are generally powerless counterparts of men who are dominant and powerful. Such an imbalanced power is inclined to make women suffer in the traditional paradigm of male-female relationships in which women require love, protection and material provision from the dominant males who tend to be egocentric and insensitive.

Brontë's female protagonists such as Caroline in *Shirley* and Jane in *Jane Eyre*, represent middle-class women who feel entrapped in a restricted sphere and are urged to break away and utilize their energy and abilities more fully. Through the characters of Frances in *The Professor* and Lucy in *Villette*, the author reflects vividly the hardships which confront single middle-class women who have to support themselves. Both women are forced into the work market

with insufficient resources for income earning and almost no employment prospects. The chapter ends, finally, with an examination of the position of governesses and spinsters as reflected sympathetically in *Shirley*.

Of all Charlotte Brontë's works, *Shirley* is considered different because it is the only one which is not written in an autobiographical form but a novel involving social events and so renders itself a much broader scope than the author's other three novels. It is also *Shirley*, importantly, in which Brontë explores women's issues more extensively than in any of her other novels. The novel provides the frame idea towards traditional demarcation of male and female sphere while the other novels involve, in narrower scale, the personal experiences of the female protagonists who strive for fulfillment. This novel, which employs the Luddite riots of 1811-12 as its setting, has two central themes running parallel to one another. The first incorporates the social riots which are presented through scenes dominated entirely by males where female characters are virtually excluded while the second theme emphasizes male-female love and women's issues which center around the two female protagonists, Caroline and Shirley. For the social theme, readers are presented with a conflict between hungry and unemployed workers and the hated mill-owner, Robert Moore, along with other prominent male figures in the village. These male dominated scenes are sharply contrasted with domestic scenes where female characters are introduced. The contrast between these scenes effectively points to the social demarcation of roles and sphere between the two sexes: males belonging to the broader, active, vital, important and serious sphere while females reside domestically, dependent upon males and occupying themselves with household matters, bringing up children or dreaming of love and marriage.

As reflected in *Shirley*, a woman is male dependent and her place is the home in which she is in charge of household tasks as well as providing domestic comforts to the male. Hortense, the unwed sister of Robert, for instance, is seen to be busy in almost every scene she appears, with either cooking or sewing. One of her greatest concerns each day is to have meals carefully prepared for her brother. As she tells Robert, she considers it is her duty to be happy wherever he prefers to live. Men generally disregard women's potential and they deem that women only require the resources necessary for making them good housewives. This is voiced through Mr. Helstone, a parish vicar, who advises his niece, Caroline, that all she needs to concern herself with is to "stick to the needle—learn shirt-making and gown-making, and pie-crust-making, and you'll be a clever woman some day" (*Shirley* 98).

The similar messages regarding the contrast between roles and sphere of men and women and female dependency are also conveyed to readers, albeit on a smaller scale, in the early chapters of *Villette*. These chapters are narrated to us through the observations of the female protagonist, Lucy Snowe, while she is a girl on one of her visits to her godmother, Mrs. Bretton. On this particular visit Mrs. Bretton has another guest, a unique little girl of seven named Paulina who, despite her young age, has absorbed traditional femaleness. Little Polly has been left temporarily in the care of Mrs. Bretton while Mr. Home, her father, needs to travel to the Continent for a change, as advised by a doctor, to recover his health. It is little Polly—a miniature angel in the house-- through whom Brontë highlights the female's restricted role and sphere as juxtaposed with the vital and active sphere in which Graham, Mrs. Bretton's son, belongs.

All little Polly's wishes for her young life, is to be only with her father. During Mr. Home's brief visit before his departure, Polly is seen always at his side, either to wait on him or hemming him the handkerchief she aims to give as a keepsake. In Mr. Home's absence Polly grows attached to Graham and the girl lives each day for moments when she can be near and wait on Graham, as she did earlier for her father. In Lucy's eyes, it seems so astonishing that

One would have thought the child had no mind or life of her own, but must necessarily live, move, and have her being in another: now that her father was taken from her, she nestled to Graham, and seemed to feel by his feelings: to exist in his existence (*Villette* 83).

The highlight of each day comes when Graham returns from school and Polly turns spirited from being statue-like all day long. Lucy observes that at meals "herself was forgotten in him" (*Villette* 82) and he is served and waited on more attentively than a "Grand Turk" (*Villette* 82) could have had. Sometimes she requests sweet cake for Graham, which is usually not allowed at tea, on the grounds that: "One little piece - only for him - as he goes to school: girls - such as me and Miss Snowe - don't need treats, but he would like it" (*Villette* 82). As young as she is Paulina has realized the traditional demarcation of male and female roles and sphere which she readily conforms. She mirrors conventional females who sacrifice themselves for the sake of the males from whom they, in return, expect love and protection.

It is obvious, through the portrayals and interactions of Graham and Polly that social expectation concerning gender roles have been imposed on them very early in life. Society, and his family, dictates, however, that Graham

is prepared for a different role and sphere from Lucy and Polly. Most of his time is spent with his serious study and assignments which girls such as Lucy and Polly, who pass their time quietly learning feminine tasks at home, can never comprehend. At the age of seven Polly has already adopted a role of a miniature housewife who provides men with domestic comforts and who meticulously cares for household tidiness, as seen when she cautions Graham to wipe his shoes more properly on the mat. Even when she plays, she takes on a motherly role as when she rocks her doll to sleep and whispers as mothers usually do. Simultaneously, boys learn that they are the superior sex, the selected ones for the mission of education and work in the wider sphere. They are aware it is not their role to devote themselves to family's cares as girls do but that males are recipients of such care and devotion. While Polly is very sensitive about his well-being, Graham is inclined to be insensitive to Polly's feelings and often tricks her to give in to his wishes.

The division of roles and regard for male superiority are conventions which were generally accepted in Victorian society. One real life reflection comes from Charlotte Brontë's own family in which such a value is seen but to a somewhat lesser extent. Of the six children, Branwell Brontë was the only boy and the one in whom his father placed his hope. At home he received regular lessons from his father on subjects boys in those days were expected to study while the girls were trained in womanly tasks such as needle-work by their aunt. He was the hope and pride of the family and was claimed to be brilliant although he might not have been any more intelligent or gifted than Charlotte or Emily. In 1836, the family supported him financially to study art at the Royal Academy Schools in London. However, he failed to enroll in the prestigious institution and returned home two weeks later without any clear explanation as to what had happened.

As men are the chosen ones for the domain of education and work, as shown in the novels of Charlotte Brontë, they are seen to be busy and continually occupied by business as against to female idleness. They are required to actively come and go in contrast to women who engage themselves with “insignificant matters” inside their home and see men off and cheerfully receive them back. The women’s restricted sphere limits their mobility as Judith Lowder Newton remarks in *Women, Power & Subversion* that in *Villette*, “Graham comes and goes while Polly sits on a stool ‘all day long’” (Newton 87). In *Shirley*, after Mr. Helstone orders Caroline not to take any more lessons from Hortense, Caroline has barely nothing to engage herself with. She passes hours sitting very still yet her hands sew industriously as her mind contemplates how to pass her time in years to come (*Shirley* 175). What surrounds the women’s sphere in Brontë’s novels often conveys a sense of stillness, stagnancy, repetition and at times emptiness in which women fill their hours with tedious work.

Male characters in the novels of Charlotte Brontë are conscious of their superiority since it is certain, for at least one thing, that they are more learned and are exposed to much a broader and variety of experiences than women. In *Jane Eyre*, while Rochester has “battled through a varied experience with many men of many nations, and roamed over half the globe” (*Jane Eyre* 135) Jane Eyre has never traveled further than seventy miles before meeting him. In *Shirley*, Caroline Helstone, has only had one year schooling and has never left her neighborhood while Robert has lived in both the Continent and England and settled himself as a mill-owner. There is nothing significant about Lucy’s educational background in *Villette* and compared with Paul Emanuel, who has received a proper education, she seems an ignorant child. In *The Professor*, Crimsworth’s worthy degree from Eton makes him more than

qualified for the teaching profession while Frances who has not had formal education only mends lace to earn her own living. She carefully manages her earnings to have enough to live by and to take lessons to qualify herself for teaching.

As the superior sex who have privileged access to education and experiences, all of Brontë's prominent male figures are portrayed as more dominant and powerful in their relationships with women. In *The Professor*, for instance, Frances and Crimsworth maintain their "master-pupil" relationship from the beginning until the end. Frances submits to Crimsworth's preference to communicate with her through English, which is his first but her second language. If she challenges him teasingly by talking French she is to be punished by reading him English which she cannot fully comprehend unless receiving his explanations as though she is "a child and a novice" listening to her "senior and director" (*The Professor* 277). In *Villette*, the male protagonist, Paul Emanuel assumes himself morally superior and takes on the role of Lucy's spiritual guardian to watch over her. He cautiously keeps an eye on her and warns her of conduct which he exaggeratedly considers weak as a way to harass her. In chapter XIX, entitled "The Cleopatra", for instance, finding Lucy alone at the art gallery observing a sensual painting of Cleopatra, Paul expresses the impropriety of a single young woman such as Lucy to be exposed to such morally questionable an image. He immediately takes her away from the painting and orders her instead to peruse a set of paintings which convey the nineteenth century's ideal of women: the depictions of the four stages of women beginning from a young girl to a wife, a young mother and widow (Gordon 165). Such a self-assuming role of guardian can be interpreted as an endeavor aimed, ultimately, to keep Lucy within the limits of traditional ideas of female pulchritude rather for his own sake than for Lucy's.

Furthermore, the novels also convey that the males' superior place and the significance with which females tend to regard them are inclined to make males egocentric and insensitive to women's feelings. In *Villette*, the respectable Doctor John can callously hurt a woman's feelings if he is tempted to prove his significance to and superiority over her. The scene in which Lucy confronts the figure of a nun, for instance, can well exemplify such narcissistic impulses in him. Prior to the scene, Lucy received a letter from Doctor John and after keeping it unread all day long she eventually seeks the privacy of the attic to read and appreciate her precious letter. There, the eerie sight of the nun frightens Lucy and she drops the letter as she rushes out for Madame Beck. When she leads Madame and her company back to the attic, Doctor John, who takes part in the company, sees the letter and snatches it from the floor without Lucy's notice. A little later when he is alone with her, he returns the letter only after he has seen Lucy cry bitterly over its loss. She rejoices but cannot help feeling his cruelty in his "teasing torment". Lucy doubts if "tears of temperature one degree cooler than those I shed would only have amused Dr. John" (*Villette* 328). Likewise, in *Jane Eyre*, Rochester schemes to ensure he will win Jane's love by inviting the attractive Blanche Ingram to Thornfield and overtly displays his intimacy with her to provoke Jane's jealousy. He further deceives Jane into believing that he is marrying Blanche and tortures Jane to the point that she cannot help but declare how much he means to her and how acutely the thought of leaving him grieves her. Rochester then declares his love and proposes marriage to Jane only after he has been ensured of how much he is loved and how significant he is to her.

Men's power, ego and insensitivity are inclined to inflict pain and suffering for women in the traditional paradigm of relationships which require women to conform to male expectations and subject themselves to their

domination and power. In such relationships, women are helpless and powerless counterparts while their lovers or husbands remain dominant and powerful. The woman's doom in such a paradigm is seen through a number of relationships in Brontë's novels. In *Shirley*, for instance, Mrs. Helstone dies of a broken-heart after her short-lived marriage. She had had the misfortune of marrying a stern clergyman, Mr. Helstone, who made no effort to understand women, regarding them as a race of beings much inferior to those of his own sex. To him, his wife's silence is translated as "nothing ailed her, and she wanted nothing" (*Shirley* 53). Also in *Shirley*, Mrs. Pryor is married to a cruel and deceptive husband and eventually seeks her way out of unresolved misery by leaving her husband and child. In *Jane Eyre*, Bertha Mason, becomes detestable in the eyes of her husband after he has found that her mother is insane and Bertha is believed to inherit the "seed" from the mother. Bertha then dwindles from the prime beauty who attracted numerous suitors to a powerless wife, contemptible in the eyes of her husband on whose mercy she now depends. It is very likely that his detestation and rejection of her exacerbate her fragile condition. Her frustration and disappointment transform into anger, violence and, ultimately, madness. In all these, her husband who now owns and enjoys her fortune sympathizes only with himself and puts all the blame exclusively on her part as he says: "Bertha Mason,—the true daughter of an infamous mother, —dragged me through all the hideous and degrading agonies which must attend a man bound to a wife at once intemperate and unchaste" (*Jane Eyre* 310).

Yet, to too many women, marriage becomes almost the only goal in their restricted lives. Some of Brontë's female characters portray these women who will strive so hard for a good match. These characters are usually depicted as physically attractive and are often of good social status but are

rather shallow and often have certain flaws, such as the arrogant Miss Ingram, the selfish and spoiled Georgiana and the superficial and flirtatious Rosamond in *Jane Eyre*. On the one hand, they serve as a contrast to the heroines who are intelligent but poor and physically unattractive, and are hence excluded from the marriage market. On the other hand they reflect the misguided aspect of marriage which considers looks and status as principal criteria. These charming daughters are spoiled and obsessed with the idea of marriage which is continually encouraged by their parents. Georgiana, for instance, while her mother was on her death-bed “spent most of her time in lying on the sofa, fretting about the dulness of the house, and wishing over and over again that her Aunt Gibson would send her an invitation up to town” (*Jane Eyre* 237). Ginevra Fanshawe, a self-obsessed, beautiful, young coquette in *Villette* devotes her time to flirting and dressing up prettily for parties and visits. Ginevra ends up eloping with her lover Colonel de Hamal, a handsome aristocrat who leads a wasteful life and eventually becomes the source of frequent difficulties and miseries to his family.

Of all the prominent female characters depicted, the ones who conform most to conventional roles are Caroline in *Shirley* and Paulina in *Villette*. In both characters the traditionally prescribed virtues of female self-devotion and submission to the dominant male is highlighted. As earlier mentioned, Paulina lives her life solely to suit and serve the needs of Graham and her father. Growing into a young woman she continues to be Mr. Home's dutiful daughter but is somewhat distracted when she meets Graham and falls in love with him. When the situation forces her to reveal that she and Graham are in love, her heart is virtually breaking to see her father's pain from being unprepared to

lose his daughter. She resolves the situation by proposing that Graham, or now Doctor John Bretton, can move in to live with them after they are married, so that she can take care both of him and her father.

The peril of totally devoting herself to a man she loves and to be completely subjugated to his domination is hinted all along through the character of Paulina. When Paulina as a young woman of seventeen once again meets Graham, she responds to him with feminine reserve. But with his influence Paulina's "timid, self-imposed restriction" (*Villette* 519) dissolves and once again he becomes her idol and her whole world. In him "there was influence unspeakable in all he uttered, wrote, thought, or looked" (*Villette* 521), overall she feels her lover "sacred". She to whom Lucy has high regard as a "delicate, intelligent and sincere" (*Villette* 461) woman is hereon to dwell in her husband's shadow. Paulina vanishes from the novel after her marriage and seems to barely exist now that she is a wife. Not even her offspring resemble her in looks; they both are like their father who is said to bring them up with his "firm hand" (Newton 117).

In her own thoughtful way, Caroline will also devote herself to her husband's well-being as does Paulina. In the scene in which she and Shirley witness the confrontation between rioters against Robert and his workers, Caroline is held back by Shirley from fleeing to Robert's side to offer him support. To Caroline's submission and devotion, Shirley wonders: "What a docile wife you would make to a stern husband" (*Shirley* 339). But while Paulina is content with her role of docility Caroline doubts whether there should be more to a woman's life than being a "devoted and virtuous" angel for the happiness of a man she adores (*Shirley* 174). Caroline suffers from unrequited love almost throughout the novel. It plagues her feelings that her

life is empty and purposeless and she strongly feels that she needs to secure work outside her home. But her proposal meets with firm opposition from her uncle who would feel ashamed if his niece is to be employed as a governess. A woman's frustration, it seems, can neither be eased by any effort nor understood by others, especially a man. Mr. Helstone derides Caroline's idea of working as a governess. His advice to her is that she should "put all crotchets out of your head and run away and amuse yourself" (*Shirley* 191)

Through the character of Caroline, Charlotte Brontë successfully portrays female despair over a life in which she is given too few matters to occupy her and too little control to make significant changes. Caroline's position differs from other orphaned heroines' in that she need not fend for herself but is well provided for by her uncle. But shelter and material necessities are not sufficient to make any one contented particularly a sensitive person such as Caroline. She develops into a young woman without parental love and is almost totally neglected by her uncle. Without the necessities to struggle to survive, her life is emptier and more without purpose than other Brontë's heroines. Seeing herself now and years ahead without love and with nothing significant to occupy her, at the height of her despair, she ponders,

I have to live, perhaps, till seventy years. As far as I know, I have good health: half a century of existence may lie before me. How am I to occupy it? What am I to do to fill the interval of time which spreads between me and the grave? (*Shirley* 173)

What Caroline expresses eruditely is perhaps what many other women who share the same destiny and probably Brontë herself helplessly and hopelessly questioned. In the life of the Brontë sisters, years had passed in the Haworth parsonage seeing the sisters' frustration and hopelessness in finding suitable work. Charlotte Brontë herself evidently showed her preference for a life of hard work to one which had nothing significant to occupy it. In her letter to W.S. Williams, a reader at her publisher, Smith, Elder & Co., she wrote, "...Believe me, teachers may be hard-worked, ill-paid, and despised, but the girl who stays at home doing nothing is worse off than the hardest-wrought and worst paid drudge of a school" (Gordon 122).

Caroline also reflects a woman's silent suffering from an unrequited love which she must secretly conceal since etiquette requires a woman to be passive and "only respond to male advances".¹ She falls in love with her cousin Robert Moore who treats her inconsistently, alternating between affectionate intimacy and intentional distance of a "cousin-like" manner. When Robert deliberately responds to her greeting with a distant and indifferent air unlike the Robert of yesterday, Caroline is overwhelmed by disappointment and almost unbearable pain. In such a situation, had she been a man she could simply demand an explanation, as etiquette allows men to encourage and pursue a relationship while it is appropriate for women only to remain passive. As with many women in her situation, Caroline must endure her bitter pain quietly and take the blame herself because, as she sees it, "Robert had done her no wrong: he had told her no lie" (*Shirley* 106) and "it was she that was to blame" for "she had loved without being asked to love" (*Shirley* 107). Her situation and intense feelings are described figuratively:

You held out your hand for an egg, and fate put into it a scorpion. Show no consternation: close your fingers firmly upon the gift; let it sting through your palm. Never mind: in time, after your hand and arm have swelled and quivered long with torture, the squeezed scorpion will die, and you will have learned the great lesson how to endure without a sob (*Shirley* 105).

But Caroline cannot overcome her agonies and is eventually overwhelmed by a sense of despair. She pines away and perhaps would have died if not for Mrs. Pryor's disclosure of the truth that she is, in fact, Caroline's mother. Maternal love gives a purpose to live for and she gradually recovers. It is shown explicitly through the character of Caroline that women, just as men, do require some prospects in life to live for. She prefers to die because men neither give her love nor access to occupy herself by working outside her home. It is "motherly love" which provides her with hope and enables her to be more content with herself and hence more ready to marry Robert at the novel's end.

The frustration which Caroline experiences from lacking accesses and opportunities to utilize her energy and to fill the intolerable void in her life is earlier echoed through the female protagonist of *Jane Eyre*, a novel published two years prior to *Shirley*. Jane, is an orphan who has lived in a charity school for orphans at Lowood for eight years, the first six years as a pupil and the last two as a teacher. But change arrives by the end of the eighth year, when Miss Temple, the school superintendent has left Lowood. It is Miss Temple's influence which keeps Jane's life at Lowood content and she even adopts "a disciplined and subdued" (*Jane Eyre* 85) temperament. Without Miss Temple, her reasons for subduing her nature to the strict school routines and duties are no longer there. She feels trapped within the confinement of Lowood and is

eager to explore the outside world. Jane desires liberty and is ready to experience the world beyond Lowood. She paces her chamber as she assesses her own situation:

...now I was left in my natural element; and beginning to feel the stirring of old emotions. It did not seem as if a prop were withdrawn, but rather as if a motive were gone: it was not the power to be tranquil which had failed me, but the reason for tranquility was no more. My world had for some years been in Lowood: my experience had been of its rules and systems; now I remembered that the real world was wide, and that a varied field of hopes and fears, of sensations and excitements, awaited those who had courage to go forth into its expanse, to seek real knowledge of life amidst its perils (*Jane Eyre* 85).

These desires lead her to seek employment and become a governess of a little girl at Thornfield-Hall, but three months after she has settled there, the once subsided restlessness troubles her again. Once again, Jane paces back and forth along the corridor of the third storey again feeling trapped in the confinement and the routine of Thornfield. This time, as she paces the attic, she agonizes over the restrictive life of women in general who

.....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 (*Jane Eyre* 110-11).

Through Jane the female voice appeals for society to be more just to women and to allow them more alternatives in life. It is a plea for society not to ignore women's plight engendered by a restricted frame of life which subjugate them and keep them passive while, in fact, they have potential to be more beneficial to both themselves and society. Jane questions the social validity of and justice for women and this expression significantly prefigures those to be developed by feminists of later decades of the nineteenth century and in the twentieth century. Within such a society, middle-class women who need to earn their own living are confronted by hardships because they have almost no resources sufficient for any respectable work as seen through the struggles of Lucy in *Villette* and Frances in *The Professor*. In *Villette*, a disaster which Lucy intentionally omits to relate details, leaves her an isolated person without any kin when she is twenty-three. The situation forces Lucy to depend economically on herself and to seek work when she is not prepared for it and in a society that hardly provides any work opportunities for women. "Thus, there remained no possibility of dependence on others;" ponders, Lucy, "to myself alone could I look, I know not that I was of a self-reliant or active nature; but self-reliance and exertion were forced upon me by circumstances, as they are upon thousands besides..."(*Villette* 95). Frances Henri shares the same predicament as Lucy, being forced into the job market without any resources nor educational background handy for employment. Both protagonists face extreme difficulty in seeking proper work and in fulfilling the tasks which require tremendous effort. Settling down in Brussels, Frances receives training in lace-mending, an occupation which she learns in a few days and which she can earn money from quickly. But to earn a pittance from mending fragile and precious lace which is a symbol of luxury, a young woman such as Frances must toil until late at night torturing her eyesight. In Lucy's case, her first work experience is of different nature from Frances' lace-

mending. She is employed as a nurse of Miss Marchmont, a rich middle-aged woman suffering from a crippling rheumatism in the neighborhood. Miss Marchmont needs constant care and Lucy must reside in the same room as her, day and night, a circumstance of which Lucy wrote: "her service was my duty - her pain, my suffering - her relief, my hope - her anger, my punishment - her regard, my reward" (*Villette* 97). Incidentally, what Lucy has to endure, being laborious and so constantly occupied to nurse a person in need, is perhaps worth the time and effort than what a lace-mender has to tolerate. And a lace-mender's effort is only to perfect the symbol of luxury for the wealthy few who can enjoy a fabric so fragile not to cover the body as one of the basic necessities of life, but as a flagrant function of conspicuous spending of society's leisure class.

According to Françoise Basch in *Relative Creatures*, at the middle of the nineteenth century, three-quarters of single women depended on themselves for their own earnings (Basch 105). While the number of women who entered the work force was increasing, inadequate female working conditions and pay raised little concern. At work, women had to cope with the disparity of lower pay and working status than men due to poorer educational background and inferior status in society. It was hard for many women who had to support themselves, and sometimes their dependents to make ends meet with insufficient remuneration.

To earn sufficient income, therefore, Frances has to work harder, a situation which wearies her both mentally and physically. Seeing no future advancement as a lace-mender, Frances takes some lessons to qualify herself for the teaching profession. She is later employed as a school teacher and insists on continuing her career even after she is married to William

Crimsworth. Despite the fact that she works as hard as her husband, who is a college instructor, she earns only about one-third of his income. Such discrimination, prevalent in the nineteenth century, makes Frances feel that this is not the way she should devote her energy for the best rewards. She adopts a plan to open her own school and with Crimsworth's support, the scheme is forwarded and in time the school becomes a success. Like Frances, Lucy Snowe also adopts a teaching profession in a foreign city upon the death of Miss Marchmont, after which she crosses the channel to search for employment on the Continent. Lucy is rather pleased with her teaching profession though she has to work hard for half the salary of the former English teacher she replaces (*Villette* 99). At the end of the novel, Lucy's wish to be a directress of her own school is fulfilled by Paul Emanuel's efforts and support. Her school becomes a success after years of hard work.

Considering the inferior working status and deficient earnings of women, one can imagine how slight a chance it would be for Frances and Lucy to set up a school on their own. The disparity between male and female work opportunity is stark when comparing, for instance, Lucy with Crimsworth, the male protagonist of *The Professor*. Both of them trace a similar background: they are self-supporting orphans in their early twenties who opt to settle on the Continent in search of a new beginning and employment. But it is very clear that Lucy can never adopt a profession such as Crimsworth's because she is a woman who has no education compared with Crimsworth's worthy degree from Eton. While Crimsworth is able to establish a respectable career Lucy, as in the case of Frances, can merely earn a minimum income and success in her career only derives through the support of the male protagonist who helps establish a small school for her.

It should also be noted that for some single women, a life of struggle for marriage, work or worldly status is no longer their aim, but a retreat to the religious realm is sought as an alternative. In *Jane Eyre*, one of the female characters, Eliza Reed, decides to become a Catholic nun after the family's ruin and the deaths of her mother and shameful brother. The disaster leaves her alone with Georgiana, the sister whom she both envies and hates because Georgiana is beautiful and attracts much more attention. Being rigid, cold and unkind as she is Eliza does not represent a person of a religious mind but rather regards it as her consolation. Work is not an alternative for a woman of her class and besides, she manages to secure the fortune she is supposed to have in spite of the family's ruin. Entering a convent is then considered a better alternative for such an embittered figure as herself than to be overwhelmed by the isolation of a spinster's life. Traditionally, nunneries and convents were once places where parents who were unable to marry off their daughters would leave them in retreat from worldly involvement for the rest of their life.

Unlike Eliza Reed's choice of vocation, a large number of single middle-class women in the nineteenth century had no other option but to earn their keep from working as a governess as did all the Brontë sisters. Much of Charlotte Brontë's observations on the condition of governesses was gained from her direct experience while working as a governess in 1839 and again in 1841. Of all Brontë's literary creations who are governesses, Jane in *Jane Eyre*, Lucy in *Villette* and Mrs. Pryor in *Shirley*, the latter echoes most bitterly the frustration and agony she feels while tolerating the job. She demonstrates that a governess lives solitarily in the family where she has a rather vague and undefined status. She is definitely not treated as a member of the family and cannot interact on an equal basis, at the same time, she is usually detested by

the servants. Moreover, a governess is unable to be friends with the pupils despite their affection for her. Mrs. Pryor stresses to Caroline that the agony which tortures a governess can virtually make one “pine and grow too weak for your work: you would come home—if you still had a home—broken down” (*Shirley* 378). The rest of her life will be passed in desolation with hardly any sympathy or understanding from others except those very dear to her. She will waste away until the day comes when she takes leave of this world.

The predicament as reflected by Mrs. Pryor parallels closely what Elizabeth Sewell wrote in 1865: “the real discomfort of a governess’s position arises from the fact that it is undefined. She is not a relation, not a guest, not a mistress, not a servant - but something made up of all. No one knows exactly how to treat her” (quoted by Gilmour 62). Besides, many governesses were pressured by their inadequacy in the subjects they taught and the method of teaching itself. In some cases this resulted in mental disorder and a number of them ended up in lunatic asylums (Basch 112).

While the number of middle-class women working outside the home increased as a result of economical pressure, work options for women became fewer in the middle of the nineteenth century (Poovy 169). Because governessing was almost the only alternative available for genteel women, there was, inevitably, a larger supply than demand despite all the hardships a governess had to endure. The situation favored employers to demand ample requirements from a governess, as illustrated in one advertisement in *The Times* in 1843 in which a salary of £12 per annum was offered to a “morning” governess who was “of ladylike manners, capable of imparting a sound English education with French, music and singing, dancing and drawing,

unassisted by masters" (quoted by Basch 111). In some cases a salary offered was down to £10 a year, "...generally below that of the cook and butler, and not above that of the housekeeper, footman and lady's maid" (quoted by Basch 112).

Apart from the plight of the governess, the status of spinsters was another women's issue which received special concern from early feminists and one which Charlotte Brontë raised sympathetically in *Shirley*. In this novel, Brontë devotes one entire chapter to the suffering of unmarried women. Miss Mann and Miss Ainley are portrayed as solitary, poor and ugly but are spankingly clean. Miss Mann represents a stereotype of spinsters: medusa-like, ill-tempered, loveless and unpleasant. When Caroline visits her home, Miss Mann first receives her with cold hospitality but this gradually alters as she realizes Caroline's sincerity. In her, Caroline discovers a soul which longs for understanding and cares as any other soul such as herself. She also learns that once Miss Mann was a devoted and dutiful daughter and sister who had no life of her own, but devoted herself to the service of others. For the fact that she is single, she is repaid only with ridicule and contempt for her sacrifice.

Miss Ainley represents another type of spinster, to whom Caroline feels that her goodness and purity of heart is almost saint-like, and to which she cannot help but feel reverent. Unlike Miss Mann, Miss Ainley is saved from affliction by her religious devotion and charity work. Although Miss Ainley is not ill-treated, she is hardly rewarded for her untiring services to the poor, many of whom "became so accustomed to her services that they hardly

thanked her for them: the rich heard them mentioned with wonder, but were silent, from a sense of shame at the difference between her sacrifices and their own" (*Shirley* 182).

Readers are hence introduced to two daughters of society who do not have a life of their own but devote them entirely for the sake of their family, and who, by the fact that they remain single, are likely to receive nothing but scorn and disrespect from society. While Miss Ainley can gain some respect through her religious devotion, Miss Mann is a typical victim of social injustice, perceived as nothing but a wretched and ugly being who appears to have nothing to offer to society. Through Caroline, Brontë voices a rather lengthy plea for the concerns and betterment of single women's conditions :

Old maids, like the houseless and unemployed poor, should not ask for a place and an occupation in the world: the demand disturbs the happy and rich: it disturbs parents...The brothers of these girls are every one in business or in professions; they have something to do: their sisters have no earthly employment, but household work and sewing; no earthly pleasure, but an unprofitable visiting; and no hope, in all their life to come, of anything better. This stagnant state of things makes them decline in health: they are never well; and their minds and views shrink to wondrous narrowness. The great wish—the sole aim of everyone of them is to be married, but the majority will never marry: they will die as they now live. They scheme, they plot, they dress to ensure husbands. The gentlemen turn them into ridicule: they don't want them; they hold them very cheap...What do they expect them to do at home? If you ask,—they would answer, sew and cook. They expect them to do this, and this only, contentedly, regularly, uncomplainingly all their lives long, as if

they had no germs of faculties for anything else: a doctrine as reasonable to hold, as it would be that the fathers have no faculties but for eating what their daughters cook, or for wearing what they sew. Could men live so themselves?
(*Shirley* 391)

The plea articulates deep frustration and despair of the lives of single women in the nineteenth century. It encapsulates the women's condition that this entire chapter has attempted to point out. Like the earlier plea for improvement of women's conditions, it, again appeals to society to be more concerned about women's plight. It urges them to acknowledge that women suffer social confinement which gives them no other options but to fulfill the traditional roles and duties in which they must devote their lives for the sake of others. Women should have more to do and more concerns in their lives. They should have the right to develop themselves intellectually and be given opportunities to utilize their energy and abilities in more substantial ways.

An exploration of women's conditions in the nineteenth century in the works of Charlotte Brontë has shown that conventional division of roles and spheres between men and women and the deprivation of women's education, experiences and employment prospects clearly reflect women's subordinate place and inferior status in society. In such a paradigmatically unequal social structure, these women almost have no other option but to spend their lives passively and quietly in the stagnancy of the female sphere within which men and family are their prime concerns. The novels further reveal that within the scope of relationships, men are dominant and powerful and are inclined to be egocentric and insensitive to women who are subjugated to them and require from them material and mental security.

It is emphasized through the novels of Charlotte Brontë that women are frustrated and suffer within such a restricted frame of life which oppress and restrain them. Caroline in *Shirley* and Jane in *Jane Eyre* feel themselves entrapped by these restraints society imposes on women. They strongly feel the need to transcend these limitations and make their lives more purposeful. The novels also convey that women are prone to suffer in the traditional paradigm of relationships because they are helpless and too powerless to bring about any changes if caught in unhappy relationships or marriages, as seen through the miseries of Mrs. Helstone and Mrs. Pryor in *Shirley*. The struggles of Lucy in *Villette* and Frances in *The Professor* reveal the hardships of single women who are forced into the work market without resources sufficient for income earning.

Through her female protagonists, Brontë reveals that women have abilities and potential to lead a more substantial lives. Although these characters are excessively frustrated by social limitations they do not decline traditional female duties totally but dread to live all their lives for only this one aspect. They put forth that women need more to do and involve themselves with in life. Through these characters, Brontë urges that ultimately the conditions of middle-class women in the nineteenth century British society are in need of change, because women suffer the restraints society imposes on them and because there is no place in society in which they can live with dignity.

Notes

1. In *Sex and Subterfuge: Women Novelists to 1850* (London: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1982), p. 116, Eva Figes remarks when referring to a woman's "undeclared love" in the novels of Harriet Martineau and Charlotte Brontë that "Brontë would expatiate at some length on the secret humiliation of a woman suffering from unrequited love, since social custom demands that a woman must only respond to male advances".