

## **Chapter IV**

### **Conclusion**

Charlotte Brontë's novels may be distinguished from most mid-Victorian novels, in one prominent aspect, by their particular concerns toward women's issues. While most other contemporary novelists persisted with portrayals of ideal Victorian women and the traditional aspects of wifedom and marriage without question or criticism, Brontë sought to reflect women's conditions and problems within the confinement of these traditions (Calder 56). She emphasizes the social limitations which restrict women solely to the domestic sphere and condition them to be male dependents as she simultaneously points to women's potential for empowerment which is often denied and prevented from developing by society. These aspects contribute to make Brontë's novels invaluable resources for a study of women's status in the nineteenth century which is the focus of this thesis. The thesis attempts to argue that while women in the nineteenth century are conditioned by their society to be dependent and conform to male expectations, they, in fact, have the potential to live more independently and to have more control over their lives. It seeks to support this assumption by exploring the demarcation of gender roles and spheres and their consequences which affect women tremendously and points to Brontë's assertions concerning a woman's potential, needs, aspirations and the significance of a woman's self-identity and independence.

The thesis lays its ground in Chapter II by pointing out the contrast between male and female sphere as presented by Charlotte Brontë and focuses on the limitations society imposed upon women which limit and narrow their

experiences and abilities within the domestic sphere. Women are shown to be deprived of the resources necessary for income earning and a chance to make fuller use of their abilities. Some of the female protagonists such as Caroline in *Shirley* or Jane in *Jane Eyre* echo strongly the frustrations of middle-class women who feel their lives are wasting away to nothing, and whose abilities can be utilized in more substantial ways if given the opportunity. In most novels, however, financial needs bring Brontë's female protagonists face to face with limitations regarding employment prospects: they do not have sufficient resources for any decent employment except teaching or governessing. *Shirley* points to a governess' depression from her undefined position, a sort of alienation which leaves many women with incurable mental wounds for the rest of their lives.

Brontë points out all along that women have potential and aspirations to be exposed to a greater variety of experiences and to engage themselves in a more substantial way. Her female protagonists are portrayed as intelligent and insightful women who are fully endowed with potential and ability. Shirley, the female protagonist who lends her name to the novel, for instance, is an intelligent and capable woman whose status enables her to gain respect from men as she also shows her abilities to deal in business with them. Women's potential to achieve success in their career, if given the opportunity, are emphasized through the characters of Frances in *The Professor* and Lucy in *Villette* when both become successful directresses of their own school through years of hard work.

Unfortunately, inferior status and dependence reduce women into beings men habitually relate with irrationality, childishness and shallowness. To a certain degree, this prejudice is not far from the truth because many women cannot but be superficial when they have not been exposed to adequate education and experiences beyond the domestic sphere. As seen through a number of minor female characters in Brontë's novels, many women take marriage as their ultimate goal and most of their endeavors are toward this end. But the demographic fact that women outnumbered men did mean that a lot of women were kept single all their lives leading to another set of problems as Brontë conveys: single women are not in the position to support themselves, and in some cases, their families, because they are not adequately prepared for income-earning and because society hardly provides any employment prospects for women. Moreover, these single women, whose status of being unmarried society treats as inadequate, unavoidably become victims of social ridicule and prejudice.

Chapter II also points to an imbalanced power in the traditional paradigm of male-female relationships in which a woman is submissive to male domination and depends on male love and protection. Within such a paradigm, women are prone to suffer subjugation to male control because convention dictates that they need to repress themselves for the sake of men who tend to appear egocentric and insensitive. As shown in *Shirley*, men's privileged position regarding social etiquette is obviously seen beginning from the point of courtship. They are the ones to initiate the relationship and seek their mates while women are to remain passive, a circumstance which favors the objectification of women. Once a woman is courted or married to a man she loves, such as seen in the relationship

of Caroline and Robert in *Shirley*, her lover becomes her sole concern while she is only one among numerous interests in life which men are exposed to. The significance women make of their lovers further encourage a male's sense of egotism and insensitivity as a result of their assumed superiority.

It would not be erroneous, perhaps, to conclude that Brontë sees marriage in a traditional sense as a doom for women. There are hardly any representations of a happy marriage in the traditional sense in any of her novels. Most married characters are presented to have their counterparts perished and a number of marriages or relationships end tragically. Brontë takes a rather pessimistic view on marriage in which women are to merely be the male's submissive and powerless wife.

This thesis also examines female needs, aspirations and struggles toward fulfillment in Chapter III through two of Charlotte Brontë's best known novels, *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*. In these two novels, as with her other novels, the female protagonists are depicted as orphans to heighten the sense of need and privation of women in a patriarchal society. Jane and Lucy reveal the urgent need for these women to support themselves and as they do not have access to sufficient resources are not qualified for any other respectable careers except teaching. The two female protagonists also reflect women's loneliness and emotional needs partly because they live within a confinement where they lack the proper prospects and the means to involve themselves more intellectually, and partly because they are also isolated young women. In *Jane Eyre*, Jane's relationships with her master leads her to conflicts which enable her to realize that the essence of her selfhood lies in her self-identity, independence as well as a sense

of righteousness which renders her self-esteem. Jane reveals that it is vital for herself to retain what is significant to her selfhood whether her love is to be fulfilled or not. In the end, she achieves a sense of fulfillment when Rochester finally accepts her autonomy as her love for him is fulfilled. In *Villette*, Brontë firmly stresses that a love-relationship should render support to a woman's development of her selfhood rather than an obstruction to it as in Jane-Rochester's relationship in the early stage and generally in a traditional type of relationship. Lucy and Paul's battles to adjust their power relationship leads Paul to ultimately accept Lucy's autonomy as remarkably shown by his setting up for her a school which provides her with the independent means to support herself. In the end, Paul is destined to die which leaves Lucy isolated and lonely for the rest of her life just as many other single women in society. But Lucy is seen to have come a long way from the insecurity and morbidity which plagued the earlier parts of her life. She does not achieve fulfillment in the sense Jane does but she is stable and in control of herself. Lucy may not be happy but at least she is contented enough to live by herself.

Jane's and Lucy's quests reveal how women must undergo onerous struggles to be able to retain their self-identity as well as fulfilling their financial needs and aspirations for love. Brontë also puts forth that women have the right to have some control over their lives. To be able to possess and maintain such a privilege not only does a woman need to battle against the prevailing patriarchal order, she also has to fight her own inclination to subject herself to male power, an inclination which is driven by deeply rooted traditions.

We must acknowledge, however, that important factors which enable Jane and Lucy to attain a sense of fulfillment can hardly occur in real life: a poor and isolated Jane becomes independent through the inheritance of a large sum of money and Rochester becomes a crippled man and must now depend on Jane; Lucy feels secure and more stable mainly because finally she feels loved and understood and is able to occupy herself productively. This, perhaps, implies how rare it was for women in Brontë's time to gain independence and achieve what Jane and Lucy do.

In both *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*, the novels' love theme which intertwines the theme of quest and a fulfilling love is shown to be vital to the sense of fulfillment of both Jane and Lucy. One may doubt whether it is necessary that "love" should contribute so significantly to a woman's sense of fulfillment. It could be said, perhaps, that, apart from the author's personal regard for love, the theme is, unavoidably, an element she emphasizes to satisfy the reading public who tend to enjoy and expect stories which involve love and romance.

This study of the status of women in nineteenth century British society in the novels of Charlotte Brontë finds a stark contrast between the restricted female sphere and broad, active and vital male sphere which reflects traditions which regard women as an inferior sex who only fit the traditionally prescribed roles of mother and wife. However, Brontë's portrayal of women's potential to be a man's equal or even superior in some cases and aspects, defiantly questions the validity and justice of this belief. The thesis also finds that within such an imbalanced paradigm, women are given only resources sufficient for moulding

them as sacrificing housewives and, hence, are critically deprived of proper education, work prospects, broader interests and experiences, and ultimately the right to have some control over themselves. Against the traditions which condition women to see themselves as selfless and helpless dependents, Brontë's female protagonists portray the importance of female independence and identity: the need of a woman to be recognized and to have a level of control over herself.

Evidently, Charlotte Brontë does not convey these messages through exploring the domestic sphere. Rather, she examines the needs, aspirations and plight of the female characters who dread to be confined within a domestic sphere but seek fulfillment beyond the confinement. It is through these characters' struggles, reflections and observations that the novels successfully convey the agonies and doom of women who are mired with problems. A powerful effect is gained through capturing the intense feelings and frustrations of these women who find themselves without the necessary access to improve their lives in any way.

The recognition of Charlotte Brontë's works is achieved not only because of her abilities to present her subject matter so effectively. The fact that she herself shared the painful experiences with other women with the same predicament in society also contributed to the power of her creation which enables her subject matter to appear so real and moving. As with many women of her time she had seen years pass by her stagnant and lonely life without hope or prospects for anything better to come. But Charlotte Brontë was not a soul who would yield to despair. By the same token as her female protagonists, her

life reflects a spirit which pushes forward because, as voiced through Rose Yorke, the girl who reveals a liberated spirit in *Shirley*, it is “better to try all things and find all empty, than to try nothing and leave your life a blank” (*Shirley* 400). Like her literary creations, she strives away from the void of life that many women in Victorian society had to endure.

Writing from her own experiences and the perspective of a self-supporting woman, Brontë points to the significance of work; independence and the rights of individuals which women of her time critically lacked. Caroline’s desire to be more occupied with more substantial work in *Shirley* echoes a woman’s need to make a fuller use of her potential in response to both her intellectual needs and the need to fill the painful void of a woman’s life. Brontë valued work and she realized that it was her writing career which saved her from despair provoked by intolerable isolation and the tragical loss of all her siblings. She wrote to her publisher’s reader, Mr. Williams, that her work gave her “hope and motive”, the vitality which too many single women of her time did not have (Bald 56). Work provides an independence which Brontë sees as imperative to female selfhood: “there is no more respectable character on this earth than an unmarried woman who makes her own way through life quietly persevering—without support of husband or brother;” wrote Brontë, to her former teacher, Miss Wooler (quoted by Ewbank 157). Female independence is thus essential because it translates as the right for a woman to have some control over herself. It provides a woman some freedom to think, choose and decide for oneself and is, therefore, something all Brontë’s female protagonists strive hard to attain and retain.



In literary world, it is accepted that Charlotte Brontë's works stand out from her contemporaries through the subject which centers around women's issues and narratives which are infused with romantic elements. Her novels are also believed to have influenced the course of women's writing, as remarked by Mrs. Oliphant, one of the well-known female novelists in Victorian Period: "perhaps no other writer of her time has impressed her mark so clearly on contemporary literature, or drawn so many followers onto her own peculiar path" (quoted by Showalter 105-6). Brontë's works are another significant chain in the course of female writing and prefigure what was to come in the late nineteenth and the twentieth century.

Without the author's realization, the stories of her female protagonists, with their poignant pleas for understanding and change, are seen to echo the "cry of need" which, as Robin Gilmour puts it, is striking in the age, despite the narration which is deeply personal and narrow in scope (Gilmour 60). The reflections and insights in Brontë's novels also disclose the part that written history, which in itself is a male-biased discipline, often does not: she gives voice to that sector of society, which, according to Feminist thinking, is deprived of the right to live with dignity. In this sense, the exploration of women's issues in Charlotte Brontë's novels has definitely contributed to a better understanding of the status of women in nineteenth century British society as a whole. Furthermore, the fact that these novels point to social injustice towards women as well as women's potential and rights extends the influence of the works beyond mere historical documentation as they have been recognized for their impact on the women's movement for equal status in ensuing years.